



Wild Lands Advocate 13(2): 13 - 15, April 2005

Fire Management Plans Blaze Out of Control in Bighorn

By Lara Smandych, AWA Conservation Biologist

The risk of wildfire in Alberta has prompted the government to plan and implement fire control initiatives to prevent loss to the province's communities that live on the edge of wild lands. Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) for the Clearwater Forest Area is proposing a mitigation plan to harvest more than 280 hectares of additional forest to reduce the risk of wildfire to the town of Nordegg. But will this clearing really serve to protect the community?

Forested and wildland areas are attractive places to live and work. Recent trends show people shifting from urban centers into these interface communities. As a result, forest protection has shifted its focus to community protection to avert fire. One could ask why nature should be destroyed in order to protect landowners who have chosen to live in these interface communities.

The FireSmart program is a fire management initiative used to reduce and prevent losses due to fire and to enhance safety in interface communities. In 2003 the large fires in the Crowsnest Pass and area prompted Alberta Public Lands and Forest Division (SRD) to take a new look at their fire prevention strategy. The result was the Nordegg FireSmart Community Zone Plan. In Alberta, Nordegg ranked among the top six communities as having high priority for FireSmart planning and mitigation.

Interface FireSmart fire management focuses on steps that can be taken to reduce the threat of fire to interface communities. These initiatives concentrate on fuel management and include activities such as the removal of shrubs and deadfall, the thinning and removal of trees, and the use of fire-retardant building materials to prevent the spread of fire.

For Nordegg, however, the concept of community fire control has become a broad regional initiative, penetrating deep into surrounding forest and wildland with the goal of creating primary and secondary fire containment lines. The planning area is extensive and stretches beyond the Nordegg townsite and subdivisions into the Bighorn First Nation and Bighorn Canyon Development Nodes. No harvesting under this plan will occur within the boundary of the Bighorn Wildland. Under Nordegg's FireSmart plan, approximately 280 ha have been identified for commercial harvesting using patch cut, stand conversion, and clear cut methods. An additional 60 ha will experience mechanical fuel reduction in the name of fire control.

Why is such a large and intrusive harvesting plan needed for the area, particularly when other initiatives have already been undertaken in and around Nordegg resulting in the removal or alteration of more than 440 ha of forest and wildland?

Fire in the Bighorn region has been strictly suppressed since the 1950s. Unfavourable results of fire suppression include the aging of forests, a higher canopy density, and the accumulations of biomass on the forest floor. In January 2005, *Canadian Geographic* reported that more than 450,000 ha of forest are consumed by fire every year in neighbouring Saskatchewan, while Alberta allows less than 200,000 ha to burn annually. This level of human fire suppression has had the opposite effect in that it has created the perfect environment for wildfires and the urgent need for fire control and community protection.

SRD has a history of unproven fire management in the area. In 1999 fire management for Nordegg saw the development of the Nordegg Wildland Urban Interface Plan in recognition that fire could significantly impact the health and safety of the community. A total of 34 ha of forest were thinned and pruned, and





had deadfall removed around the north subdivision of the community. SRD admitted that these efforts would do little to hinder approaching fires from adjacent area.

The threat and impact of wildfire on other interface communities in Alberta in 2001 accelerated SRD's need for a larger scale fuel reduction plan for Nordegg. By 2003, under the new Nordegg Fuel Reduction Harvest Plan (Harvest Plan), an additional 410 ha of commercial partial-cut harvesting was undertaken. SRD readily admits, however, that they were not happy with the overall results of the Harvest Plan. Among the unforeseen problems were the following:

- cleared forest blocks were bigger than they needed to be,
- tree blowdowns occurred and deadfall logging was required,
- tree species died and contributed to the increase in fuel load, and
- SRD did not have a full-time role in clearing inspection and sequencing supervision.

By the time these problems were realized, four large blocks of forest located both east and west of the Forestry Trunk Road had already been cleared. These blocks were not contiguous and would do little to prevent risk of fire. Furthermore, as one member of AWA observed, the resulting landscape around Nordegg is a mess and is becoming an eyesore.

Despite these poor results and many people in and around the community of Nordegg remaining skeptical about further fire-control efforts, the new FireSmart plans were developed. Will these plans be effective in protecting the Nordegg community? Do other less intrusive and extensive options exist to abate wildfire threats?

"Until they show me the need for these plans, I am not convinced SRD needs to do anything beyond what they've already done for fire control within the community," says Martha Kostuch, a Rocky Mountain House veterinarian and president of Alberta League for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (ALERT). "It may be a gut reaction to fires in Alberta and B.C. and the criticism they [SRD] haven't done enough."

Kostuch is not convinced that in a particularly bad fire season the proposed clearing will provide enough resistance to wildfire and believes that evacuations will be inevitable. SRD acknowledges that this plan will not serve to stop a large fire but would only reduce its intensity for better control.

In the end, forest clearing may not address the potential for fire, as harvesting may leave the area in a flammable state given the degree of fire suppression. Although we can try to prevent the severity of fires, inevitably they will continue to threaten forests and neighbouring communities due in part to the persistence of hot, dry summers. Research has shown that forest clearing can have many negative impacts on the forest and wildland ecosystem. These include accelerated and increased levels of erosion, the increase of invasive species, increased recreational access, increased predation of wildlife, and irreparable damage from clearing techniques to the soil structure.

SRD needs to consider other fire management tools available to address interface-community fire control. Among these is prescribed burning. Prescribed burning has become an accepted ecosystem-management activity (Biswell 1994). Prescribed burns may, in fact, act as a fire break that keeps fire near the ground where it is less intense and more accessible for control.

Research by the United States Forest Service promotes the effective, although risky, prescribed burn, given the controversy that often comes with clearcutting options. Ben Gadd also questioned the effectiveness of forest clearing on community protection for Jasper (see *WLA* April 2004). He too proposed prescribed burning of the forest in and around Jasper as an alternative to planned clearing activities. In 2003, the B.C. Minister of Forests also echoed the return of prescribed burns.





In contrast, SRD's plans to clear trees and remove fuel from the forest floor may serve to keep the fire ablaze in the canopy where it is difficult to control. Prescribed burns don't come without impacts to the community, however: primarily, air quality issues due to smoke. Special management attention is required as to the timing of these burns and their impact on sensitive species.

Given the undesirable outcomes of clearing and the first phase of logging initiatives in the area, SRD has not proven the need or benefit for such drastic harvesting measures. Further logging should not proceed until the effectiveness and overall need for fire abatement activities is adequately assessed and addressed.

SRD needs to manage the forest for social and environmental values. Management and protection of wildlife and their supporting habitat needs to be a top priority. "If a need for this activity is identified, then what is the best way to undertake these actions in order to address and manage for all values and benefits while minimizing negative impacts?" asks Kostuch.

Given the extent of this plan, could timber supply and salvage be driving forces behind this initiative? Could this new plan simply be an excuse to log timber resources? Public and community safety must be a priority; however, fire suppression initiatives that serve simply to preserve and supply timber to operators cannot be supported.

"The plan may seem extensive but we have a lot invested in Nordegg," says Clearwater County Manager Brian Irmen. "Council feels something significant needs to be done to protect the community. It won't take long for the scar on the landscape to heal. We would rather take the scar than risk loss to the community."

SRD has repeatedly failed their public consultation obligations by not consulting all stakeholders on issues at the outset, and despite being chastised in court over poor public consultation in the Bar C logging case in the Ghost River area, SRD has once again fallen short. Although public open houses were held and the draft presented to Clearwater County Council in October 2004, SRD said that the omission of representation by environmental groups on the FireSmart committee was an oversight and they issued an apology. After providing this excuse, they offered AWA an opportunity to comment on the final draft. AWA expects that all stakeholders and interested parties have equal opportunity to review the draft plans and that adequate consultation be provided through the entire process.

Although the public consultation process has yet to be completed, I was informed by SRD that the fire plan was basically a "done deal" and would be going through. Yet, according to a letter sent to AWA by SRD, the plan is still in draft stage and implementation will not commence until the plan is endorsed by Fish and Wildlife and Clearwater County. Harvesting operations will not proceed until late fall 2005 and will be completed by spring.

Despite the planned intervention, the community of Nordegg and area may be left vulnerable to future fire catastrophe. Given that 40 per cent of wildfires in Alberta are caused by human activity, SRD needs to concentrate its efforts on community fire-risk education, fire preparedness and emergency management, in addition to forest-user education and training in attempts to minimize potential future risk. More resources should also be directed toward other processes such as fire fighting personnel and infrastructure.

Further questions or concerns regarding wildfire threat mitigation in Bighorn and area should be addressed to Gary Mandrusiak, Wildfire Prevention Officer, Sustainable Resource Development, Clearwater Forest area (403) 845-8356.

