

OPINION: B.C. forges ahead on wildfire resilience amid cross-border uncertainty

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B.C. Wildfire Service leads prescribed burns during the 2024 wildfire season, using fire to reduce the threat of wildfire. | (Adam Buchanan/B.C. Wildfire Service)

B.C. recently demonstrated its deep reciprocal relations with the U.S. by sending a team of highly trained wildland firefighters to assist with the devastating blazes in the Los Angeles area. This genuine spirit of cooperation and care is the opposite of the sentiment exposed in President Trump's tariff approach.

Historically, we've always been there for them, and they've always been there for us.

But now, as B.C. and Canada fight back against the U.S. tariffs, we don't know how an erratic leadership south of the border will react. And we don't know how our longstanding and effective reciprocal relationship around wildfire will be affected.

Thankfully, B.C. is a leader in wildfire management nationally and plays an important role globally. Although more needs to be done here at home, a recent report from the B.C. Wildfire Service shows progress on how we plan for and address wildfires in our province.

On the direct firefighting side, new-to-B.C. technological innovations are highlighted. One is the adoption of predictive software to support decision-makers in understanding wildfire behaviour. For example, it only took 15 minutes to produce a 12-hour fire spread prediction that previously would have taken hours. Time-saving technologies are a game-changer when it comes to making decisions about where to allocate scarce firefighting resources.

Another tool now available is night vision systems. Aircraft and helicopter operators can fly at night with B.C. Wildfire Service staff on board to detect and map out fires. This means urgent work can happen continuously, day and night, and quicker decisions can be made regarding suppression activities.

While suppression of course remains important, wildfire prevention and mitigation are emerging as the most cost effective and impactful long-term strategy.

Some of this preventative work is in fuel mitigation. This involves reducing or removing wood from the forest that allows fire to grow in speed and intensity. Prescribed and cultural burning – where fires are intentionally lit under controlled conditions to mimic naturally caused wildfires, thereby reducing fuel load – is one way of achieving this.

Prescribed and cultural fires in B.C. are planned to increase by 47 per cent this year compared to 2024, and many of these plans involve partnerships with First Nations. In addition, \$60 million over three years has been allocated to the Forest Enhancement Society for wildfire risk reduction projects, including the creation of fire breaks around communities and supports to remove fibre for value-added uses, such as electricity generation.

Wildfire training in B.C. has also ramped up and, since 2022, \$127 million has been invested in FireSmart activities that include fuel management projects.

While all of this is positive progress, it is largely insufficient at current levels. The urgency of the wildfire threat demands significantly greater investments and action on prevention and mitigation now. Thirty-nine million hectares of forestland in B.C. are at extreme or high threat of wildfire. British Columbia is – and remains – at risk.

Although a 47 per cent increase in prescribed and cultural burning this year is meaningful, it represents less than 10,000 hectares – a pittance compared to the millions of hectares at risk. The cost of fuel treatment today in B.C. averages approximately \$8,000 per hectare, so the amount allocated to organizations (such as Forest Enhancement Society) to reduce risk and investigate viable economic models with industry must be bolstered.

Experts confirm that for the foreseeable future wildfires will increase in scale and intensity in B.C. and elsewhere, including California.

Fortunately, B.C. is on the right track, as evidenced by a report from the Premier's Expert Task Force on Emergencies released last April. This important analysis emphasizes the need for strong coordinated efforts across government and the urgent need for a broader whole-of-society approach that more effectively engages community-level champions and other key players such as First Nations, local government, farmers and ranchers, industry, businesses, and civil society organizations to collaboratively tackle the challenge of wildfire resilience.

A concerted focus on wildfire resilience is crucial. And B.C. is starting to build this resilience at the landscape level. Progress includes better planning, attention to water and watershed security, and linking wildfire to the challenges of a shifting climate. Success will also depend on ongoing research, and a nuanced understanding of wildfire and local ecosystems, to ensure we know what tools, programs, and approaches work best locally here in B.C.

While the world feels chaotic at the moment, one thing we can control is how we prepare for and address the wildfire threat in B.C. to reduce negative impacts today and enhance ecological and social benefits in the future. Now, we just need to go farther faster.

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