



Wildfires, Woodlots and the Urban Interface



Fort McMurray wildfire on Hwy 63, 2016. Photo credit: Jonathan Hayward, The Canadian Press.

By LISA MARAK

While this past winter seems to have been unusually long, spring and the hot days of summer will be upon us before we know it, bringing with it the risk of forest fires. Unfortunately wildfires have become a reality in BC that we face each summer.

Our forests and wildlands cover over 94 million hectares with approximately 2,000 wildfires occurring each year. Many of our communities feel threatened with this high

occurrence of wildfires around the province, particularly those in rural areas. The wildfire in Fort McMurray is an example of the devastation caused by wildfires.

The impact on our natural resources is also devastating. Along with our forests being ravaged, wildlife habitat is damaged and viewscapes are ruined. Hydrologic processes are affected causing possible soil erosion and changes in infiltration and water run-off.

This is being driven by the effects of climate change, the large areas of forest in the province

impacted by the mountain pine beetle which act as fuel and increasing community development on or near our forests.

Following the summer of 2003 when some of the most devastating forest fires impacted communities in BC, the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations developed a Wildland Fire Management Strategy (2010).

One of the measures recommended in this strategy was fuel mitigation. Fuel mitigation is a management treatment to reduce wildfire risk



Dave Gill, Forestry Manager for Westbank First Nations (WBFN) speaks to woodlot licensees about a fuel mitigation project conducted at WBFN's community forest in West Kelowna.

in the wildland-urban interface. The objective is to modify forest fuel to reduce aggressive fire behaviour. Treatments include tree thinning, spacing, pruning and removal of woody debris that reduces fuel loads which in turn reduces the potential for devastating wildfires. Fuel management reduction also improves forest health and growth, enhances wildlife habitat through increased browse and provides better range for cattle grazing.

Woodlot Licences, BC's smallest forest tenure managed for timber, along with other forest values, are often located next to communities. Some examples of where woodlot licenses are likely to be found include viewscapes, watersheds, high recreational use areas, urban-wildland interfaces and adjacent to private property.

With the majority of the 862 woodlots licences located near communities, they are situated in

the wildland-urban interface and as such are being managed to conserve and protect important social, economic and environmental values. Managing for fire hazards and fuel loading is an important part of their management.

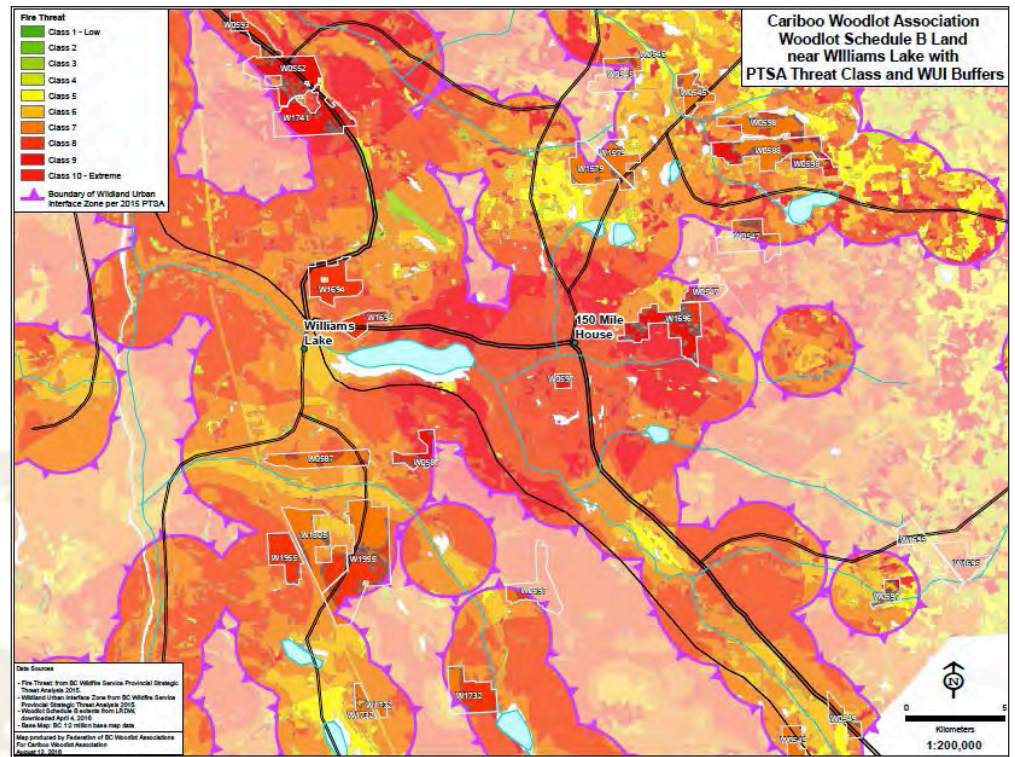
The Federation of BC Woodlot Associations has completed a spatial and data analysis of the 2015 Provincial Strategic Wildfire Threats Analysis (PTSA) on Woodlot Licences within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) across BC. It assigns wildfire risk ratings to a given area and shows where the greatest fuel loading and fire risk exists on Woodlot Licences in close proximity to communities.

This spatial and data work is intended to facilitate recommendations and decision making regarding fire proofing communities at strategic and operational levels by multiple stakeholders - the Ministry of Forests, Lands & Natural Resources, local governments, First Nations

and community groups.

Licensees with woodlots in high risk areas, through their Woodlot Association would like to work with local government to hopefully develop and carry out fuel mitigation projects to improve management and reduce the risk of wildfire to communities. Local governments play a key role in carrying out the Wildland Forest Management Strategy as they can identify threats, engage the public and assist in developing and administering fuel mitigation project proposals.

When it comes to communities addressing fuel management issues to help prevent and mitigate wildfires it can only be accomplished by addressing fuel build-up on woodlot licences. And the folks who have woodlot licences want to be good neighbours and work with their community. A good start as another fire season approaches.



Map showing the Provincial Strategic Threat Analysis threat class and Wildland-Urban Interface buffers by Crown land on Woodlot Licences within the Cariboo-Chilcotin Forest District.



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