

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR A SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

Are regulated activities helping or hindering Wildfire Risk Reduction?

BACKGROUND

Wildfire is a natural and integral part of many of BC's ecosystems. While wildfire can be ecologically beneficial, in the wrong place or severity, it threatens life, infrastructure and societal values, and can degrade ecosystems. Eliminating fire is not an option. Risk reduction, through initiatives such as Wildfire Risk Reduction (WRR), aims to reduce the severity and amount of area burned by impeding fire movement across the landscape.

Most fires in BC start away from communities. In the absence of wildfire suppression, fire size and rate of spread through the landscape depend on vegetation, topography, and weather. With topography and weather out of our control, vegetation and barriers to fire must be managed as part of landscape fire management. The highest consequences of catastrophic fire occur where the forest meets communities – the Wildland Urban Interface, or WUI. As of 2021, over a million people in BC live in communities that are classified at high or extreme wildfire risk, including approximately 22 percent of the Indigenous population.

These risks can be mitigated by management activities, such as fuel treatments, targeted harvesting, shaded fuel breaks, post-harvest abatement, and the regeneration of fire-resilient forests. These strategies, when coordinated, form the backbone of landscape fire management. Most of these risk reduction efforts are currently concentrated near communities.

The *Forest and Range Practices Act* (FRPA) and the *Wildfire Act* can compel natural resource managers to do these activities, including following higher-level plans, assessing and abating wildfire hazards, and regenerating logged areas. From 2011-2020 approximately 207 000 hectares were harvested in the WUI. FRPA and the *Wildfire Act* have different objectives, are designed to achieve different outcomes than WRR, and are not always compatible. Past Board audits and investigations have shown that forestry practices can add or subtract from wildfire risk reduction efforts.

The Board is interested in how WRR efforts are integrated into forest and range planning and practices. For those communities most vulnerable to wildfire in BC, this special investigation will examine how FRPA and the *Wildfire Act* positively or negatively affect WRR objectives in the WUI.

OBJECTIVE

Evaluate how activities authorized under FRPA and the *Wildfire Act* help or hinder wildfire risk reduction efforts within the WUI and how those activities align with wildfire risk reduction plans.

SCOPE

This investigation will evaluate activity authorized and regulated under FRPA and the *Wildfire Act* for a sample of communities considered at extreme risk of wildfire.¹ Samples will be chosen from within the WUI or the boundary of a Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan (CWRP) or their equivalent. Samples will be geographically distributed and include a variety of communities. Samples will consist of activities from June 2019 to June 2022, with evaluations based on information collected in both the field and the office. The scope does not include an assessment of compliance with plans and regulations unrelated to the reduction of fire hazards.

APPROACH

Samples will include a mix of activities carried out under FRPA and the *Wildfire Act*² and will be chosen within CWRP plan boundaries or two kilometres from the boundary of a local government or fire protection district. These boundaries around communities are the area of interest and are synonymous with the WUI.

Investigators will:

- Interview industrial users, and review planning documents to verify whether planning and practices are consistent with CWRPs and complementary to wildfire risk reduction initiatives.
- Determine compliance with hazard assessment and abatement requirements for industrial activities subject to section 7 of the *Wildfire Act* by reviewing assessments, and conducting hazard assessments following recognized standards.
- Evaluate areas that are subject to an obligation to establish a free growing stand to determine if fire management stocking standards are in place or implemented and meet FRPA regulations and standards.
- Determine whether WRR treatments comply with authorizations and meet the regulations and standards established concerning FRPA and the *Wildfire Act*.

REPORTING

Under section 122 of FRPA, the Board will report the findings of this special investigation to the public. Recommendations may be made to address legislation or policy related to wildfire risk reduction activities authorized under FRPA or the *Wildfire Act*.

¹ Extreme wildfire risk as identified using the BC Wildfire Services' Provincial Strategic Threat Analysis.

² Sections 11, 12, 22, and 23 of the *Wildfire Regulation*; Sections 44 and 52 of FRPA; Sections 44, 79, and 82 of the *Forest Planning and Practices Regulation*.