

BACKGROUND



Forest Fires in British Columbia: How Policies & Practices Lead to Increased Risk

1030–1188 West Georgia Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 4A2
Tel: 604.687.8027 Fax: 604.687.3264
E-mail: info@abcfp.ca
Web Site: www.abcfp.ca

To read the full position paper, please visit the ABCFP web site at www.abcfp.ca.

Traditionally, forest fires in British Columbia have been seen as a purely destructive force. Strategies and technologies to fight fires in our forests have improved dramatically since the 1940s when aircraft were first used to dump water on fires. Today, forest fire fighters are able to extinguish almost 95 per cent of fires quickly and with little loss of property or life. But at what price does this success come? Decades of fire suppression have changed the ecology of the forests and even if we change our fire policies today, it will take decades to undo the damage.

Scientists have learned that forest fires are far from being purely destructive forces in our forests. Many species of flora and fauna are dependent upon fire for their survival. Forests, especially in the BC interior, depend on fire to keep pests such as the mountain pine beetle, root rots and dwarf mistletoe infections, in check. In addition, decades of fire suppression have led to a huge build up of fuel. Fires, like those of 2003, are much more destructive and more difficult to extinguish due to this fuel build up.

The Association of BC Forest Professionals (ABCFP), which has a mandate to advocate for and uphold the principles of forest stewardship, forestlands, forest resources and forest ecosystems, is calling for changes to government policies and forest practices to change the way fires, especially forest fuels, are dealt with in British Columbia.

The ABCFP recognizes the importance of the Filmon Report, which examined the 2003 fire season, and views this report as a starting point. Building on the Filmon Report, the ABCFP has made 13 recommendations to improve the health of our forests and reduce the risk of catastrophic forest fires similar to those that occurred in the summer of 2003.

The ABCFP's recommendations can be broken down into three key messages:

- Wildfire is a natural process that needs to be reintroduced into the ecosystems of BC.
- Alternative treatments should be carried out to reduce fuels where fire cannot be safely reintroduced.
- Fire management, particularly fuel management, must be a key component of forest management.

Fire Management Policy in BC

From a policy perspective, BC's emphasis on fire suppression response and other policies may actually contribute to an increased fire risk. For example, it is currently acceptable to retain course woody debris on the forest floor. This adds to the amount of fuel already available for forest fires. Recommendation 1 calls for the creation of policies that link fire and land management and that encourage adequate management of fuel loading.

– more –

Ensuring BC's Forests Are In Good Hands.

Today, most landscape level management plans do not take fire into consideration. More attention needs to be paid to both fire and fuel management in all areas of the province, but most especially in the fire prone areas such as the Cariboo. Recommendation 2 states that fire should be seen as an underlying management principle in Regional Land Use Plans, Land and Resource Management Plans and other landscape level plans.

The Fire Risk Problem

Recommendation 3 calls for more attention and resources to be focused on forests beyond the wildland-urban interface (the zone where human development and wildlands exist together). While community protection should continue to be of primary importance, more attention must be paid to the rest of the forest. Significant losses to these resources can impact the economic, social and biological values of the province.

Recommendation 4 deals with the complicated funding area. This recommendation states a joint federal/provincial funding program should be created to deal with reducing fire risk, and that funding should be directed to the highest priority areas first.

Recommendation 5 is about the establishment of funding for research into fuel abatement projects. Currently there is an inconsistent approach to fuel abatement research. Several projects have taken place since 2003, but without the proper support, the chances of success are greatly diminished.

Increased public education is the goal of recommendation 6. Not all land is owned by the provincial government; therefore, private land owners must take some responsibility for reducing the fire hazard. The public must understand the links between fuel reduction, risk reduction, protection of human health, safety and private property, and smoke management. Fire and fuel management is the responsibility of all British Columbians.

Areas affected by the mountain pine beetle infestation are at particular risk of forest fire due to the large number of dead and dying trees. Recommendation 7 addresses this issue and suggests the development of a fire management plan for these areas of the province.

Roles and Responsibilities in Managing Fire Risk

Education is the key to understanding the multiple roles of fire and the complex changes that extensive fire suppression can cause in an ecosystem. Ensuring a higher level of fire and fuel management content in the post-secondary forestry programs is the goal of recommendation 8.

Recommendation 9 is about identification of fuel hazards. It states that there is a need to develop clear and concise definitions of what constitutes a fuel hazard and to identify mitigation techniques that provide protection to ecological, social and economic values. Fires must have fuel, heat and oxygen to continuously burn. Identification and removal of the fuel is one way to stop or mitigate fire hazards.

Treatment of fuel hazards is the goal of recommendation 10. Research focusing on operational trials to find the best way to address fuel hazards will benefit the whole province.

While it is often possible to predict where fires are most likely to start, it is more difficult to predict how they will behave and this puts fire fighters and communities at risk. Recommendation 11 calls for increased funding for the Canadian Fire Behavior Prediction system. Currently this system only recognizes 16 forest types in all of Canada and does not adequately describe the diversity of fuels in BC.

Historically, forest professionals have focused on the protection of commercial forests to ensure their continued economic viability. Now is the time to allow forest professionals to address plans in wildland-urban interface areas. Recommendation 12 calls for the creation of policies to allow and encourage forest professionals to create fire management plans in all areas of the province.

The Ministries of Forests and Range, and Environment need more resources. Recommendation 13 calls for sound risk reduction strategies at all levels of planning and practice and staff in these two ministries are best placed to plan for fire management.

In conclusion, fire is a natural part of the ecosystem of almost all forests. Many plants and animals depend on either fire itself or the results of forest fires for survival. The emphasis on fire suppression and our subsequent success at this task since the 1940s has led to a huge build up of fuels in our forests. Fire exclusion has also contributed to other forest health problems such as the mountain pine beetle epidemic. Today's forest fires are far more destructive than those of the past due to the large build up of fuel. Fire must be safely reintroduced to the landscape and fuels must be carefully managed in order to prevent devastating fire events such as those of the 2003 fire season.

To read the full position paper, please visit the ABCFP web site at www.abcfp.ca.