



Summary and recommendations

Executive Summary

Worldwide, catastrophic wildfires and the ongoing climate crisis are catalyzing Indigenous peoples to re-assert jurisdiction to lands and waters by leading the recovery and restoration of their/our territories.

'Mega-fires' are increasingly burning landscapes that have been degraded by over a century of colonial state-driven forest (mis)management and a paradigm – and paradox – of fire suppression. Simultaneously, many settler-colonial governments are stating their commitments to 'reconciliation' and implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Together, these two trends point to the critical need to uphold Indigenous rights and stewardship systems through Indigenous-led transformation of forest and (wild)fire management.

These ecological and socio-political shifts provided the context for the 2017 'Elephant Hill' wildfire in British Columbia (BC), Canada, which burned close to 200,000 hectares throughout Secwepemcúlcw – the traditional and unceded territory of the Secwépemc Nation. In the immediate wake of this fire, and the significant and interconnected social, cultural, economic and ecological impacts that are still ongoing, affected Secwépemc First Nations advocated for Secwépemc leadership in the recovery and regeneration of their territories in the months, years and decades to come.

Supported by a newly-elected provincial government with a mandate to advance reconciliation, and a provincial review that recommended "establish[ing] Indigenous Peoples as true partners and leaders in emergency management", Secwépemc communities partnered with the provincial government to forge a new collaborative approach to land-based wildfire recovery.

The Elephant Hill wildfire, and the joint recovery process that followed, is the focus of this report. We draw on in-depth interviews with Secwépemc elected leadership and staff from communities and the provincial government, as well as ongoing work and action research with the Secwepemcúlcw

Restoration and Stewardship Society, to provide a detailed account of this example of contemporary Indigenous leadership in wildfire management and land-based recovery.

This study was framed by a number of broad questions:

- How did Secwépemc communities experience and respond to the 2017 wildfires in their territories?
- How was the 'joint leadership' approach to wildfire recovery established, negotiated and understood by those involved?
- What are the 'lessons' – the successes, strengths and challenges – from Elephant Hill, and how can these guide ongoing and future collaborations?
- What are the persistent barriers to achieving true partnerships and Indigenous leadership in (wild)fire management, and how can these be overcome?
- What are Secwépemc priorities for (wild)fire and emergency management, and for the restoration of fire-affected and fire-adapted Secwepemcúlcw?

To highlight these lessons and demonstrate the need for transformative change, the story of the Elephant Hill wildfire and the joint leadership approach to wildfire recovery is told in four Parts:

→ **PART 1: THE ELEPHANT HILL WILDFIRE (CHAPTERS 1-4)**

An overview of the record-breaking 2017 wildfire season in British Columbia; the experiences and responses of Secwépemc First Nations and government agencies; and the impacts of these wildfires on Secwépemc territories and communities.

→ **PART 2: THE PROCESS FOR JOINT WILDFIRE RECOVERY (CHAPTERS 5-7)**

Understanding the drivers for collaboration; the process of negotiating the scope and governance of joint wildfire recovery; and a summary of land-based recovery activities and outcomes on Elephant Hill.

→ **PART 3: REFLECTIONS ON 'SUCCESS' AND LESSONS LEARNED (CHAPTERS 8-10)**

Diverse views of 'success' and identification of key strengths, challenges and unresolved tensions to inform future collaborations.

→ **PART 4: BEYOND ELEPHANT HILL (CHAPTERS 11-13)**

Persistent barriers; Secwépemc priorities for advancing equal partnerships and First Nations leadership in (wild)fire management; and Secwépemc visions for recovery, restoration and stewardship throughout Secwepemcúlecw.

KEY FINDINGS



Part 1: The Elephant Hill wildfire

There is widespread acknowledgement that the 2017 'mega-fires' – and the ongoing wildfire risk and loss of ecological resilience throughout Secwepemcúlecw – were the direct result of timber-focussed forest (mis) management practices combined with the history of fire suppression and impacts of climate change. The Elephant Hill wildfire caused deep and lasting impacts to Secwépemc territories and to community health and wellbeing that have not been adequately recognized, addressed or compensated by provincial or federal governments.

Secwépemc communities experienced poor communication and a lack of guidance from provincial and federal authorities regarding immediate wildfire threats or evacuations. Negative experiences of evacuation by Secwépemc and neighbouring ranching communities created widespread opposition to evacuating in future.

BC Wildfire Service staff admit that engagement with First Nations occurred too late, if at all, and that there was no explicit expectation on Incident Management

Teams to collaborate with Indigenous and local communities. While Secwépemc communities played a leadership role through on-ground fire response and fuels mitigation, emergency coordination and supporting agency response, there was widespread frustration that Secwépemc knowledge and capacities were ignored and disrespected. As such, a deep mistrust of fire agencies and a strong feeling of 'being on your own' remain.



Part 2: The joint process of wildfire recovery

The scale and significance of impacts of the Elephant Hill wildfire, along with a newly elected provincial government with stated commitments to implementing the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, created a 'window of opportunity' for change. However, it was the strong leadership and advocacy from Secwépemc communities that catalyzed the collaborative approach to wildfire recovery.

Commitments to joint leadership were enacted through a Joint Leadership Council, Joint Technical Committee and sub-committees that emerged following the fire. Nevertheless, the limited mandates or decision-making authority of provincial government representatives at these tables, and challenges in accessing higher-level decision-makers, posed a barrier to advancing Secwépemc recovery priorities and interconnected stewardship goals.

In their letter to Premier Horgan, and over the months and years following the Elephant Hill wildfire, Kukukpi7 (Chiefs) emphasized that 'healing the land' and actioning commitments to reconciliation requires addressing the cumulative impacts and pressures that form the broader context for land-based recovery, and supporting Secwépemc leadership "in the months, years and decades to come". This vision conflicted with a narrower focus on 'recovery' that was defined by short-term funding, a lack of strategic or landscape-level planning, and the 'three great goals' of fireguard rehabilitation, range recovery and salvage harvesting.



Part 3: Reflections on ‘success’ and lessons learned

Overall, the majority of Secwépemc and provincial government representatives we spoke to felt that the joint process of wildfire recovery was a success. While the lack of clearly defined recovery goals posed a challenge to evaluating the success of land-based recovery, ‘success’ was largely defined in terms of less tangible outcomes such as confidence in the ability to work together. The value of this process was seen in terms of new relationships and trust; promoting collaboration and a united voice amongst Secwépemc communities; economic and training opportunities; and supporting First Nations-led archaeology.

These successes were made possible by the strong leadership and coordination from both Secwépemc communities and FLNRORD Natural Resource Regions and Districts; flexibility and willingness to work outside of usual policies and processes; a strong governance structure, co-designed by communities and the provincial government; spending time to develop shared understandings and identify shared values; and open, honest communication *in communities* to build trust. Jointly making decisions about land-based recovery requires getting together on the land and bringing together – rather than siloing – multiple communities and jurisdictions.

Key challenges related to capacity; a lack of strategic or landscape-level planning; conflicting perspectives as to the scope of ‘wildfire recovery’; ensuring adequate and appropriate participation; and jurisdictional silos and conflicts within government. Many of these challenges have not been overcome and pose potential barriers to future collaboration.

There remains a disconnect between high-level government’s stated commitments to reconciliation, and (inadequate) provision of funding, resourcing and access to decision-authorities to advance First Nation priorities or cede management authority to Indigenous peoples – particularly in the context of (wild)fire management and land-based recovery.

The Elephant Hill ‘model’ has created new expectations for joint leadership and government-to-government technical collaboration. However, for Secwépemc communities, it was just the first step along a pathway to true co-management.



Part 4: Beyond Elephant Hill

The provincial government, and BC Wildfire Service specifically, highlight substantial progress and changes since 2017, in particular improved public communication, funding for mitigation, and strategic agreements. However, Secwépemc community representatives experience persistent barriers to active involvement in wildfire management and remain frustrated at a lack of consistent and meaningful engagement.

Conflicting understandings of when and how ‘engagement’ should take place, combined with an unwillingness within BC Wildfire Service to explicitly direct operational staff or address views that devalue Indigenous knowledge and fire expertise, mean that on-ground engagement during fire seasons still depends on the particular Incident Commander/operational staff, posing a barrier to widespread change. As such, ‘shared responsibility’ and ‘equal partnerships’ remain largely confined to the mitigation, preparation and recovery phases of wildfire management. During wildfire events, BC Wildfire Service effectively retains or assumes control and responsibility for response.

Priorities for advancing Secwépemc leadership in (wild)fire management include establishing community-based emergency management offices and territorial patrols; strengthening the role of First Nation liaison officers; promoting collaboration in prescribed and cultural burning; and asserting sovereignty and leadership in managing and protecting cultural heritage.

Building on the ‘model’ of Elephant Hill means First Nations determine the approach to wildfire recovery and associated government-to-government collaboration in their territories. Simultaneously, the provincial government must spend time developing shared understandings, principles and goals with local First Nations; invest in long-term capacity building; address legacies and ongoing processes of resource extraction and forest (mis)management; and support First Nations decision-making and ‘doing the work’ of recovering their territories in months, years and decades to come.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights 30 recommendations – framed as ‘calls to action’ – for advancing First Nation leadership and true partnerships in all phases of wildfire and emergency management.

- **Mitigation and preparation:** 13 recommendations to strengthen First Nations emergency management and wildfire response planning; pre-season fire engagement; resource sharing; management of archaeology and cultural heritage; prescribed and cultural burning; and wildfire recovery planning.
- **Response:** 4 recommendations to strengthen First Nations engagement and participation in wildfire response.
- **Recovery:** 13 recommendations for improved recovery governance and planning; stakeholder engagement; funding and resources; and to support and build capacity for First Nations-led archaeology.

As ‘operational’ calls to action, these recommendations must be viewed alongside the 70 key findings which, together with the voices shared in this report, provide the pathway to guide ongoing collaboration in recovery, restoration and stewardship throughout Secwepemcúlecw. Without this context, there is a risk that ‘Elephant Hill’ will be distilled into a generalized process that prioritizes ‘operational’ outcomes over meaningful collaboration and joint decision-making.

TOWARDS TRUE PARTNERSHIPS AND SECWÉPEMC LEADERSHIP IN SECWEPENCÚLECW

In the summer of 2021, wildfires once again devastated Indigenous communities, impacting Secwepemcúlecw and other Indigenous territories throughout BC.

Recurring mega-fires clearly indicate that advancing First Nations leadership and capacities in emergency and (wild)fire management is about more than upholding Indigenous rights or governments’ commitments to ‘true partnerships’ and ‘reconciliation’. It is about confronting the underlying issues of unsustainable resource extraction and land and fire management that have created the conditions for these ‘unprecedented mega-fires’. It is about strengthening Indigenous stewardship to revitalize ecologies and cultures and mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis that we collectively face.

In the words of former Kukpi7 Ron Ignace: “To move forward, we need to know where we come from.” In looking back on Elephant Hill, and in looking ahead to the enormity and significance of the challenges we face – of recovering the land and communities after another wildfire season, of mitigating and adapting to climate change, of meaningfully implementing UNDRIP – it is our hope that this report offers insights to guide a new way forward.

Elephant Hill was just the beginning.

Recommendations

The following recommendations – framed as ‘calls to action’ – address critical needs and priorities for advancing First Nation engagement and leadership across all stages of wildfire management and upholding commitments to reconciliation.

These 30 recommendations – categorized across the four pillars of emergency management – are targeted to the Canadian and BC provincial governments (in particular, the BC Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development – including BC Wildfire Service – and its Natural Resource Regions and Districts); and Secwépemc communities.

Meaningfully implementing these recommendations will require going beyond the common approach of attempting to ‘integrate’ Indigenous knowledge or practices into existing state-run institutions and programs: it means adequately supporting, and ceding power and decision-authorities to, Secwépemc people.

MITIGATION AND PREPARATION

Emergency management coordination and wildfire response planning

1. We call on the Government of Canada to provide long-term funding to establish First Nations Emergency Management Offices, including resources and training for Emergency Management Coordinator roles and Initial Attack crews and funding for First Nations firekeepers.
2. We call on BC Wildfire Service to strengthen and further formalize the First Nation liaison officer role within the BC Wildfire Service Incident Command structure, including through establishing a formal role description and developing and implementing training modules for Incident Commanders, crew supervisors and other Operational/Planning staff. These should be developed in collaboration with the First Nations Emergency Services Society and with input from individual First Nations, including those directly impacted by the 2017-2021 wildfire seasons.
3. We call on BC Wildfire Service Fire Zones, in partnership with local First Nations, to identify points of contact to serve as First Nation liaison/s and to meet with these contacts to confirm priorities and processes for engagement prior to each fire season.
4. We call on the Government of British Columbia to establish a First Nations Emergency Management Secretariat, comprising Emergency Management BC, Indigenous Services Canada, the First Nations Emergency Services Society, the Union of BC Municipalities and BC Wildfire Service, to provide a coordinated approach to emergency management funding, emergency services support and capacity building with First Nations.

Pre-fire season engagement

5. We call on BC Wildfire Service to establish and maintain a user-driven database of First Nation contacts and resources relevant to fire management and response. And, BCWS Fire Zone officers to share this database with First Nations and facilitate updates during the winter and spring prior to each fire season.

This online database would be managed at the Fire Zone level. Relevant information would include key contact information (names, position, role/responsibility pre – and during wildfire event, phone and email for Chief and Council, Band Administrator, Natural Resource/Stewardship staff, Emergency Management staff, Archaeology/Cultural Heritage staff, and identified First Nation liaison/s); band owned/operated contractors (e.g., heavy equipment) and associated resources; training register (e.g., S100/S185) and other resources (e.g., fire truck).

6. We call on BC Wildfire Service Fire Zone and Emergency Management BC Regional staff, in consultation with First Nation staff, to coordinate pre-season planning and engagement meetings in First Nations communities (in person, Covid-protocols allowing) to identify key contacts, responsibilities and needs for emergency management and wildfire response.

Equipment sign up and resource sharing

7. We call on BC Wildfire Service to create online sign-up form for 'as and when required' equipment.
Equipment sign-up currently requires reaching out to BCWS Zone Officers. No templates or forms are publicly available.

Archaeology

8. We call on BC Wildfire Service to respond to and action the key recommendations provided in the First Nations Emergency Services Society's *First Nations Data Assembly Project* (Price and Hammond, 2017), including but not limited to:

- 8.1 BC Wildfire Service or individual Fire Centres to contract an archaeologist to obtain a blanket permit in advance (as early as six months) of each fire season, to be on-call to respond to wildland fires as they occur. Blanket permits may also be structured to allow for pre-work assessment of planned fire activities and post-impact assessment following unplanned fires.

- 8.2 BC Wildfire Service managers and planners to work with local First Nations and archaeologists to identify which community-specific protocols and processes should be followed when working with Indigenous cultural heritage resources.
- 8.3 Contracted archaeologists to collaborate with First Nations fire liaisons to identify and assess potential risks to archaeological and other cultural heritage sites and to provide management recommendations to BC Wildfire Service field staff. Incident Command/Planners may accept and apply management direction as appropriate and safe, given their expertise and knowledge of each individual situation.
- 8.4 BC Wildfire Service to revisit and implement the crew training module, chance find procedure and field cards developed and provided to BC Wildfire Serve through the *First Nations Data Assembly Project*.
- 8.5 BC Wildfire Service to collaborate with local First Nations and a qualified archaeologist in advance of any planned work (e.g., prescribed burning) to discuss any community specific heritage policies or goals, preferred site management strategies, and preferred consulting archaeologist.

The First Nations Data Assembly Project also developed training modules, field cards and Chance Find Management Procedures to accompany the report. These provide specific guidance for BC Wildfire Service staff to ensure the protection of archaeological sites.

Where unplanned impacts to sites are likely, as in the case of wildland fires, archaeologists will be available to BC Wildfire Service or individual Fire Centres and can offer real-time management advice to the Incident Commander that takes into account the practical constraints of the situation.

Note: recommendations regarding obtaining blanket permit may be addressed by Archaeology Branch approach of taking out a province-wide wildfire blanket permit. Current permit to expire 2023. Additional or complementary recommendations may arise from the BC Wildfire Service initiated 'Culturally Sensitive Sites Protection: Development of Training Program and Standard Operating Guidelines'

Recovery planning

9. We call on the Thompson Rivers Natural Resource District, with support from the 100 Mile House Natural Resource District, Thompson Okanagan Natural Resource Region and BC Wildfire Service to compile documentation (principles, guidance documents, best practices) from the 2017 and subsequent wildfires and create public-facing website providing these resources and guidance for wildfire recovery and rehabilitation.
10. We call on the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development to develop and publish a high-level land-based recovery framework. This would identify: roles and mandates for land-based recovery activities within the Ministry (decision authorities, technical expertise); commitments to joint wildfire recovery with First Nations; land-based wildfire recovery and rehabilitation activities within the jurisdiction of FLNRORD and other Ministries; critical post-wildfire decision/activity timelines and other time-sensitive planning considerations; and framework for collaboration across FLNRORD Regions and Districts.

This could be initially be developed for the Regional Operations – South area under the direction of the Director for Wildfire Recovery.

Prescribed and cultural burning

11. We call on BC Wildfire Service to establish partnerships with local First Nations to facilitate active involvement in prescribed burns within their respective traditional territories as and when desired.

The form and extent of First Nation involvement in prescribed fire activities is to be determined through consultation between BC Wildfire Service and First Nation representatives, and may include (but is by no means limited to): conducting pre-burn cultural heritage assessments; informing burn objectives and burn plan development; and participating in burns.

12. We call on the First Nations Emergency Services Society to establish regional Indigenous fire stewardship networks.

These networks would bring together community-based Indigenous fire practitioners and resource/stewardship managers to support knowledge sharing and connections within and between Indigenous Nations. In partnership with BC Wildfire Service Fire Centres and local First Nations, these networks could also facilitate cultural burning workshops and provide support and training opportunities for Indigenous community staff and representatives.

13. We call on BC Wildfire Service to enable a First Nations led cultural burning permit system that empowers First Nations communities and fire knowledge keepers to determine cultural burn objectives; allows for the incorporation of community knowledge and language, and community participation; and would be flexible to allow wider burn periods and reduced oversight.

Note: many of these recommendations will be presented in a forthcoming paper¹ on barriers and opportunities for advancing Indigenous fire stewardship, informed by multiple Nations (and this report) Canada wide.

¹ Hoffman, K., Christianson, A., Dickson-Hoyle, S., Copes-Gerbitz, K., Nikolakis, W., Diabo, D., McLeod, R., Michel, H., Al Mamun, A., Zahara, A., Mauro, N., Gilchrist, J., Myers Ross, R. and Daniels, L.D. 'The right to burn: barriers and opportunities for Indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada'. Under review.

RESPONSE

14. We call on BC Wildfire Service to establish regular (e.g., daily) partnership table conference calls for all large/project fires, to provide updates and briefings and seek local input. These partnership tables will bring together representatives from BC Wildfire Service (Incident Command/Information Officer), First Nations/First Nations liaison(s), Regional Districts, Natural Resource Districts, and other key stakeholders (e.g., infrastructure providers, industry).
15. We call on BC Wildfire Service to address persistent issues resulting from changeover of Incident Management Teams/Incident Commanders and prioritize previous recommendations to ensure consistent and respectful engagement with First Nations/First Nations liaison(s) during all large/project fires.
16. We call on the Thompson Nicola Regional District and its associated municipalities, in consultation with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and local First Nations, to establish protocols for 1) contracting local First Nation/s representatives to assist at traffic control/evacuation checkpoints in proximity to reserve lands and 2) providing adequate and consistent briefing information on local First Nations (reserve locations, contact information) and access permits issued to authorities enforcing evacuations and road closures.

First Nations liaison officers

17. We call on BC Wildfire Service to provide direction to Incident Commanders to make contact with local First Nations representatives immediately upon appointment and, where desired by the First Nation, to establish and fill a First Nation liaison position within the Incident Command Structure upon establishment.

As and when desired by individual First Nations communities, First Nations liaison officer(s) will be appointed upon establishment of an Incident Management Team. The liaison(s) will be the point of communication for the Incident Commander as well as other BC Wildfire Service staff and contractors. The liaison(s) responsibilities will include facilitating information exchange with the community (e.g., regarding evacuations/wildfire threat); connecting BC Wildfire Service with community resources; advising on cultural heritage concerns (including identifying potential impacts and mitigation measures); facilitating collaboration between community fire knowledge keepers/fire experts and agency operational staff; and providing input to guide suppression strategies and the use of prescribed fire.

RECOVERY

18. We call on FLNRORD Regional Operations and/or BC Wildfire Service representative(s) coordinating and undertaking rehabilitation activities to establish partnerships with, and actively engage, local First Nations throughout the planning, decision-making and implementation processes.

Governance and planning

19. We call on FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts, in partnership with local and affected First Nations, to collectively define the desired approach to joint wildfire recovery. This includes jointly defining governance approach (e.g., leadership, technical or sub-committee structure); participation; relationship if any to existing governance bodies (e.g., Tribal Councils, government-to-government tables); and scope and scale (e.g., single or multiple fires; single Nation or Nation to Nation).
20. We call on joint wildfire recovery governance bodies (i.e., FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts in partnership with participating and affected First Nations) to define a mechanism for elevating higher-level decisions and issues to leadership (Ministerial or Regional Executive Director) level within the provincial government.

21. We call on joint wildfire recovery governance bodies (i.e., FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts in partnership with local and affected First Nations) to jointly develop a strategic and landscape-level wildfire recovery plan prior to commencing land-based recovery activities. This plan should: set short, medium and long-term priorities and objectives for recovery; articulate the roles and responsibilities of all involved; identify capacity and resourcing needs; identify capacity and desired involvement of First Nation communities in recovery activities; and establish a monitoring and evaluation plan that incorporates targets for rehabilitation/recovery activities, a plan for monitoring post-wildfire impacts, and mechanisms to promote compliance with principles.
22. We call on FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts, in partnership with local First Nations, to develop a strategic post-wildfire salvage and retention plan to proactively direct salvage operations across the affected land base.

Funding and resources

23. We call on the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development to provide funding to support wildfire coordinator positions at both the Resource District level and within First Nation/s or designated coordinating First Nation governance body.
24. We call on the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia to ensure that allocated wildfire recovery funding adequately supports First Nation involvement in joint decision-making and considers the inherent costs of recovery activities (e.g., archaeology, coordinator role/s).

Stakeholder engagement

25. We call on FLNRORD Natural Resource District range and stewardship staff to provide timely and regular briefings on the approach to and progress of joint wildfire recovery to tenure license holders (e.g., range, forestry).

26. We call on FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts and local First Nations engaged in joint wildfire recovery to collectively determine appropriate strategies and formats for inviting participation of or input from key stakeholders in the development and implementation of recovery plans and principles.

Archaeology

27. We call on the BC Archaeology Branch to appoint a dedicated archaeologist to coordinate wildfire-related archaeology (managing blanket permits, briefing BCWS and Districts on statutory obligation, and supporting First Nations, as needed, in post-fire archaeological assessments and reporting).
28. We call on Secwépemc First Nations, with the support of professional industry (archaeology) associations and the BC Archaeology Branch as required, to develop a guidance document outlining the process, rationale, best practices and budgetary considerations for wildfire-related archaeology.
29. We call on Secwépemc First Nations, with the support of the British Columbia Association of Professional Archaeologists and the BC Archaeology Branch if and when requested, to develop and implement a data collection template and online data management system to support post-wildfire archaeology.
30. We call on FLNRORD Natural Resource Districts, in consultation with local First Nations, to contract a qualified archaeologist to support a coordinated approach to First Nations-led post-wildfire archaeological assessment and reporting (including site registration). This contract would include stipulations for training and mentoring of First Nations staff and building capacity within First Nations who do not have a qualified archaeologist on-staff.