

# Wildfire Resilience and a Cross-Government Approach in British Columbia

## University of Victoria's POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project – Ember Insights Series

by Oliver M. Brandes, Doug Donaldson & Jon O’Riordan

### Key Messages

1. British Columbia — and the world — has entered a period of wildfire crisis with increasing economic, environmental, and social impacts. Some call this period the *Pyrocene*.
2. Addressing this wildfire crisis is a significant provincial priority and requires systemic changes with more emphasis on coordination and integration of landscape-level management and beneficial fire, including:
  - ✓ Increased focus on and attention to mitigation and prevention of wildfire disasters that includes social and environmental risk reduction.
  - ✓ Substantial investments in FireSmart BC to reduce damage to infrastructure.
  - ✓ Better fuel management, including prescribed and cultural burning.
3. By shifting from an emphasis on wildfire suppression to a focus on wildfire resilience,\* better cross-government integration, and broader collaboration, the provincial government can leverage capacity — both within and external to government — and save money over time. This includes:
  - ✓ Providing a mechanism to implement existing expert reviews and advice, along with future policy innovations and new priorities.
  - ✓ Identifying cross-government areas for new high-value investment to improve wildfire resilience.
  - ✓ Enhanced collaboration and leveraging of complementing programs and activities within the provincial government and more broadly across communities and other levels of government.
4. Increased wildfire resilience will, among other things, better buffer against catastrophic wildfire with benefits including improved protection of drinking water sources, biodiversity, old growth forests, and human settlements; reduced health costs; advancing watershed security; and allowing governments and broader society to prioritize assets, such as hospitals, schools, roads, homes, and other infrastructure.
5. Achieving wildfire resilience requires a fundamental conceptual shift in the existing provincial approach and supporting policies. A core recommendation for implementing better cross-government coordination

### About the series

The POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project’s “Ember Insights” series explores wildfire resilience with a focus on management, practice, and governance reform opportunities. The series is designed to be practical and to the point. While focused on the emerging wildfire resilience field, the series also offers links to stimulate discussions on ecological governance and broader public policy-related concepts.

### Who is this paper for?

The primary audiences for this document are ministries in the B.C. provincial government with wildfire-related responsibilities and the B.C. cabinet more generally. It is focused on government decision-makers and senior staff. It will also be of interest to wildfire resilience champions and thought leaders outside of government and anyone with interest in wildfire resilience, governance, and wildfire public policy more generally.

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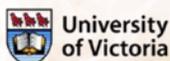
to address wildfire is through a project charter and a designated champion to ensure clarity and specify roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities for each participating provincial ministry.

\* We use the term “wildfire resilience” in the context of social-ecological systems resilience, which involves linked systems of people and nature as defined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. See <https://poliswildfireproject.org/understanding-resilience/>

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## How will we approach the wildfire age in B.C.?

In recent years, regions across B.C. have experienced record-breaking fire weather (high temperatures, low humidity, and powerful winds) and wildfires with extreme economic, ecological, and social impacts. As such, wildfire has emerged as a high priority for governments across Canada and globally, with many recommendations from experts and organizations across society about how to manage the increased threats and impacts.

Consensus exists that contemporary wildfires are the culmination of a century of altered human-forest-wildfire relationships and exacerbated by climate change<sup>i</sup> While wildfire is a natural and necessary process on the landscape, in some parts of B.C. (as in much of the forested world) we have entered a new period in some regions where major wildfires of increased size, severity, and frequency are intersecting with more built infrastructure in locations at high or extreme wildfire risk. Extreme fire behaviour can also negatively effect ecosystem services that flow from the landscape. For example, in some places, increased fire severity can create hydrophobic soils, leading to debris torrents that impact water quality and water flow timing and undermine watershed security.

This current wildfire crisis is so significant it has generated a new term now used in popular literature: *the Pyrocene*.

The economic, environmental, and social costs of the Pyrocene — to communities and to the provincial government — are increasing significantly (see Figures 1 & 2). Managing these challenges will require widespread changes in policy and better coordination across government with an emphasis on *making communities more resilient to wildfire* while also promoting *beneficial fire*.<sup>ii</sup> This evolving situation is leading to a growing recognition within government agencies, such as the B.C. Ministry of Forests, that a new *cross-government* organizational approach is needed.<sup>iii</sup>

### THE PYROCENE

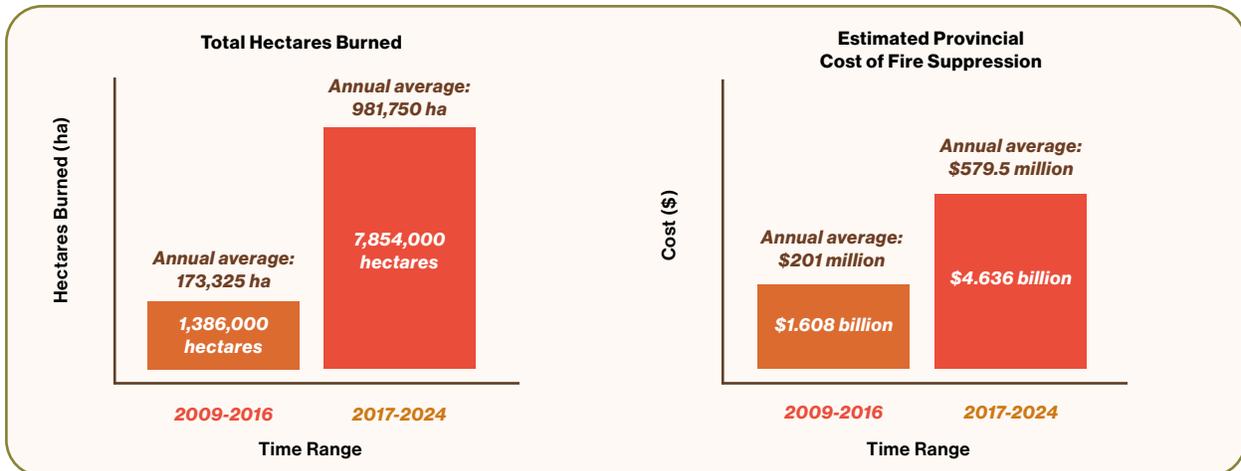
COINED BY FIRE HISTORIAN STEPHEN J. PYNE, THIS POPULAR TERM AND CONCEPT REFERS TO A PROPOSED GEOLOGICAL EPOCH CHARACTERIZED BY THE SIGNIFICANT AND WIDESPREAD IMPACT OF HUMAN-CAUSED FIRE ON EARTH, AMPLIFIED BY CLIMATE CHANGE. WHILE FIRE IS A NATURAL PART OF ECOSYSTEMS, THE PYROCENE SUGGESTS A SHIFT TO A NEW ERA WHERE HUMAN SETTLEMENT AND ACTIVITIES (ESPECIALLY THE COMBUSTION OF FOSSIL FUELS) HAVE FUNDAMENTALLY ALTERED FIRE REGIMES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES. IT SUGGESTS THAT HUMANS ARE, IN ESSENCE, CREATING THE FIRE EQUIVALENT OF AN ICE AGE.†

In this paper, we explore the limits of the provincial government's existing arrangement and management approach and outline the opportunity for more dedicated coordination that would address wildfire as a cross-cutting public policy priority between government ministries. The approach proposed in this paper can save money in the long term and lead to better coordination within government, improved community-level engagement, increased landscape resilience, better enabling of a whole-of-society approach, and improved overall wildfire management in B.C.

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† To help understand the global shifts currently underway, fire historian Stephen Pyne has written extensively on fire across scale and time. See, for example:

- Pyne, S. J. (2022). *The Pyrocene: How we created an age of fire, and what happens next*. University of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/books/the-pyrocene>
- Pyne, S. J. (n.d.). *The Pyrocene*. <https://www.stephenpyne.com/disc.htm>
- Pyne, S. J. (2025, January 22). Human use of fire has produced an era of uncontrolled burning: Welcome to the Pyrocene. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/human-use-of-fire-has-produced-an-era-of-uncontrolled-burning-welcome-to-the-pyrocene-247195>



**Figure 1.** Hectares burned and provincial suppression dollars spent from 2017-2024 vs. 2009-2016.

### The current wildfire context

Since 2017, the impacts of wildfire have continued to increase in B.C., including rising economic costs, impacts on government budgets, adverse social and health outcomes, and associated environmental consequences, such as impacts to drinking water sources and increased debris torrents.<sup>iv</sup>

In response, the provincial government has dramatically increased its budgets to protect and restore fire-damaged communities and landscapes (see Figure 1). The wildfire management budget increased almost 400 per cent between 2017 and 2025, from \$63.293 million to \$238.047 million annually (see Figure 2). The fire preparedness budget, which includes prevention and mitigation activities, is now more than \$47 million annually. This helps fund programs like FireSmart BC (see Box 1), as well as fuel management programs.<sup>v</sup>

#### Box 1. FireSmart BC

Wildfire resilience strategies often focus on either community mitigation or landscape-level treatments for ecological benefit. Community mitigation includes a host of strategies where the primary purpose is to ensure public safety and protect homes and infrastructure. In B.C., these interventions are part of the FireSmart™ program. Activities covered under FireSmart BC include education, emergency planning, vegetation management, home hardening, building codes, and more. The provincial government funds FireSmart Community Funding and Supports, which is administered by the Union of BC Municipalities.<sup>1</sup>

**WILDFIRE IS NOW A MAJOR POLICY AND FISCAL PRIORITY YEAR IN AND YEAR OUT.**



**Figure 2.** The increase in annual B.C. wildfire management budget from 2017 to 2025.

The B.C. provincial government realizes the significance of current and emerging natural disasters and the complexity of dealing with wildfire within the context of a changing climate. In March 2023, it created the Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR) and passed the B.C. *Emergency and Disaster Management Act*. The new ministry and legislative regime is guided by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction,\* which emphasizes social and environmental risk reduction and was officially adopted by the B.C. provincial government in 2018.

### A shift towards wildfire resilience

The BC Wildfire Service includes the strategy of *modified response* as part of wildfire suppression, which reflects the beneficial role fire plays in natural systems. Fires are allowed to burn for ecological reasons and future risk reduction as long as human lives are protected and damage to infrastructure is mitigated. Although some transitions to more integrated responsibilities around wildfire resilience are occurring across government, a core focus around the historical government approach to wildfire remains.

This organizational arrangement (*form*) was created to address wildfire when suppression (*function*) — meaning extinguishment — was the primary focus (see Figure 3). More emphasis on coordination and integration of landscape-level management is needed to effectively drive prevention and mitigation and elevate the importance of beneficial fire more generally (see Figure 4).

Recent independent expert reports and analyses highlight the need for improved cross-government coordination and, since 2017, the provincial government has been responding (see Box 2). However, the new wildfire reality is accelerating and thus requires even more focus and emphasis on prevention and mitigation activities, with complementing improved coordination across government, as well as new suppression technologies and better integration of community and cultural

## UNDERSTANDING FUEL MANAGEMENT

FUEL MANAGEMENT IS CONSIDERED BY MANY EXPERTS TO BE AMONG THE MOST EFFECTIVE AND URGENTLY NEEDED INTERVENTIONS TO HELP SUPPORT LANDSCAPE RESILIENCE TO WILDFIRE, AND MANY COMMUNITIES ARE LOOKING TO FUEL MANAGEMENT AS A SOLUTION. IT INVOLVES THE MODIFICATION OF A FOREST STRUCTURE TO REDUCE FUEL ACCUMULATIONS AVAILABLE IN A WILDFIRE. THE GOAL FOR MANAGING HAZARDOUS VEGETATION FUELS ON THE LANDSCAPE IS TO CREATE FIRE RESILIENT ECOSYSTEMS. FUEL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES INCLUDE CULTURAL BURNING, PRESCRIBED FIRE, MECHANICAL TREATMENT, AND MODIFIED WILDFIRE RESPONSE. ‡

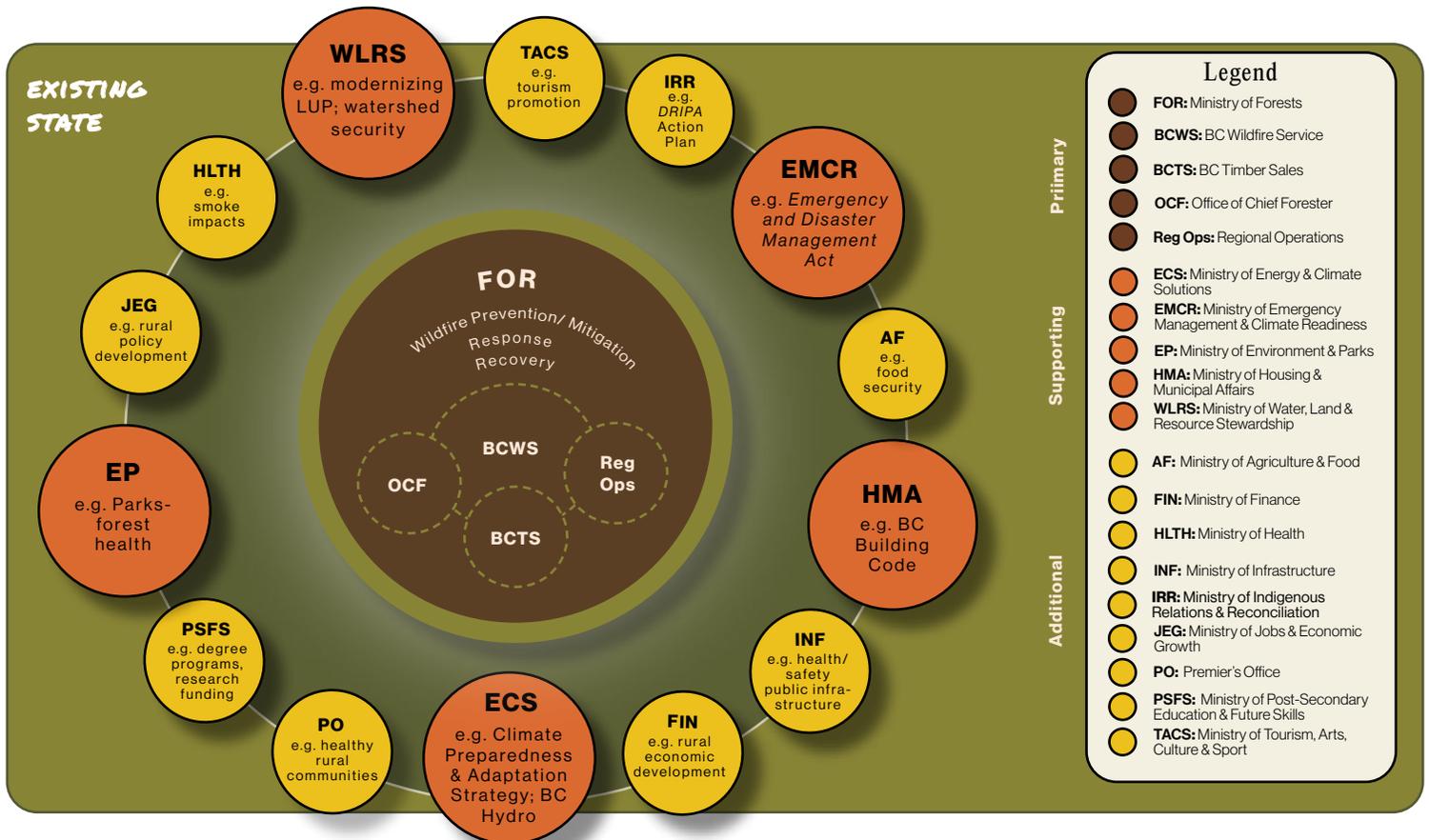
knowledge at scale to meet these mounting challenges. Our work at the University of Victoria's POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project explicitly supports this vision for a more integrated, “whole system” shift, which aligns with broader provincial and global efforts to effectively address the threat and challenge of wildfire.<sup>vi</sup>

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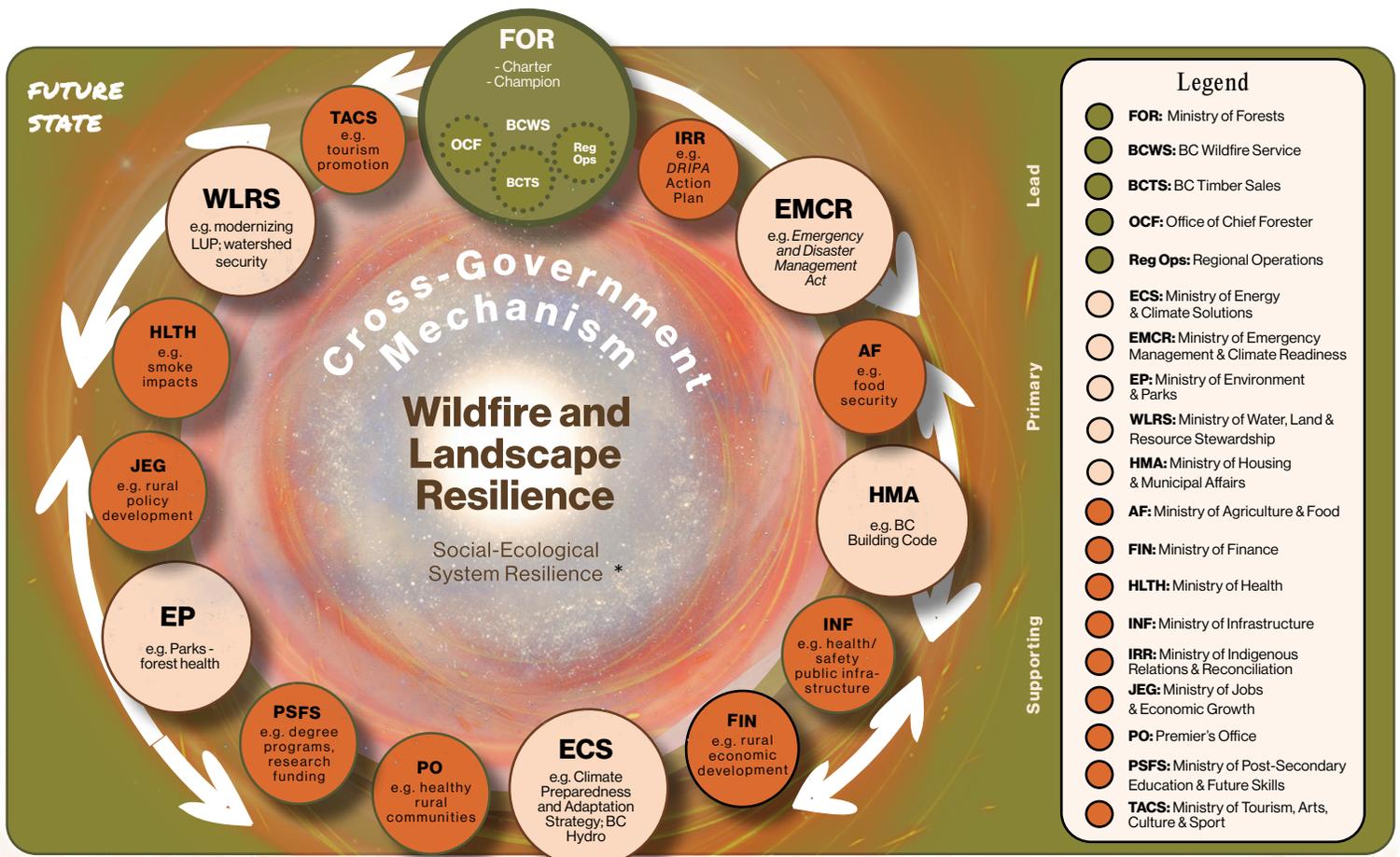
\* The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction calls for all of society to share responsibility for disaster risk reduction. It was adopted by the UN in 2015 and focuses on mitigation/prevention and preparedness as well as the traditional response and recovery pillars of emergency management.

‡ The Donaldson, D., Barnett, A., Brandes, O. M., Kriese, K., & O'Riordan, J. (2024). *Learning to Live with Fire: State of Wildfire in B.C.—Policy, Programs & Priorities*. POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project. <https://poliswildfireproject.org/publications/learning-to-live-with-fire/>

Government of British Columbia. (2023, April). *Fuel Management*. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/prevention/fire-fuel-management>



**Figure 3. Existing state** of form follows function regarding B.C. ministries interacting on wildfire resilience, with response and suppression at the core. Graphic adapted from "Learning to Live with Fire: State of Wildfire in B.C. – Policy, Programs & Priorities" (see page 33 <https://poliswildfireproject.org/publications/learning-to-live-with-fire/>).



**Figure 4. Future state** of form follows function regarding B.C. ministries interacting on wildfire resilience through a cross-government mechanism, with wildfire and landscape resilience at the core. \*We use the term "wildfire resilience" in the context of social-ecological systems resilience, which involves linked systems of people and nature as defined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. See <https://poliswildfireproject.org/understanding-resilience/>

## Box 2. Wildfire: A mounting provincial priority

Several recent reports and approaches emphasize the need for improved cross-government coordination:

- The Premier’s Expert Task Force on Emergencies *Summary of Recommendations* (2024) recommended government initiate a landscape resilience strategy.<sup>2</sup>
- *Forest Landscape Planning* tables<sup>3</sup> around the province are considering landscape resilience including the Lakes Resiliency Project and the Quesnel TSA Forest Landscape Planning Pilot.
- B.C.’s adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2018) and the subsequent passing of the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (2023).<sup>4</sup>
- B.C.’s *Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy* (2022)<sup>5</sup> recommended reducing risks from wildfires by expanding prescribed and cultural burning and protecting and maintaining healthy ecosystems.
- The Premier’s mandate letter to the Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness<sup>6</sup> prioritized supporting the Minister of Forests to identify ways to mitigate wildfire risk.
- The BC Forest Practices Board report, *Forest and Fire Management in BC: Toward Landscape Resilience* (2023).<sup>7</sup>
- G7’s *Kananaskis Wildfire Charter* (2025)<sup>8</sup> and the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers’ *Canadian Wildland Fire Prevention and Mitigation Strategy* (2024)<sup>9</sup> both recommend a whole-of-society approach to wildfire resilience.

The suggested future state *form-follows-function* arrangement depicted in Figure 4 shows how increased cross-government collaboration and more explicit mechanisms for integration could operate and how it might assist in better executing the provincial priority on wildfire and landscape resilience.

This proposed arrangement and coordinating structure better prioritizes wildfire across government, improves how different ministries interact, and enables these ministries to better engage other levels of government (e.g. Indigenous, federal, local), Indigenous partners, and communities in a “whole-of-society” approach.<sup>vii</sup>

### WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH

A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH INTEGRATES AND COORDINATES EFFORTS WITHIN AND BEYOND THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT. IT NECESSARILY INCLUDES OTHER LEVELS AND ORDERS OF GOVERNMENT (INDIGENOUS, LOCAL, AND FEDERAL) AND MORE DEEPLY INVOLVES CRITICAL NON-GOVERNMENT ACTORS, SUCH AS INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS, CIVIL SOCIETY, PRACTITIONERS AND LOCAL EXPERTS, PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS, AND CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES — ALL OF WHOM BRING NEW AND UNIQUE RESOURCES, KNOWLEDGE, AND CAPABILITY TO ADAPT TO LANDSCAPE AND WILDFIRE CHALLENGES. ‡

‡ Brandes, O. M., Barnett, A., Donaldson, D., & Kriese, K. (2024, July 16). *Wildfire and a whole of society approach*. POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project, University of Victoria. <https://poliswildfireproject.org/publications/wildfire-and-a-whole-of-society-approach-lightning-explainer/>

## Necessary shifts for a landscape & wildfire resilience strategy

It is increasingly well understood that wildfires are an essential element of properly functioning forests, watersheds, and grassland ecosystems. Recent recommendations from our research at POLIS emphasize the need for changes in policy, priority, and operations to:

1. Increase the number and frequency of fires which are characteristic of nature's normal range of variation.
2. Reduce the number and frequency of fires which are catastrophic to the built infrastructure and natural ecosystem health.<sup>viii</sup>

Better enabling these necessary policy and management shifts requires the provincial government to accelerate the move from primarily focusing on suppression to emphasizing resilience through better cross-government coordination and integration. This broader conceptual shift towards wildfire resilience is captured in Table 1.

## Implications & opportunities

Failing to comprehensively address wildfire in a landscape-level resilience frame will result in spiraling fiscal and societal costs and missed opportunities as the climate crisis deepens over the coming decades (see Box 3). A focused cross-government approach to wildfire resilience offers opportunities for reducing many of these significant future costs. Benefits include:

1. Finding efficiencies by correcting where policies and programs are counteracting or not working synergistically.
2. Providing a mechanism to implement future policy innovations and new priorities in a systematic, efficient, and effective way, including better implementation of recommendations from existing expert reviews and reports.
3. Identifying cross-government areas for new high-value investment to improve wildfire resilience.
4. Enhanced collaboration and leveraging of complementing programs and activities within the provincial government and more broadly across communities and other levels of government.

**Table 1.** Summary of the conceptual shift towards wildfire resilience

FROM:	TO:
GOVT. HOLDS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR FIRE	GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP + A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH
PRIMARYLY FIRE SUPPRESSION	WIDESPREAD MANAGED WILDFIRE • INCLUDING PREVENTION OF UNWANTED FIRES AND MODIFIED SUPPRESSION TO INCREASE BENEFICIAL FIRES
MINISTRY COMMAND AND CONTROL	SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES ACROSS GOVERNMENT
SMALL-SCALE AND SITE-LEVEL FOCUS	LANDSCAPE-LEVEL FOCUS
COMMUNITY-LED LAND USE DEVELOPMENT	LAND USE DEVELOPMENT BASED ON FIRE RISK
PRIORITY FOR TIMBER VALUES INCLUDING SAFETY, PROPERTY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES	PRIORITY FOR INTEGRATED VALUES EMPHASIZING ECOSYSTEM FUNCTION AND AN ECOSYSTEM-BASED APPROACH

‡ Brandes, O. M., Barnett, A., Donaldson, D., & Kriese, K. (2024, July 16). *Wildfire and a whole of society approach*. POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project, University of Victoria. <https://poliswildfireproject.org/publications/wildfire-and-a-whole-of-society-approach-lightning-explainer>

### Box 3. Provincial wildfire costs are increasing

- **Government spending on the rise**, including:
  - More than \$4.4 billion on fire suppression from 2017 to 2024 (eight-year annual average of \$560.84 million) compared to \$1.6 billion from 2009 to 2016 (\$200.94 million annual average).<sup>10</sup>
  - Prescribed and cultural burning as a fuel reduction tool costs between \$1,000 to \$10,0000 per hectare, with 2.1 million hectares of land in the wildland-urban interface at high or extreme wildfire risk.<sup>11</sup>
- **Tens of millions of dollars in losses to tourism revenue** due to wildfires with general overall negative impacts on GDP and worker earnings.<sup>12</sup>
- **Escalating health and wellness consequences** from wildfires.<sup>13</sup> For example, thousands of people were on evacuation order or alert from 2017 to 2024, with vulnerable populations especially at risk.<sup>14,15</sup> In addition to the immediate physical and mental health consequences of evacuation, smoke from the 2023 Canadian wildfires is estimated to have caused 1,300 acute deaths and 8,300 chronic premature deaths across the nation.<sup>16</sup>
- **Personal and individual financial impacts**, including mortgage insurance rates. In Canada, these rates are up 33 per cent since 2018, with wildfire cited as a major factor.<sup>17</sup> Insured loss claims due to wildfires in B.C. are currently averaging \$400 million annually and predicted to rise to as much as \$1.5 billion per year by 2030.<sup>18</sup>
- **Increasing loss of ecological function**, for example associated with wildfire impacts on increasing debris flow, as well as the inability of an ecosystem to return to its pre-wildfire state.<sup>19,20</sup>

### Achieving better cross-government coordination

The provincial government already has notable experience in delivering complex and challenging cross-cutting policy and operational priorities. When it comes to shifting fully to wildfire resilience and improving the delivery of commitments and priorities more generally, examples of other cross-government initiatives in complex natural resource management offer useful insights and are outlined in Box 4.

Delivering complex, cross-ministry priorities more efficiently requires institutional organization and mechanisms that match the magnitude of the policy change. One current, unfolding example is how government has organized itself to better co-develop reconciliation plans with Indigenous Peoples as part of its commitment to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the complementing provincial legislation, the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA).

Other past experiences with valuable lessons and insights from the resource and forestry sectors include the Commission on Resources and the Environment (CORE) process and the shift from prescriptive to results-based forest and range practices. These examples offer useful guidance on how the provincial government can better position itself to advance wildfire and landscape resilience.

#### **Box 4. Examples of cross-government initiatives in complex natural resource management in B.C.**

Each of the following examples resulted in more innovative approaches to cross-government efforts on public policy priorities (including improving governance, management, and implementation of complex initiatives and priorities) than if they had been led by a single ministry in a more typical siloed approach. These examples can be viewed on a spectrum — from simple cross-ministry committees that meet regularly and work together in a coordinated way, to established and formalized bodies, such as secretariats or commissions, with complex, evolving, and longer-term mandates.

##### ***Secretariat to Environment and Land Use Committee of Cabinet (1973-1980)*<sup>21</sup>**

The provincial government established the *cabinet Environment and Land Use Committee* as an alternative model to a standalone Ministry of Environment to encourage balanced decisions based on collaboration across economic, social, and environmental ministries. In 1973, the government created a staff secretariat to catalyze cross-ministry staff analyses of public policy issues to support cabinet decisions. The secretariat was disestablished in 1980 but the cabinet Environment and Land Use Committee remains in place.

##### ***Commission on Resources and the Environment (CORE) (1992-1996)*<sup>22</sup>**

Due to mounting land use conflicts between resource development and conservation, the provincial government established the *Commission on Resources and the Environment* (CORE) in legislation to develop regional strategic land use plans to zone the working landscape and create new protected areas with multi-sector roundtables. This fundamentally changed how the provincial government functioned for developing these plans. Once the commission had completed the initial three plans, the process was taken over by relevant government ministries. Out of this process, government had built capacity and capability to lead effective planning processes and better collaborate with Indigenous partners and communities to more fundamentally integrate land use information and values, such as water, biodiversity, and community priorities, into provincial land and resource planning. In 1996, the government disbanded CORE and established a staff-led *Land Use Coordination Office* (LUCO) to coordinate a range of economic and environmental ministries in developing 26 Land and Resource Use Management Plans across the province.

##### ***Forests and Range Practices (1995-2002)***

In 1995, the provincial government passed the *Forest Practices Code of British Columbia Act* to better balance industrial logging while protecting key ecosystem values.<sup>23</sup> The Code was highly prescriptive and in 2002 was replaced by a results-based regulatory regime called the *Forest and Range Practices Act* and regulations. A *cross-ministry task force* was established under the Chief Forester Office to coordinate this transition. The task force brought ecological values into the regulations and created balanced government objectives which guided statutory decision-makers.

##### ***Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) and DRIPA Action Plans 2019 (ongoing)*<sup>24</sup>**

The B.C. provincial government's recognition of the principles embodied in the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) through the passing of the *Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA) required a major policy shift around how government engages and partners with Indigenous communities — shifting from consultation to deeper collaboration and informed consent. In 2022, to enable this shift, the government established a *Declaration Act Secretariat*, a central agency within government that works across government and assists various ministries to develop and reform legislation in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples in B.C. so it aligns with UNDRIP.

*Continues on next page >*

**Box 4. Continued:**

***B.C. Water Table and Watershed Security Strategy Co-Development (2021-ongoing)***<sup>25</sup>

The B.C. Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship established a *cross-ministry committee* and began working with the First Nations Water Caucus (together creating the *B.C. Water Table*) to identify watershed security priorities and co-develop a Watershed Security Strategy, including informing the development of a Watershed Security Fund.<sup>26</sup> Its goals are to improve management and governance of water and watersheds, better protect drinking water sources, advance flood and drought response, and enable better watershed governance, with an overall objective of improving resilience, coordination, and collaboration at the community level.

***Emergency and Disaster Management Act (2023) and Regulation (2024) implementation (ongoing)***

Although they are still in the early stages of implementation from a cross-government perspective, the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (2023) and *Emergency and Disaster Management Regulation* (2024) set out EMCR as the lead coordinator of B.C.'s emergency management activities and describe how a minister responsible for the *Wildfire Act*, for example, must coordinate risk assessments and emergency management plans with other provincial ministries and local authorities.

### Analysis, conclusions & next steps

Based on our analysis and the experiences outlined in Box 4, coupled with progress already underway within the provincial government, we believe the shift to a landscape and wildfire resilience approach in B.C. will require a lighter touch than some other, more comprehensive past provincial initiatives. Many of the existing ministry legal accountabilities are already sufficiently aligned and, in our view, improved coordination across government is the critical next step to facilitating a robust cross-government approach to wildfire resilience in B.C.

To achieve better coordination, integration, and long-term decision-making that elevates wildfire as a priority, we suggest the creation of a cross-ministry *project charter* with a designated *champion* under the direction of the Ministry of Forests (see Box 5).

We emphasize that coordination can be ineffective when it does not ensure the structures (in this case the identified key ministries) use their *own existing authorities* to drive towards wildfire resilience. For this reason, we recommend starting with a project charter and *champion* to strengthen leadership, increase clarity around roles and responsibilities,



**Photo:** By the BC Wildfire Service (2023). Copyright Province of British Columbia. All Rights Reserved. Reproduced with permission of the Province of British Columbia.

and drive the mandate for better coordination with accountability and clear targets to ensure better wildfire resilience outcomes.

Once the *project charter* is developed, the Ministry of Forests and the designated *champion* will be well positioned to effectively coordinate and promote integration and collaboration across government. This will help drive systemic changes to provincial policies and government organization, including:

- ✓ Increased focus on and attention to mitigation and prevention of wildfire disasters that includes social and environmental risk reduction.
- ✓ Substantial investments in FireSmart BC to reduce damage to municipal and industrial infrastructure.
- ✓ Better fuel management, including prescribed and cultural burning, on the forested landscape.

Establishing cross-government collaboration and more explicit mechanisms for integration, as illustrated in Figure 4, will accelerate implementation and not only improve coordination (e.g. co-implementing programs across ministries) but also create a more sophisticated policy environment to increase fiscal efficiencies and improve effectiveness of policy delivery. Ultimately, it will also set the stage for the provincial government to develop deeper and stronger external partnerships as needed in a whole-of-society approach.

### Box 5. Project charter

The project charter is an organized way of setting out the responsibilities of all the involved provincial ministries. It includes:

- **Mission statement and objectives** with measurable results that can be tracked over time. In the case of wildfire management, the results are economic, fiscal, environmental, and social.
- A named **project champion** at a senior level in the lead ministry who reports to the various political authorities, including the lead minister and the cabinet Environment and Land Use Committee (ELUC).
- **Clear responsibilities (and accountabilitys)** of each participating agency, including assigned budgets and personnel required to complete the tasks.
- **Timelines and milestones (including targets)** for achieving critical points in policy development.
- **Commitment to co-governance**, including an explicit commitment to consultation with Indigenous Peoples consistent with the B.C. *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, as well as with various parties outside of the cross-government interagency group.
- A mechanism and formalized **requirement to review overall progress and achievements** no more than a year from launching the initiative, followed by regular adjustments as appropriate.

## Appendix: Selected current B.C. government ministry roles and responsibilities associated with wildfire

While legislation often defines specific ministry roles, there are large areas of shared responsibility between provincial ministries when it comes to regulations, programs, and processes connected to wildfire resilience. These roles and responsibilities often overlap or interact across multiple ministries and are varied and complex. The structure and nature of these current interactions is captured in Figure 3.

The future suggested state for an improved coordination mechanism between ministries as described in this report is depicted in Figure 4. As denoted by the larger circles, some ministries have more significant responsibilities — including Forests (FOR), Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR), Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS), Environment and Parks (EP), Housing and Municipal Affairs (HMA), and Energy and Climate Solutions (ECS) — while other ministries have supporting roles, such as Post Secondary Education and Future Skills (PSFS), Jobs and Economic Growth (JEG), and Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation (IRR).

The Ministry of Forests and EMCR hold the bulk of provincial responsibility on wildfire resilience and natural disasters through the *Wildfire Act*, *Forest and Range Practices Act*, and the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act*, as well as responsibility for implementing programs to reduce wildfire risk and increase disaster resilience. Both ministries are also members of the BC FireSmart Committee, which collaboratively maintains and improves the delivery of the FireSmart BC program to better support wildfire preparedness, prevention, and mitigation in B.C.

The way FOR and EMCR organize their work related to wildfires and emergency management aligns with the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (see page 4), which follows the four pillars of:

- mitigation/prevention
- preparedness
- response
- recovery

Although they are in the early stages of implementation from a cross-government perspective, the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (2023) and *Emergency and Disaster Management Regulation* (2024) set out EMCR as the lead coordinator of B.C.'s emergency management activities and describe how a minister responsible for the *Wildfire Act*, for example, must coordinate risk assessments and emergency management plans with other provincial ministries and local authorities.

The ministries of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS), Energy and Climate Solutions (ECS), Environment and Parks (EP), and Housing and Municipal Affairs (HMA) are also important and primary ministries when it comes to wildfire resilience:

- Among other responsibilities connected to wildfire resilience (including those around land and water management more generally), WLRS leads the modernization of land use planning in partnership with First Nations and in collaboration with local governments and industry. It also leads ongoing efforts around watershed security.
- ECS oversees the provincial Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy and provides direction to BC Hydro, where the biomass cogeneration initiative resided until its cancellation in 2017.
- EP has legal authority over activities on approximately 15 per cent of B.C.'s land base, including addressing forest health issues.
- HMA presides over the BC Building Code and supports local governments on, for example, Wildfire Development Permit Areas.

Although not a ministry, the Premier's Office is also a primary player because the Minister of State for Local Governments and Rural Communities reports directly to the Premier. Small rural communities tend to be disproportionately impacted by wildfire, so the connection between this cabinet position and issues of wildfire resilience is strong. The mandate for this position is to serve as an important point of contact between rural communities and the Premier to inform government decisions and identify opportunities for small communities to grow and thrive.

Many other ministries have supporting and complementary roles associated with wildfire, as depicted by the smaller circles in Figures 3 and 4:

**Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation** — overall implementation of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan (2022)*, which includes cultural burning

**Ministry of Health** — research and mitigative measures related to wildfire smoke impacts through the BC Centre for Disease Control; patient care during hospital stays and in long-term care facilities during wildfire evacuations

**Ministry of Jobs and Economic Growth** — deliver *Rural Initiative - Draft Guidance (2025)* to ensure a rural perspective is considered in government decision-making around policy and program design; overall implementation of the *Northern Development Initiative Trust Act*

**Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport** — support rural tourism opportunities in the context of increasing wildfire impacts

**Ministry of Agriculture and Food** — mitigation and compensation on wildfire smoke crop damage; domestic animal welfare during wildfires, including evacuation; wildfire and food security mitigation initiatives

**Ministry of Finance** — Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Development reports to Minister of Finance on ways to support economic development proposals from rural businesses and stakeholders

**Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills** — support programs, initiatives, and micro-credentialing associated with jobs in wildfire resilience field; deliver post-secondary funding for wildfire-related research and education

**Ministry of Infrastructure** — ensure the design of public infrastructure projects, such as schools, includes wildfire smoke mitigation measures (e.g. HEPA air filter systems)

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, it gives an indication of the widespread connection to wildfire resilience across the entirety of the provincial government.

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## ABOUT THE POLIS WILDFIRE RESILIENCE PROJECT

The POLIS Project on Ecological Governance is an ongoing interdisciplinary project at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies. We are a hub for collaborative and action-oriented research, policy practice, and education. Our work is rooted in principles of ecological governance with a firm focus on strengthening watershed security. It explores the nexus of resilience and governance and offers new perspectives, ideas, and practical solutions to create a more secure future for both communities and ecosystems. As part of an international network, our team works with all levels of government, Indigenous nations, local communities, industry, experts, researchers, and civil society. Over the coming years, we will imagine and promote a new B.C. wildfire management and governance regime that lies within nature's limits, reduces catastrophic wildfires, and helps position B.C. as a leader in wildfire resilience.

[www.poliswildfireproject.org](http://www.poliswildfireproject.org)

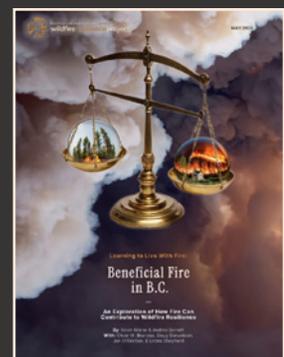
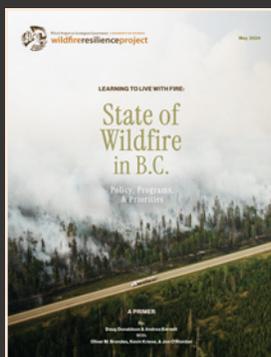
## ABOUT THE POLIS PROJECT ON ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

The POLIS Project on Ecological Governance is an ongoing interdisciplinary project at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies and a hub for collaborative and action-oriented research, policy practice, and education. Our mission is to support ecological thinking and action as a core value and practice in all aspects of society. We create engaging spaces for academic researchers, community practitioners, and policy decision-makers to come together and demonstrate the powerful potential in collaborative governance arrangements based in ecological principles. Current POLIS initiatives include the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project, and the POLIS Biocultural Ethics Initiative.

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## FURTHER READING

Learn more about the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project at [www.poliswildfireproject.org](http://www.poliswildfireproject.org), where you can download all our research publications and find project updates.



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