

Forest and Fire Management in BC: Toward Landscape Resilience

A report issued by the Forest Practices Board in June 2023

Issue

The way forests and fire have been managed in BC over the last 100 years has increased the scale and intensity of wildfires and decreased landscape resilience. In 2017, 2018, and 2021, BC experienced its 3 largest wildfire seasons in 102 years of recorded history, affecting 3.4 million hectares of land.¹ 2023 is shaping up to be another catastrophic fire season.

Historically, people co-existed with fire on the landscape. Wildfire returned to certain landscapes frequently and, together with Indigenous fire stewardship, played an important role in maintaining resilient ecosystems. For most of the twentieth century, forest management policy excluded Indigenous fire stewardship, emphasizing fire prevention and suppression, livestock grazing, and wood production to meet the demands of a growing society. In general, these policies have contributed to increases in the amount and distribution of live and dead forest fuel across the landscape and increased fire severity.² If the way forests and fire are managed doesn't change, BC will face many more catastrophic wildfire seasons.

Catastrophic wildfire can negatively impact social, ecological, and economic values, including damage to infrastructure and private property, increased risk of poor air quality and flooding, loss of wildlife habitat, soil productivity, timber supply, and recreation opportunities. Because wildfires emit large quantities of greenhouse gases, increases in wildfire scale and intensity make meeting BC's emission reduction goals even more challenging.

Suppressing wildfires is expensive. The 2021 wildfire season had direct suppression costs of \$800 million, with indirect costs potentially as high as \$24 billion. Reducing wildfire risk also comes with a price tag. Since 2018, the Crown Land Wildfire Risk Reduction program and the Forest Enhancement Society of BC have spent an estimated³ \$72 million to carry out fuel reduction treatments on approximately 26 000 hectares within the wildland urban interface (WUI).⁴ Currently, over 39 million hectares of public land in BC are at high or extreme threat of wildfire, yet provincial funding has been directed almost exclusively to public and private lands within the WUI, leaving high-risk areas of the broader landscape untreated. The Province cannot afford to maintain the status quo approach to reducing wildfire risk.

Solution

Landscape fire management (LFM) is a part of the solution to restore landscape resilience, but it will require a significant shift in how forests and fires are managed. LFM is a way to proactively mitigate the risk of catastrophic wildfires on the broader landscape. It is a restoration approach to addressing forest fuel buildup and improving landscape resilience. In many landscapes, the first step in LFM will be

¹ Ministry of Forests. Forest Analysis and Inventory Branch. 2022. Impacts of 2021 Fires on Forests and Timber Supply in British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/forestry/stewardship/forest-analysis-inventory/tsr-annual-allowablecut/impacts_of_2021_fires_final.pdf?bcgovtm=neckhtml

² Hessburg, Paul F.; Churchill, Derek J.; Larson, Andrew J.; Haugo, Ryan D.; Miller, Carol; Spies, Thomas A.; North, Malcolm P.; Povak, Nicholas A.; Belote, R. Travis; Singleton, Peter H.; Gaines, William L.; Keane, Robert E.; Aplet, Gregory H.; Stephens, Scott L.; Morgan, Penelope; Bisson, Peter A.; Rieman, Bruce E.; Salter, R. Brion; Reeves, Gordon H. 2015. Restoring fire-prone Inland Pacific landscapes: seven core principles. *Landscape Ecology*. 30(10): 1805-1835.

³ BCWS and FESBC provided all figures related to treatment area and costs; total expenditure is based on the reported average treatment cost.

⁴ Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) – the forested areas within two kilometres of residential structures, businesses, or other built infrastructure.

designing strategies to contain or reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. The ultimate goal of LFM is to restore and maintain a wildfire-resilient mosaic of forest and non-forest conditions across a landscape which can provide the values important to society today, habitat for native species, and resilient forests for future generations.

Achieving this paradigm shift will require bold and immediate action by the provincial government to align policies and programs across all levels of government with a vision of landscape resilience and co-existence with fire. Before we can take advantage of wildfire's ability to maintain resilient ecosystems, we need to prepare the landscape to accept fire again. Integrating LFM in BC's land management framework will enable our land and fire managers to work together and significantly increase the pace and scale of management strategies designed to restore landscape resilience. This will require cross-jurisdictional collaboration and coordination to enable timely action at the scale necessary to make meaningful progress. This report calls on the provincial government to act now and lead BC's transition toward landscape resilience.

About the Forest Practices Board

The Forest Practices Board serves the public interest as the independent watchdog for sound forest and range practices in BC. It reports compliance with the Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) and the Wildfire Act (WA) to the public. The Chair of the Forest Practices Board may make a special report about a matter they consider to be in the public interest. This special report addresses the wildfire risk crisis in BC and the urgent need for provincial leadership to develop a vision for landscape resilience and co-existence with wildfire.

Access the full report at <https://www.bcfpb.ca/release-publications/releases/forest-and-fire-management-in-bc-toward-landscape-resilience>

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