

# A Coordinated Approach to Prescribed Fire Treatments in British Columbia's Ecosystems

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Wildland fire is a naturally occurring process and has also been intentionally used for centuries by First Nations peoples to shape and form the landscapes and resources familiar to British Columbians (Beck et al. 2005). Fire has a historically founded role in nearly all ecosystems in British Columbia and, as such, most ecosystems are adapted to fire within a broad range of varying frequency and intensity (Keeley et al. 2009). As a result, fire is integral to maintaining the productive and healthy functioning ecosystems upon which all British Columbians depend (Hall 2010).

In the context of a changing climate, reducing ecosystem vulnerability to future disturbances will be an important aspect of maintaining ecosystem resilience. A type of management action that could help build resilience is the reintroduction of fire into forest ecosystems where historical fire cycles have been disrupted by past fire exclusion and have therefore been made more vulnerable to severe future fires (Campbell et al. 2009).

The reintroduction of fire through the application of “prescribed fire” is recognized worldwide as an essential tool in environmental stewardship, however, its practice in the province diminished during the 1990s for a variety of reasons. Beginning in 2000, there was a renewed interest in its application, especially with respect to supporting ecosystem restoration, habitat improvement, and forest fuel management activities within the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations and the Ministry of Environment.

With the renewed interest in prescribed fire in British Columbia came a perceived lack of administrative and professional leadership in managing it as a discipline, which led to a fragmented approach among the different practising agencies. This fragmented approach, along with a decline in the use of prescribed fire as well as an aging staff, resulted in a reduction in experienced practitioners and few opportunities available to younger staff to gain hands-on experience.

A more co-ordinated approach in the application of prescribed fire, including standardized training, mentoring, and certification was needed to help provide opportunities for existing practitioners to maintain and improve their skills and for inexperienced staff to develop the expertise, while reducing overall wildfire risks to the province.

As well, a more co-ordinated approach to public communication and prescribed fire planning and operations was seen as desirable by the agencies involved. Additional benefits that could be realized included educating the public about the objectives and benefits of

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prescribed fire, and advancing improvements to airshed management by helping to minimize the potential negative health impacts of prescribed fires (primarily arising from smoke), especially in proximity to populated areas.

Importantly, in concert with wildfire management planning, the judicious use of prescribed fire is increasingly regarded as an effective tool in helping to mitigate catastrophic wildfire risk and for creating greater resiliency in the province's forests in light of climate change.

In consideration of this background, in 2008 the Executives from the Ministries of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations and Environment supported the establishment of a permanent, multi-agency Prescribed Fire Council for British Columbia. The key responsibility assigned to the Council was the provision of leadership for prescribed fire activities in British Columbia by promoting and supporting its safe and effective use.

"Membership" on the BC Prescribed Fire Council is open to any province-wide or federal agency or organization that uses or promotes prescribed fire as a land management tool. Currently, the Council includes the BC Ministries of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations and Environment, Parks Canada, Natural Resources Canada, the First Nations Emergency Services Society, and the First Nations Forestry Council.

The Council's terms of reference (<http://bcwildfire.ca/prevention/PrescribedFire/>) outline its scope, mission, and objectives. Notably, the Council's objectives include

- Promoting prescribed fire safety and research, and standardized planning and operations to improve overall efficiencies and effectiveness;
- Promoting public education and communication that describes the objectives and benefits of prescribed fire, especially in relation to reducing the impacts of wildfire, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change and increasing forest resiliency;
- Standardizing training and implementing a provincial certification process for practitioners to maintain high standards and ongoing skill development while reducing overall risks;
- Adopting best management practices for managing smoke and air quality impacts from prescribed fire in order to minimize the potential negative health effects, especially in proximity to populated areas; and
- Making recommendations for amendments to existing policies and legislation.

Recognizing the ecological importance of fire is one key part of maintaining forests that are resilient to our changing environment and that continue to function as productive ecosystems supporting British Columbia's ecological, societal and economic sustainability goals (Campbell et al. 2009).

For more information or to contact the B.C. Prescribed Fire Council visit: <http://bcwildfire.ca/Prevention/PrescribedFire/> or phone the Wildfire Management Branch, MFLNRO in Victoria at 250-387-5965.

## References

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