

## Reducing the Risk of Wildfire – The Time for Action is Now

by Tim Ryan, RPF

VICTORIA – Sept. 24-30, 2017 marks National Forest Week in Canada. Established around 1920 as Forest Fire Prevention Week, the origins were to encourage greater public awareness towards Canada's forests. At the time, the greatest threat to forests came from forest fires, mainly due to human causes. Since then, National Forest Week, as it was renamed in 1967, has evolved to encompass the many and varied human and environmental aspects of Canada's forest resources — past, present and future. While much has changed in the last century, one could be forgiven for concluding that once again, the greatest threat comes from forest fires, only now due in large part to climate change.

The 2017 fire season began slowly, with a wet and cooler than normal spring, but took off on about July 7 and remains in full swing. This year dwarfed the historic records for area burned in British Columbia at well over a million hectares, or 12,000 square kilometres, and it's still going. The effects on people, wildlife and our forest economy will be felt for many years to come. Consider also that 2017 was the driest year ever recorded in many parts of B.C. — by a significant margin, according to Environment Canada. Penticton, Vernon, Kamloops, Kelowna and Cranbrook all had their driest summer since records have been kept. As of early September, Kamloops had only nine millimetres of rain and the average is 93. Kelowna had seven millimetres of rain and usually gets about 110.

In 2010 and again in 2015, the Forest Practices Board reported on progress implementing the 2003 Filmon recommendations to reduce the risk of wildfire damage to communities. Our reports, [Fuel Management in the Wildland Urban Interface](#) (2010) and [Fuel Management in the Wildland Urban Interface –Update](#) (2015), made a number of recommendations and suggestions for how to reduce the risk to property and lives. We would like to be able to say that significant progress has been made and the risks are being adequately addressed, but that's not the case.

From 2008 to 2017, B.C. has spent an average of \$200 million a year on wildfire suppression. In contrast, our 2015 report found that just \$60 million was invested in wildland fire prevention in the preceding 10 years and only a fraction of the necessary area was treated. Since our 2015 report came out, less than \$20 million more has been spent on prevention work.

Our findings highlight B.C.'s need to get ahead of the game through wildfire prevention and readiness, so we can save on the costs of fighting fires and, more importantly, reduce the risks to people's homes, properties and lives, and to local businesses and infrastructure.

Many communities in B.C. have a community wildfire-protection plan, but a plan doesn't help if it's not implemented and hazard fuels are not treated. In June of this year, we were in Cranbrook meeting with city officials, the fire chief, forest companies and community groups. A big topic of conversation was the risk of interface fires and the lack of progress in treating hazardous forest-fuel build up around the community. By early September, there were two interface fires within 18 kilometres of the city.

Community wildfire protection plans require sustainable funding for fuel reduction treatments and retreatments. All parties need to find ways to treat more area effectively at a lower cost. This includes accepting prescribed burning as an efficient and effective treatment in the right circumstances and engaging the forest industry in carrying out fuel-reduction treatments.

The role of local government needs to be re-examined to capitalize on their strengths. Local governments do not generally have technical expertise in forest-fuel reduction, nor should every municipality. But local governments are very good at co-ordination, facilitation and community consultation. Perhaps the Province could provide the technical expertise, while local governments provide co-ordination and communication.

Private property owners also have a responsibility to take the necessary precautions to FireSmart their houses and buildings, and the forested areas on their property, to reduce the risk of damage and to assist firefighters.

It's time for B.C. to start being proactive — not reactive — when it comes to wildland fire. What's needed is leadership to galvanize action and for all parties to get involved — the Province, municipal governments, First Nations, the forest industry and individual citizens. No one party can make a difference on their own. The reports and the recommendations are all there. Let's not waste any more time with reviews and evaluations of what went wrong; the current fire season isn't over yet and the next one is only six months away. It's time for action.

Find the Forest Practices Board's reports at: [www.bcfpb.ca](http://www.bcfpb.ca)

Information on FireSmart can be found at: <https://www.firesmartcanada.ca/>

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