

# Firefighters raise concerns about safety of proposed 12-storey wood buildings

Alberta allowing construction of tall wood buildings starting this year

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Fire Chief Ken Block says the fire risk of tall wood buildings comes during the construction phase. (David Bajer/CBC)

Tall wood buildings up to 12-storeys could present a fire hazard during construction, and measures should be imposed to mitigate the risk, Edmonton's outgoing fire chief says.

While the wood industry says buildings constructed with mass timber or engineered wood are safe, Ken Block says that isn't the case when a structure is still under construction, because they lack sprinkler systems and fire resistant coatings

"That's when they're essentially a wood frame... without all of the fire safety features built in yet," Block said in an interview with CBC News.

"They pose a tremendous exposure hazard to any dwellings, any structures in the near vicinity."

Alberta currently allows the construction of wood structures up to six storeys. The new National Building Code, which will be published later this year, is expected to allow wood structures up to 12 storeys.

Last week, the Alberta government announced it would allow the construction of taller wood buildings this spring. The larger structures are built using thick engineered wood panels.

The Alberta Fire Fighters Association shares Block's concerns about safety during construction.

Association president Brad Readman said he learned about the province's decision through Twitter. Both he and Block said they weren't consulted about the change.

"I was surprised they were moving ahead so quickly on it," Readman said.

He wants the province to wait until it can consult with firefighters.

Tall wood structures are allowed in Quebec, and a 10-storey project is under construction in Toronto. The Brock Commons tower, built from engineered timber on the University of British Columbia campus in 2016, is 18 storeys.

Readman said the B.C. government talked to firefighters before changing its building code.

**'New dynamic'**

Block, whose term of as president of the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs wraps up Friday, said he opposed the use of tall wood during the building code consultations because evidence of its safety was insufficient.

Rory Koska, director of the Alberta Woodworks program of the Canadian Wood Council, said he expects the measures proposed by Block will be included in the National Building Code and required by the Alberta government.

"We're not trying to do anything outside the scope of what the building code is going to be calling for," he said.

"We're not trying to do anything where we're going to put anybody in harm's way. So these buildings have to meet those requirements during construction and after construction."

Tim Gerwing, press secretary for Municipal Affairs Minister Kaycee Madu, said the mass-timber buildings are already being built safely in B.C., the United and Europe.

"The next edition of the National Building Code, which more than a dozen Alberta building and fire organizations consulted on, will include this change," Gerwing wrote in an email.

"We have simply moved early to eliminate this red tape and to support economic development in our province."

Readman said he has asked to meet with Alberta Municipal Affairs Minister Kaycee Madu

He wants the government to hold off to allow municipal fire departments to get emergency and training plans in place.

"It creates a whole new dynamic for firefighting, and the sheer number of people that are involved in those structures," he said.

Block wants the province to require safety measures during construction, such as having a water supply for each floor.

He hopes the Alberta government will take a second look.

Before decisions are made that could affect public safety, the province should study the possible "unintended consequences" of the changes, Block said.

"So it's really more about encouraging them to listen and to learn and then to lead accordingly."

Block's last day as Edmonton fire chief is on Monday. [He is moving to Australia](#) to become the first fire commissioner of the new Fire Rescue Victoria service.