



# Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council

"Wildlife and their habitats thrive, are resilient, and support and enrich the lives of all British Columbians"

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PREMIER'S EXPERT TASK FORCE ON EMERGENCIES

January 17, 2024

### Wildfire, Wildlife and Habitat in BC

The new and increasingly catastrophic 'normal' for wildfires in B.C. threatens both wildlife habitat and human communities. The Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council (Council) has prepared these recommendations to support your work to address this growing challenge.

Wildlife in B.C. evolved under historic disturbance regimes including low, moderate, and high severity fires that created a mosaic of habitat conditions across the landscape. That mosaic sustained the diversity and abundance of wildlife that supported Indigenous communities and for which B.C. has become renowned.

As temperatures climb and precipitation declines, novel fires regimes are emerging in B.C. Climate changes, combined with accumulated fuels, are resulting in larger fires with higher proportions of severely burned areas. In addition to costly and tragic harm to our society, these uncharacteristically large and severe fires are causing unprecedented adverse effects on wildlife species and their habitats. Building greater landscape resilience around wildfire—the focus of our recommendations—creates a win-win that supports Indigenous food security and the wellbeing of all British Columbians, and will better enable wildlife to thrive. This means returning beneficial fire to forested and grassland ecosystems, together with proactive mitigation and restoration of the impacts of uncharacteristically severe fire.

Council has provided some larger-scale recommendations for your consideration that could be initiated in 2024, as well as nine "quick wins" that could be implemented immediately.

### Overarching Recommendations

1. **Build a strategy for resilience** – In 2024, the Province must initiate the development of an integrated wildfire resilience strategy that takes an all-of-government approach which effectively engages and leverages capacity across society. This strategy must be adequately funded, prioritizing proactive activities that build wildfire resilience throughout the landscape, and include programs with metrics for success in the areas of prevention, mitigation, adaptation, response, and recovery. This strategy must link with and drive investments into initiatives, programs and projects that support broad landscape resilience, including watershed security initiatives, wetlands conservation and restoration and biodiversity conservation and ecosystem health.
2. **Build a sustainable bioeconomy to manage fuels** – In recognition of the urgent need to manage fuels at landscape level, in 2024 the Province must begin an ongoing program to enable and

incentivize scaled-up fuels management by the Forest Sector, BC Hydro, First Nation Communities, Municipalities, and Regional Districts, and incentivize the development of the bioeconomy to enable long-term fuels management.

### **Wildlife & Habitat Focused Recommendations**

#### **3. Identify wildlife and habitat values at high risk of catastrophic wildfire and develop and implement locally informed wildfire management plans for these values.**

- a. Wildlife and habitat values include all or portions of protected areas and conservation lands, Ungulate Winter Ranges (UWR), Wildlife Habitat Areas, Wildlife Management Areas, Old Growth Management Areas (OGMAs), riparian reserves, and critical habitat for species at risk. These values/areas should be assessed for the risk (probability and consequence) of being burned severely by wildfire and of severe fire spreading outside them.
- b. For values/areas at high risk, the Province must, by 2025, develop wildfire management plans indicating the proactive treatments to be implemented to manage for more resilient conditions that sustain or restore their values (e.g., thinning, prescribed/cultural fire) and any specifics for response and recovery. These treatments must be carefully designed to both reduce fuels and sustain or restore the values for which the areas were designated. Consideration of invasive plants will be key in southern regions.
- c. This work presents an opportunity to create local buy-in for fuel reduction treatments. Indigenous communities and regional stakeholder groups, including Forest Landscape Planning (FLP) tables and Together for Wildlife Regional Wildlife Advisory Committees (RWACs), could provide local knowledge to support WLRS, FNESS, & BCWS in preparing these plans.

#### **4. Integrate direction on wildlife values in wildfire management plans into existing wildfire planning processes and decisions around prevention, mitigation, response and recovery activities.**

- a. Ensure direction on wildlife values is incorporated into prevention, mitigation, response, and restoration activities across all of government.
- b. Implement regulation and policy changes where required to support implementation of these plans (e.g., where regulations prohibit fuel treatments, such as some OGMAs, UWRs, RRZs).
- c. To effectively reduce risk to communities, the priority within Wildland Urban Interface areas (WUIs) must remain on human life and infrastructure. Wildlife and habitat areas within WUIs should be prioritized for fuel reduction treatments.

- 5. In 2024, create a simplified spatial layer that integrates over-lapping wildlife and habitat values into firesheds, and identifies the values and the intensity of fire acceptable within these firesheds.**
  - a. Many wildlife and habitat values overlap spatially. At present, there is no (or conflicting) guidance to BCWS as to how to respond when wildfire occurs within them. Integrating overlapping values into one spatial layer that includes all values in an area (i.e., by fireshed) and which indicates the acceptable range of fire intensity within each will assist BCWS in determining appropriate response tactics when fire occurs under most conditions. This work should be done through collaboration with FNESS, WLRS, BCWS, and First Nations.
- 6. Ensure that Forest Landscape Plans (FLPs) include specific objectives for landscape fire resilience, and effectively integrate information on risks of severe wildfire to wildlife, habitat and other values.**
  - a. FLP tables should be directed to incorporate wildfire risk as a foundational layer in their planning, including guidance from wildfire management plans for wildlife. Assuming that fixed reserves will maintain wildlife values in this new era of uncharacteristic large and severe wildfires will not be a successful strategy. FLP tables should conduct sensitivity modelling to test different strategies to maintain wildlife and habitat values under various wildfire scenarios.
- 7. Fund, enable and encourage fuel treatments by Indigenous Nations, stakeholders, the forest sector, and others on wildlife and conservation lands at high risk.**
  - a. Existing funding is largely for mitigation efforts in WUI areas. Effective landscape and community resilience requires moving beyond WUIs into the broader landscape. Here, priority should be given to supporting treatments within priority wildlife and habitat areas at high risk.
  - b. In 2024, work with the forest sector to address current barriers (e.g., liability, smoke, cost) to enable and encourage implementation of fuel treatments in strategic areas to enhance landscape resilience and wildlife/habitat values.
  - c. In 2024, fund and develop 3-4 strategic pilots that prioritize high value/ high risk landscapes and demonstrate success (i.e., mule deer winter range in the Cariboo, elk winter range in the East Kootenay). Initial funding could be sourced from the Tripartite Framework Agreement on Nature Conservation.
  - d. Create longer-term program (i.e., not annual) funding for key wildlife habitats and conservation lands to build and sustain contractor capacity for ongoing fuel treatments and resilience work.

## Recommended 'Quick Wins' for 2024/25

- i. Embed WLRS Biologists familiar with conservation lands into BCWS Planning and Incident Management teams to ensure communication around actions re priority wildlife habitats and conservation lands.
- ii. In conditions of high to severe drought, and in areas where severe wildfires are likely to result and are undesirable, suppress as many fires as possible as quickly as possible (full response rather than monitor). Engage the forest sector to assist with expertise, labour and heavy equipment (strike teams).
- iii. Have Natural Resource Districts require machine operators building or rehabilitating fire guard on wildlife habitat and conservation lands to wash or steam clean their machinery to remove invasive plant seeds before beginning work.
- iv. Develop a provincially approved strategy for dealing with invasive plants during prescribed/cultural burns that Districts can use, to increase acceptance of burning in southern regions.
- v. Develop an infrastructure recovery program to fund the replacement of burnt fenceposts/fencing that prevents livestock/people from accessing conservation lands that have been burnt by catastrophic wildfire.
- vi. Support innovative work to refine the Provincial Strategic Threat Analysis to better understand where fire is likely to start and flow across mountainous landscapes, to assist in prioritizing areas to treat for fuel reduction. The 'Reducing the Risk of Severe Wildfire' Project in the Kootenay region, a collaborative project involving First Nations, regional government, and the forest industry, and led by the First Nations Emergencies Services Society (FNESS) and RW Gray Consulting, is piloting such an approach.
- vii. Increase support to the Provincial Broadleaf Working Group to assist them develop a provincial broadleaf strategy, provide support to regional silviculture groups to develop broadleaf and mixed-wood stocking standards, and better understand the role of broadleaf trees in wildfire mitigation.
- viii. Establish 'burn recovery teams' for severe burns and give them a mandate to determine how and where to maintain the heterogeneity in habitats created by severe fire. Reforesting to high densities of conifers will simply recreate a significant risk of high fire severity.
- ix. Have BCWS prevention staff participate in FLP table discussions around all values - not just fire - to ensure that fire risk is integrated into all conversations and decisions.

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Ministers Wildlife Advisory Council, Strategies Working Group

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# **Recommendations from the Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council to the Premier's Expert Task Force on Emergencies**

January 17, 2024



# Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council

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- Individuals with a broad range of experience in natural resource stewardship and a passion for wildlife and habitat.
- Provide independent advice and support to the Minister on strategic issues and priorities which strengthen stewardship of wildlife and habitat in B.C.
- Focus on oversight of government work to implement the Together for Wildlife strategy including advice on legislation and policy.





# Historic Fire Regimes

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# Current Fire Regimes





# Overarching Recommendations

## 1. Build a Strategy for Resilience

- Develop an integrated wildfire resilience strategy that takes an all-of-government approach and engages and leverages capacity across society.
- Adequate funding for proactive work
- Link to watershed security and biodiversity conservation (including wetlands)



California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force

# Overarching Recommendations

## 2. Build a sustainable bioeconomy to manage fuels

- Ongoing program to enable and incentivize scaled-up fuels management by the Forest Sector, BC Hydro, First Nation Communities, Municipalities, and Regional Districts, and incentivize the development of the bioeconomy to enable long-term fuels management.



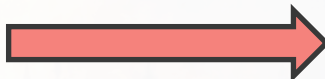
# Wildlife & Habitat Focused Recommendations

**3. Identify wildlife and habitat values at high risk of catastrophic wildfire and develop and implement locally informed wildfire management plans for these values/areas.**

## **Wildlife & Habitat Values**

- Protected areas and conservation lands
- Ungulate Winter Ranges (UWR)
- Wildlife Habitat Areas
- Wildlife Management Areas
- Old Growth Management Areas (OGMAs)
- Habitat for Regionally Important Species
- Critical Habitat for Species at Risk

Assess

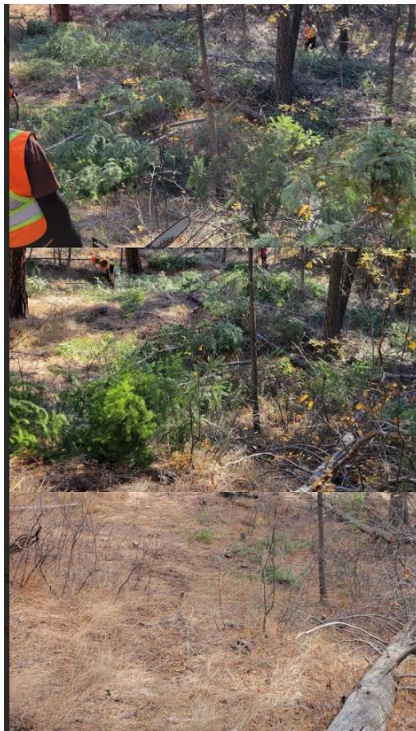


## **Values/areas at high risk:**

Develop wildfire management plans outlining proactive mitigative treatments, as well as response and recovery guidance



# Fuel Treatments to sustain or enhance wildlife/habitat values





# Recommendation 4 - Implementation

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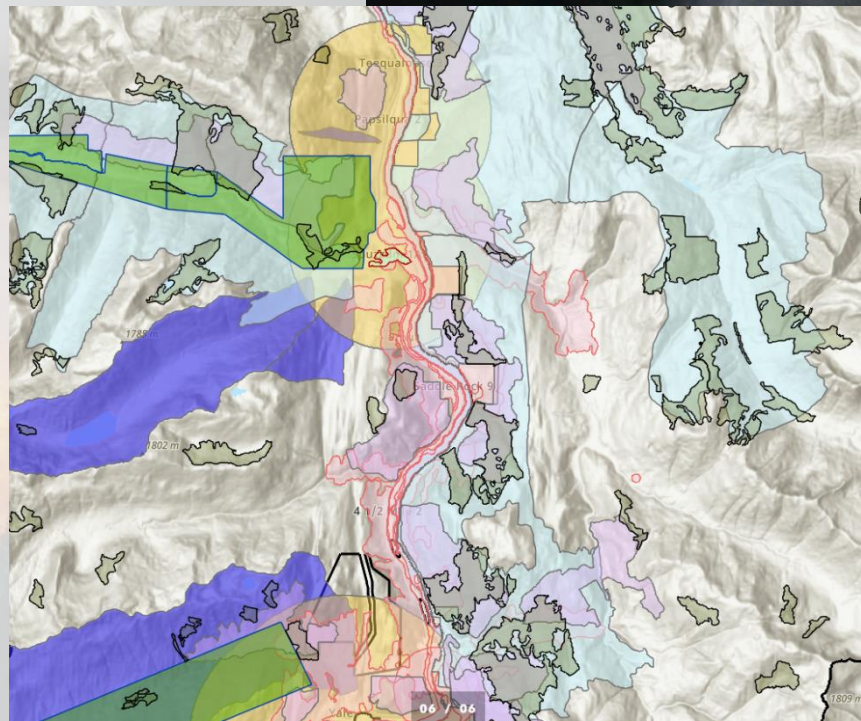
**Integrate direction from wildfire management plans for wildlife/habitat into existing wildfire planning processes and decisions**

- Regulation and policy changes may be required for fuel treatments within no-harvest areas (some OGMAs, UWRs, RRZs).
- Priority within Wildfire Urban Interface areas (WUIs) must remain on human life and infrastructure. Wildlife and habitat areas within WUIs should be prioritized for fuel reduction treatments.



# Recommendation 5 - Response

- Create a simplified spatial layer that integrates over-lapping wildlife and habitat values/areas into firesheds, and determines the intensity of fire acceptable within these firesheds.





# Recommendation 6 – Planning

**Ensure that FLPs include specific objectives for landscape fire resilience, and effectively integrate information on risks of severe wildfire to wildlife, habitat and other values.**

- Incorporate wildfire risk as a foundational layer in planning
- Include sensitivity modelling



# Recommendation 7 – Fuel Treatments

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**Fund, enable and encourage fuel treatments by Indigenous Nations, stakeholders, the forest sector, and others on wildlife and conservation lands at high risk.**

- Expand funding to areas beyond the WUIs – prioritize wildlife/habitat areas at high risk of severe wildfire
- Work with the forest sector to address barriers and enable and incentivize fuel treatments
- Develop pilots to investigate and prove out innovative approaches
- Critical to work towards Program funding, as opposed to project funding



# Quick Wins for 2024/25

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- i. Embed WLRS Biologists familiar with conservation lands into BCWS Planning and Incident Management teams
- ii. In conditions of high to severe drought, and in areas where severe wildfires are likely to result and are undesirable, suppress as many fires as possible as quickly as possible
- iii. Wash or steam clean machinery to remove invasive plant seeds before beginning work.**
- iv. Develop a provincially approved strategy for dealing with invasive plants during prescribed/cultural burns**
- v. Develop an infrastructure recovery program to fund the replacement of burnt fenceposts/fencing that prevents livestock/people from accessing conservation lands that have been burnt by catastrophic wildfire.

# Quick Wins for 2024/25

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- vi. Refine the Provincial Strategic Threat Analysis to better understand where fire is likely to start and flow across mountainous landscapes – Kootenay Pilot Project**
- vii.** Increase support to the Provincial Broadleaf Working Group to assist them in develop a provincial broadleaf strategy.
- viii.** Establish 'burn recovery teams' for severe burns and give them a mandate to determine how and where to maintain the heterogeneity in habitats created by severe fire.
- ix.** Have BCWS prevention staff participate in FLP table discussions around all values - not just fire - to ensure that fire risk is integrated into all conversations and decisions.





Thank you