

Summary: Learning to Live with Fire: State of Wildfire in B.C. Policy, Programs, & Priorities – A Primer

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Fire is natural and necessary. It is an essential evolutionary force in British Columbia. Historical fire regimes created a mosaic of diverse ecosystems and habitat conditions and supported the cultures and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples. For millennia, Indigenous fire stewardship and the use of cultural burning practices have enhanced ecosystem biodiversity, assisted with the management of complex resources, and reduced wildfire risk by reducing fuels and vegetation.

Today, more frequent and more severe fires are burning outside of their historical regime of natural and cultural cycles. This is causing rapid changes to ecosystems and having a negative impact on society and our economy.

The provincial government plays a key role in wildfire, which includes responsibilities around prevention, active management, and recovery related to both land and emergency management. However, solving the wildfire problem will require action from more than just the provincial government. No one government has all the knowledge, resources, or authority to do it alone. First Nation governments and many other levels of government and groups within civil society have a significant role to play, with the provincial government actively involved in most of these initiatives as a partner.

All levels of government (First Nations, federal, provincial, local), the research community, and fire practitioners are investing in strategies to limit harmful impacts, better manage wildfire, and help society learn to live with fire. However, even with these plans, investments, and actions, the problem continues to outpace the current suite of solutions and ecological and social impacts are worsening year after year. An urgent need exists to develop a **whole-of-government provincial landscape resilience strategy**. This should include:

- A vision for wildfire resilience at the landscape level for all ecosystem types across the province.
- A plan that addresses the human and social dimensions being challenged by wildfire and that builds trust between government and communities across the province.
- Whole-of-government priority actions and better defined and coordinated roles for the various actors in a whole-of-society approach to wildfire resilience.
- An explicit commitment to the necessary provincial budget needed to execute the strategy and required law reforms within specified timelines.
- Committed resources to initiate those well-understood initial actions while the plan is being developed.

About

This primer explores the new wildland fire reality in B.C. and is the first publication from the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project, an initiative of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria’s Centre for Global Studies. POLIS’ work on wildfire focuses primarily on land management practices and how to support and advance the modernization of provincial laws, policies, plans, practices, and processes to improve management, governance, and wildfire resilience in B.C.

Figure: Five key insights on the implementation of a whole-of-government provincial landscape resilience strategy.

Source: Developed by the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project (2024).

Complexities & Uncertainties

Scientists, experts, and community members are surprised by the speed of change and the escalating threat. Climate change impacts predicted for 2035–2050 are happening now. This makes it difficult for government to plan and resource effectively under the current wildfire management model.

Fire functions differently in different ecosystems, which means there is no one-size-fits-all solution. To be successful, different approaches to wildfire resilience will be required across B.C.

There are trade-offs to consider with the amount of carbon emissions connected to different approaches to wildfire risk management.

Funding & Economics

A strong business case exists for preventative and harm-reduction measures, such as fuel treatments, but the scale of measures required is daunting and barriers need to be addressed before broad implementation can occur. Investment in integrated landscape-level responses is a priority.

Long-term funding will be required for effective and sustained landscape treatments.

There are impediments to realizing a bioeconomy that can use material from fuel treatment for commercial products, such as energy. Investments in innovative economic models for fuel management are a priority.

Core Observations & Insights

Capacity & Capability

Capacity to address wildfire resilience within the provincial government is limited, while capacity outside the provincial government is underutilised, especially at First Nation and local government levels.

Opportunities exist to recognize training and experience from outside of government and for industry, such as forest companies, to be more active partners in advancing landscape-level and local wildfire resilience.

Many opportunities exist to leverage partnerships with Indigenous partners, non-profits, and academic institutions to conduct long-term region-based research and drive innovation.

Leadership & Governance

Wildfire is an urgent societal issue that requires significantly improved mechanisms for coordination, collaboration, and oversight at multiple scales.

Strong Indigenous leadership on wildfire already exists. This can be enhanced through shared authority and decision-making with Crown governments and actions that support reconciliation.

Perspectives on fire and how to respond vary across communities, and social conflicts and lack of trust in governments are mounting challenges. Community engagement and education are crucial for building trust and understanding of the actions needed and how we can live with fire.

Legislation & Policy

Legislative and policy gaps create challenges and inefficiencies for wildfire management. Reforms are needed to improve incentives for resilience and to support work across society on social-ecological resilience as it relates to wildfire.

THINGS TO KEEP DOING, SCALE UP, OR GET STARTED NOW

THE FOLLOWING WELL-UNDERSTOOD ACTIONS CAN BE UNDERTAKEN RIGHT AWAY TO BUILD AND ENHANCE RESILIENCE :

1. EXPAND INVESTMENTS IN FUEL MANAGEMENT

Reducing fire intensity and reach will remain a priority no matter how we organize ourselves going forward.

2. SUPPORT INCREASED PRESCRIBED AND CULTURAL BURNING

Fire on the landscape is a natural and critical ecological process. Using fire to fight fire is an effective and underutilized tool in B.C.

3. INVEST STRATEGICALLY IN PLACE-BASED, LANDSCAPE-LEVEL, AND COMMUNITY-BASED PILOTS, INCLUDING FOREST LANDSCAPE PLANS

We still have a lot to learn, and we must innovate as we go in a practical, learn-by-doing way.

4. IMPROVE HARM REDUCTION THROUGH ENHANCED PROGRAMS LIKE FIRESMART AND WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE MANAGEMENT

Building community trust starts by ensuring communities feel safe and have a voice in the decisions that will affect them and their homes.

5. FOCUS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, BUILDING TRUST, EDUCATION, AND EMPOWERING LOCAL DECISIONS

Those impacted must have a say and see themselves as part of the solution. This will allow for innovation and maximized local capacity, expertise, and resources towards a whole-of-society approach as we adapt and learn to live with fire.