Kootenay Wildfire & Climate Change
Call to Action Background Paper

Wildfire risk reduction, ecosystem resilience, and climate change mitigation and adaptation

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Our Opportunities

Our forests are changing, and so we too, need to change. Adapting to new challenges posed by wildfires and the other effects of climate change on our natural environment is critical and requires a concerted effort by all levels of government and land managers.

According to the newly released BC Flood and Wildfire Review, we have entered an era of a "new normal" in climate conditions. This brings new challenges that require creative solutions to manage all resource values and public safety while addressing the environmental, social and economic aspects of natural resource management. Solutions that reduce wildfire risks, while limiting carbon emissions and supporting carbon storage, will be most beneficial in the long term.

This conference invites you to learn about these new challenges and discuss creative solutions.

Important initiatives have taken place in recent years:

- Some land managers and communities have begun community wildfire protection at the community and landscape scale, developing innovative approaches;
- The provincial government has initiated landscape-scale planning for wildfire risk reduction and forest carbon management in the Kootenay Boundary; and
- Multiple funding portfolios are available to land managers, all levels of government and user groups to engage in wildfire risk reduction, and/or forest carbon management projects: Forest Enhancement Society of BC, Union of BC Municipalities - Strategic Wildfire Prevention Initiative, Low Carbon Economy Leadership Fund and the Columbia Basin Trust.

We can learn much from these important initiatives. Our collective efforts have, however, been insufficient to substantially reduce wildfire risks, leaving our communities and forested landscapes vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires.

We have opportunities at both the community and landscape levels to work together to develop creative ways to reduce wildfire risks that fit our Kootenay forests and communities.

While reducing wildfire risks, we can manage our forests both to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation) and to help communities and ecosystems become more resilient in coping with changing climate conditions (adaptation).

Our Challenges

Several challenges exist, at both the landscape and community levels, to reduce the wildfire hazard and to support ecosystem resilience, while managing for forest carbon.

Years of wildfire suppression, coupled with the effects of climate change, have resulted in forests that are overly dense, drought prone and showing increased signs of disease and insect damage. At the same time, our communities have expanded further into forest interface areas. These high hazard forests adjacent to our growing communities and critical infrastructure pose significant and increasing risk from wildfires.

At the Landscape Level:

- Wildfire hazard in the Kootenays is significant – among the highest in the province – because of the steep mountainous terrain and the naturally high level of wildfire fuels in our dense forests;
- 70 years of fire suppression have increased the wildfire fuel build-up;

- Climate changes are making the existing hazards worse through longer fire seasons and hotter, drier conditions;
- Property owners and land managers are not certain about the best risk reduction practices in their specific situations;
- Areas for improvement and opportunities:
    - Forest management legislative change to identify wildfire risk reduction as a management objective;
    - Wildfire risk reduction priorities are an integrated aspect of tenured forest use;
    - Cost effective fuel treatments that are appropriately funded;
    - Reforestation objectives compatible with long-term wildfire risk reduction, and climate change adaptation and mitigation;
    - Implications of wildfire risk reduction and carbon management practices on medium and long-term timber supply need to be clarified; and
    - Smoke management legislation revision to reduce limits on the use of prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risk.
- The decision-making process is complex, often with many decision makers involved:
    - First Nations;
    - Private land owners;
    - Local governments, including municipalities and regional districts;
    - Land managers, including government and private sector staff;
    - Electrical, gas and water utilities;
    - Water licensees and user groups;
    - Recreation trail licensees and user groups;
    - Transportation agencies and businesses; and
    - BC Parks and other land management agencies.

At the Community Level:

- Kootenay communities are embedded in the interface and some continue to approve and develop at-risk neighborhoods;
- Many of our communities are small, isolated and without their own fire suppression equipment and fully trained personnel; and
- In most small communities fire services are entirely made up of volunteers, making it difficult for them to take leadership in community wildfire protection and leaving neighborhood volunteers as the leaders.

Generally, the closer you get to a community, the greater the overlap between tenures, permits, interests and values, making it more difficult to plan and implement widely supported wildfire protection practices. Inadequate funding and limited expertise and experience in regard to structural fire protection, wildfire management, ecology and forest management are challenges at both levels.

Creative Solutions

The outcome will be A CALL TO ACTION that sets a course for what can be done collaboratively by residents, governments, First Nations, land managers, tenure holders and user groups to improve ecosystem resilience, reduce wildfire risk, prepare for climate change, and manage forest carbon across our landscapes and in our communities.