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## Doug Donaldson: We need a province-wide action plan to restore landscape resilience to wildfire

*Opinion: The trifecta of managing forests primarily for timber values, the shifting climate, and changing settlement patterns has created a triple-threat on the ground*

By [Doug Donaldson](#)

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The Donnie Creek wildfire burning in northeast B.C. earlier this month. PHOTO BY B.C. WILDFIRE SERVICE

I'm sitting in coastal-influenced northwest B.C. where, not too many years ago, our summer consisted of 56 straight days with rain. I'm now cancelling a camping trip and considering plans for my livestock because of powerful lightning strikes, numerous wildfires and smoke.

As the B.C. Wildfire app refreshes on my phone with multiple new red dots (wildfires) on the map, I look at the situation across the province.

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We have the largest single wildfire in colonial B.C. history burning in the northeast, with the usually highest-threat season still weeks away.



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Large areas of the province are experiencing drought and 16 temperature records were broken over the last month in communities across B.C.

With the 2017, 2018 and 2021 catastrophic wildfire seasons barely in the rear-view mirror, this season is on track to be another record breaker.

It's enough to throw up your hands in resigned frustration about what can be done.

Despite daunting challenges, one route to a better future when it comes to wildfires in B.C., and their impacts, is in front of us.

The multi-lane path was clearly [laid out in late June by the Forest Practices Board.](#)

The board is an independent, watchdog-style entity created by legislation. It carries out investigations and reports on forest and range practices, makes its findings public and, in many cases, briefs the forests minister directly.

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In a special report on forest and fire management, the board called on the B.C. government to create a province-wide vision and action plan on restoring landscape resilience to wildfire. They say the frequent catastrophic wildfires we are experiencing requires a “paradigm shift in land management.” In the view of the board, the vision and action plan must be co-developed with Indigenous people and cross “all levels of government and organizational silos,” spanning ministry mandates and election cycles.

It's easy to see why such an overhaul is needed.

The trifecta of managing forests primarily for timber values, the shifting climate, and changing settlement patterns creates its own triple-threat on the ground: an unnatural amount of fuel available in the forest due to prior fire suppression actions; higher temperature spikes and more lightning; and

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increasing encroachment of built infrastructure such as houses into forested landscapes.

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The results from 2017 to now are stark. An area equivalent to the entire length and breadth of Vancouver Island was consumed by wildfires in three seasons (2017, 2018, 2021) with direct firefighting costs topping \$1.8 billion combined in those years. More than 134,000 people were on evacuation order or alert, affecting mental and physical health and severely impacting business communities, particularly in the tourism, agriculture and forestry sectors. The consequences of prolonged smoke created high-risk health ratings and greenhouse gas emissions skyrocketed — in 2018, emissions from B.C. wildfires were almost three times more than all other sources in B.C. combined.

The “new normal” catastrophic wildfire trend is continuing in 2023. More than 10,000 square kilometres have burned, already surpassing 2021 and only slightly behind areas consumed in each of the 2017 and 2018 seasons, with many weeks of fires to come.

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Over the last six years, the provincial government responded directly to the new wildfire reality in a widespread manner, including tripling money for fire management, expanding prescribed and cultural burning as one way to reduce dangerous forest fuels, and legislating forest landscape plans that consider wildfire.

Most of that work rests with the B.C. Wildfire Service and the Ministry of Forests. There is also a new ministry for emergency response, strategies under other ministries that are related to wildfire addressing biodiversity, climate action and land use for instance, and expanded joint programming with the First Nations Forestry Council and the First Nations Emergency Services Society.

Numerous initiatives are under way. What the Forest Practices Board points out is the need for an overarching approach with wildfire at its centre, citing hard-hit California’s wildfire and forest resilience action plan as an example.

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California Gov. Gavin Newsom created a task force in 2018 that reports directly to his office. With members from state, federal, tribal and local government, and informed by a scientific advisory panel, private organizations and stakeholders, the task force “integrated key findings and recommendations from various plans, studies and assessments into a single, co-ordinated and comprehensive strategy.” The task force monitors progress on core actions from the 2021 plan, makes the findings public, and the governor releases a monthly newsletter update.

Obviously, B.C. is different from California in many ways.

Yet the scale of the wildfire challenge we face compels actions on a similar scale. This involves a “whole of society” approach where senior governments (provincial, Indigenous, federal), communities, industry and civil society are pulling for a common goal.

Such an approach can transcend ideological divides and unite rural and urban citizens.

It’s time. The wildfires demand it.

*Doug Donaldson is with the wildfire resiliency project at the University of Victoria’s Centre for Global Studies. He was a three-term MLA for Stikine and served as B.C. forests minister from 2017-2020. He lives near Hazelton on Gitxsan territory.*



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