



QUESNEL

Establishing a comprehensive wildfire
risk reduction strategy

By Sophie Guilbault

Source: City of Quesnel

THE SCIENCE

The mountain pine beetle is an insect that infects lodgepole pine trees and is the cause of severe infestations affecting the health of forests in British Columbia and Alberta. While mountain pine beetles can cause significant damage to forests, they are also increasing wildfire severity. Rapid growth of beetle populations in Western Canada has been caused by the changing climate. Temperatures in winter months have not been cold enough to prevent the spread of these insects, which has led to larger areas being infested. In British Columbia alone, the outbreak of the mountain pine beetle has affected over 18 million hectares of forest. This threat required a new approach to fire management.

THE TRIGGER

According to Bob Simpson, Mayor of the City of Quesnel, the mountain pine beetle epidemic gave an early indication that wildfire risk faced by municipalities like Quesnel was going to become fundamentally different than what had been experienced before. Mayor Simpson's background in forestry made him very well aware of the wildfire risk faced by Quesnel when he was elected for his first term in 2014. He made it a priority to address this growing threat by engaging his municipal government in discussions about fire risk management strategies. The Mayor and his team convinced members of the municipal council that one of the community's priorities should be to better manage the forests and that this work would have to start at the municipal level as there were limited provincial supports at that time. This led to the establishment of a think tank process where an overall strategy to reduce wildfire risk was developed by the City.

THE APPROACH

The City of Quesnel had prepared an initial Community Wildfire Protection Plan in 2007. The Plan was focused on fuel management in at-risk areas of the community with an overall intervention target of 2,000 hectares of land. Unfortunately, only 20 hectares of land was treated. When the time came to renew the plan in 2017, local leadership advised council that updating the document would require serious decisions about the protection work that needed to be completed. As the Plan was updated, severe wildfires in British Columbia combined with changes in provincial leadership led to more resources available to municipalities for investments in wildfire risk reduction.

The new Plan revealed that the main areas of concern were located on Crown land or private land. The City developed a fuel management intervention strategy around two main priorities, which involved direct fuel management in areas on Crown land in the city or adjacent to the city, and increased education and engagement around FireSmart measures for private property owners. When asked about the fuel management strategy adopted by the City of Quesnel, Mayor Simpson mentioned that "it was crucial for the community to adopt this two-fold strategy as there was no point investing in our vulnerable territory on public lands if our risk around private properties remained high."



Figure 13: Mayor Bob Simpson (Bottom Row - Centre) and Quesnel's City Council.
(Source: City of Quesnel)

When it comes to promoting FireSmart practices around private properties, municipal staff quickly sensed resistance among certain property owners who were worried that implementing FireSmart measures would completely remove the presence of nature around their homes. To address these concerns, the municipality set up a demonstration of FireSmart principles on airport land, which included a trail system with interpretive signage to demonstrate how specific strategies might look. Erin Robinson, the Forestry Initiatives Manager for the City of Quesnel, who co-authored the Plan and manages its implementation stated, "it's important that everyone in the community buys into the concept of FireSmart. Over 60 percent of our lands in the Plan are private, so we need everyone on the same page."

The City of Quesnel also invested in fuel management along the various trails in the community. This fuel management effort, which started with pruning trees along the edges of the trails, ended up bringing several additional benefits to the community. The City has since extended some of the existing trails to facilitate access for firefighters in the eventuality of a wildfire. In addition, the development of the trail system combined with fuel management along the various paths is now providing additional open views that were not accessible before, allowing hikers to enjoy new scenery around the community.

THE OUTCOME

The City of Quesnel has targeted fuel management from many different angles to reduce the community's vulnerability to wildfires. In addition to the various initiatives in place around wildfire risk reduction in Quesnel, the community is also working towards the establishment of a community forest. This concept involves the municipality, four local First Nation Governments, and the regional district taking control of forestry operations in an area-based tenure. The municipality is currently hoping the transfer of forestry operations to the community forest partners will be approved in the near future as this would allow the community and its partners to have greater control over community protection, both from a pest control and wildfire risk perspective.

A WORD FROM QUESNEL

When asked what advice he would offer to other Canadian municipalities keen to reduce their wildfire risk, Mayor Simpson highlighted the importance of not depending on others. "We live in a different world now where municipalities used to be tax collectors and by-law enforcers. We need to be leaders across all domains to create resilient communities." He added that it is crucial for municipalities to own the issues that are affecting them. "Once you recognize an issue, if you don't have the internal expertise to tackle it then you must find and hire the expertise. That's why we set up our Forestry Initiatives Program with two full-time City staff. In my opinion, if you're an at-risk community for fire, nothing is more important than making the decision that you are going to own it, identify how to mitigate that risk and be the champion that influences other levels of government to do what needs to be done."