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BC Community Forest Perspectives and
Engagement in Wildfire Management



Community Forest Perspectives and Engagement in Wildfire Management



The 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons in British Columbia highlighted the risk posed to communities by large, intense wildfires. In 2017, wildfires burned approximately 1.2 million hectares and prompted a 10-week provincial state of emergency and the evacuation of over 65,000 people. The 2018 wildfire season burned an additional 1.3 million hectares, with 66 evacuation orders affecting over 2000 properties and a state of emergency in place for 23 days. Together, these two wildfire seasons cost the province over \$1.2 billion in suppression expenditures alone. Today, fire-affected communities and landscapes throughout the province are still experiencing social, economic, and ecological impacts that contribute to these indirect costs. The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the urgency of proactively addressing wildfire risk through the interacting public health risks of exposure to wildfire smoke and COVID-19, as well as the added constraints posed by physical distancing requirements to rapid and effective wildfire response. In the face of these challenges, despite heightened perceptions of risk, many communities throughout BC remain underprepared.

Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz and Sarah Dickson-Hoyle are PhD candidates and public scholars who are co-supervised by Dr. Shannon Hagerman and Dr. Lori Daniels in the Faculty of Forestry at UBC-Vancouver. Kelsey's research shows how perceptions of wildfire — including those of Indigenous communities, land managers, and governance experts — shape past, current, and future approaches to wildfire management in BC. Sarah's research on the responses of First Nations communities and their territories to the 2017 Elephant Hill wildfire informs improved collaboration in wildfire management. Shannon's expertise on the science-policy-management interface in the context of adapting conservation and resource management to climate and other drivers of change is complemented by Lori's expertise on natural disturbances, human impacts and climate change in the mountain forests of BC.

In BC, community forests have emerged as leaders in addressing wildfire risk.¹ As an area-based forest license managed by a local government, First Nation, or community group (or combination thereof), community forests are uniquely situated to protect their communities and the forests on which they depend while also negotiating trade-offs inherent in managing the wildland urban interface (WUI).

During the 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons, at least 16 community forest tenures were directly impacted by wildfire. For many community forests, these seasons catalyzed their focus on proactive wildfire management and galvanized community support for these efforts. This response is reflected in the tripling of community forests' own investment to address wildfire risk in 2020.¹

As part of our research project *Wildfire: Community-based Solutions to a Wicked Problem* — funded by a Community Solutions grant from the Peter Wall Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia — we interviewed 26 community forest managers throughout BC in 2019 to better understand their approaches to addressing wildfire risk. These community forests represent a diversity of forest and fuel types, governance arrangements, and jurisdictions, and their responses provide key insights for supporting proactive wildfire management near communities. We define wildfire management as activities relating to wildfire prevention, preparedness (including pre-suppression), response and recovery, with 'proactive' approaches focused on wildfire prevention and/or preparedness.

This project follows two province-wide surveys of community leaders in 2017 and 2018² that identified high levels of concern about the impacts of wildfire and persistent challenges in accessing funding and expertise to mitigate this risk. In this most recent study, we sought to better understand these capacity barriers and solutions to overcome them, with a particular interest in how community forests engage with past and present funding programs.

This article summarises our findings on current approaches by community forests to address wildfire risk, identifies key factors that enable proactive approaches and ongoing challenges, and presents priorities and recommendations for the future of wildfire management in BC. The full report is available on the UBC Faculty of Forestry's Tree Ring Lab website.³



Pile burning following fuel treatments, Slocan Integral Forestry Cooperative Community Forest.

Photo provided by Susan Mulkey, British Columbia Community Forest Association.

Community Forest Approaches to Managing Wildfire Risk

Community forest approaches to addressing wildfire risk are as diverse as the communities they represent and include planning, fuel treatments, building capacity for wildfire response, community outreach, and homeowner preparedness.

Community forests play an increasing role in seeking funding for, developing, and implementing community wildfire protection plans (CWPPs, now known as resilience plans). Numerous community forests are undertaking strategic or landscape-level planning beyond their community to consider wildfire risk among other forest values when developing forest stewardship plans and timber supply analyses.

Prescribing fuel treatments in the WUI and at the landscape-level are framed by CWPPs and other planning tools. Landscape-level approaches are designed to accomplish many objectives, such as strategic linear fuel breaks that reduce the risk of wildfire spread and support safe access and egress during a wildfire event. For several community forests, directly integrating hazard reduction into their forestry operations is key for future operations, but often involves 'testing' silviculture prescriptions that may be at odds with 'traditional' forest management.

Many community forests work directly with their communities to address wildfire risk. Response and suppression capacity are enhanced by purchasing equipment, mapping firefighting resources, and training local and contract fire crews. Increasing homeowner preparedness includes facilitating FireSmart programs — an important example of the ways in which community forest managers' influence can extend beyond the boundaries of their tenure.

Enabling Proactive Wildfire Management

All community forest managers identified funding as critical for implementing proactive wildfire management. External funding programs include the Strategic Wildfire Prevention Initiative (SWPI), which transitioned to the Community Resiliency Investment program in 2019, and the Forest Enhancement Society of BC (FESBC) funding for wildfire risk reduction and fibre utilisation. The FESBC funding is highly regarded by community forest managers because it supports multi-year, multi-jurisdictional collaboration and provides funding-specific experts. Due to the cost of implementing

treatments and the former SWPI requirement to match a percentage of the funding, having available funds to contribute to wildfire management programs is also key. Related to costs is the ability to conduct commercially viable fuel treatments, which is highly dependent on forest type and structure, as well as access to markets (e.g. for smaller diameter stems or biomass).

For some community forests, funding and other support for wildfire management is provided by their municipality or regional district. For example, the Regional District of Central Kootenay has prioritized fire protection and hired staff to coordinate wildfire planning and funding applications. Similarly, some community forests have hired a dedicated wildfire coordinator or wildfire consultant, enabling them to navigate complex funding applications and planning processes.

Local champions and leaders, such as active local fire chiefs or mayors, are key in building support for proactive approaches. Community forest managers often facilitate partner, stakeholder, and community engagement to build local trust and raise awareness. At times, they help overcome opposition to fuel treatments in the WUI.

Strong relationships between community forests, Indigenous communities and governments, provincial government officials, fire scientists, and other interested parties are critical for advancing cross-jurisdictional and collaborative planning. These relationships are key for building trust and maintaining a social license to operate, and for developing coordinated approaches to wildfire management across multiple tenures. Managers spoke of the need to work closely with the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development when planning and implementing fuel treatments. For example, to ensure compliance with forest management obligations or to access unallocated Crown lands to conduct landscape-level treatments.

Ongoing Challenges for Addressing Wildfire Risk

While community forests are finding innovative solutions to wildfire risk, limited financial and resource capacity, a lack of operational and scientific expertise, community expectations, and the limita-

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Logan Lake Fire Chief Dan Leighton discussing the value of conducting fuel treatments with Logan Lake Secondary School students.

Photo credit: Garnet Mierau, RPF.

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tions of existing planning and legislative frameworks continue to pose challenges. For community forests with less financial stability or fewer staff, funding programs are difficult to access. Managers spoke of the administrative burden and mismatched scope of the funding programs for their priority wildfire management activities. Key challenges relate to the high costs of fuel treatments and objectives to increase resilience such as retaining deciduous trees or replanting low densities that are not funded by existing programs. There is also a perceived lack of wildfire expertise and capacity across the province, from fire behavior specialists to burn bosses for prescribed burning to contractors with appropriate equipment and experience to undertake detailed prescriptions.

Community forests face external challenges including community expectations and legislative and planning frameworks. Maintaining trust and social license are central to successful wildfire management and several managers highlighted the importance of ensuring community support before implementation. In addition, many community forests find it difficult to negotiate trade-offs between competing forest and wildfire management objectives, particularly when managing multi-value landscapes close to communities. These trade-offs come to light when considering the requirements of the *Forest and Range Practices Act* and regional land use plans. These legal objectives are often at odds with recommendations for effective proactive wildfire management, such as visual objectives in a recently burned stand or wildlife objectives in areas with low fuel loading targets of hazard abatement. While recent wildfire seasons have heightened community awareness of risk and catalyzed action, wildfire-recovery reactions often take precedence over further proactive approaches — a worrying trend given the increasing number of communities impacted by wildfire.

The Future of Wildfire Management in BC

Several priorities emerged as essential to enable community forests' innovation and success in addressing wildfire risk. Moving forward, community forest managers identified three overarching priorities for wildfire management in BC:

1. Refocusing management with a 'fire lens': Wildfire management is increasingly becoming a priority and guiding objective for community forests. Managers highlighted the need to revisit existing management plans and policies in

light of improved knowledge on wildfire risk, and for greater flexibility, particularly regarding fuel treatments. This means explicitly prioritizing wildfire management as a value and objective within forest tenures.

2. Managing fire for landscape resilience: Restoring fire to the land as an ecological and cultural process, and adaptively managing in the face of ongoing climate change, is a priority for many community forests. Prescribed burning is highlighted as it can achieve multiple objectives, including ecological restoration, cultural revitalization, and hazard reduction.
3. Scaling up collaboration: Managers emphasized the importance of scaling up areas treated and planning at a landscape level. This requires broadening the focus of community wildfire protection beyond the current two kilometre designated WUI boundary. Increasing collaboration among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, tenure holders and government agencies is key for success.

To support community forests and communities across BC more broadly, our report highlights four key recommendations:

1. Continue external multi-year funding programs that are supported by liaisons and experts to guide and facilitate applications.
2. Provide additional support tools and expanded training to overcome persistent capacity issues around wildfire science and best practices for fuel treatments, including prescribed burning that incorporates Indigenous cultural fire, led by Indigenous communities.
3. Continue to revisit forestry planning and legislative frameworks, such as the *Forest and Range Practices Act*, to enable appropriate prioritization of wildfire risk reduction.
4. Expand government outreach positions dedicated to building synergies through collaboration that address wildfire risk at multiple scales beyond the community forest tenure.

Note: This article is adapted and re-printed from UBC's Faculty of Forestry Branchlines Fall 2020 newsletter with permission.

LINKS

1. BC Community Forest Indicators 2020 Report: <https://bccfa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BCCFA-Indicators-2020-final.pdf>
2. Community Views on Wildfire Risk and Preparedness 2020 Report: <https://treering.forestry.ubc.ca/wildfires-in-bc/community-views-on-wildfire-risk-and-preparedness-2020/>
3. BC Community Forest Perspectives and Engagement in Wildfire Management 2020 Report: <https://treering.forestry.ubc.ca/wildfires-in-bc/wildfire-community-forests-2020/>