



Wild Lands Advocate 14(4): 15 - 16, August 2006

## Nature's Power Trumps Willmore Fire Plan Strategy

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This summer, forest fires in Willmore Wilderness Park (WWP) got off to a raging start with fire suppression apparently preempting the approval and implementation of the draft WWP Fire Management Plan drawn up in January 2006. A key component of the proposed plan – and a significant shift in government policy – is to “allow natural fire processes to occur to provide the benefits of wildfire when extreme negative impacts are not expected” in an area defined within Willmore as an Extensive Zone. But Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) fell back on “old school” firefighting policy when confronted by a fire in the proposed Extensive Zone by taking at least six bulldozers approximately 35 to 40 km into Willmore.

The main fire was at Sheep Creek, well inside the Front Ranges in Willmore and the proposed Extensive Zone. The heavy equipment was taken in on an old road bed up the Smoky River valley, then up the Muddywater River valley through Dry Canyon to the main fire. Under the proposed fire plan, fire suppression, which was only to be done when necessary, was not to involve the use of heavy ground equipment but instead would involve targeted airlifting of men and equipment.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is supportive of the draft fire plan, particularly with respect to the concept of letting natural burns take place in Willmore within these Extensive Zones, which, as proposed, would encompass about two-thirds of Willmore's area with eventual expansion to all of Willmore. This strategy could be instrumental in restoring forest health by creating a more varied tree age class, vegetation structure, and plant composition.

This natural reconfiguring of the forest structure could provide the wilderness with improved long-term defenses against mountain pine beetle (MPB). As stated in a Forest Health/MPB Control section of the Draft Plan, “Indirect control is provided by creating an extensive zone where natural fires may be allowed to burn including MPB infected areas of the pine forest that provide beetle habitat.”

So AWA was immediately apprehensive when it learned that the government decided to suppress the fire, with bulldozers, when one of the first opportunities to apply the principles of the proposed plan presented itself. AWA was concerned that the use of heavy equipment on an old road would result in environmental damage and potentially create openings that could facilitate illegal OHV access.

Will fire suppression in the Extensive Zone continue to be the quick fall-back option selected by SRD, largely ignoring the proposed plan? If so, what method of fire-fighting will be used in these cases?

Officials with Community Development assured AWA that there was minimal environmental damage from the bulldozers and that the decision to suppress the fire using the heavy equipment was warranted in this case. Laura Graham and John Kristensen, Assistant Deputy Minister of Community Development, Parks and Protected Areas, were confident that the decision was appropriate because of the extreme hazards assessed with this fire; they said it was not taken lightly or rashly. They felt there was a sense that the parties involved are already operating under the principles of the plan, which has yet to be formally approved and implemented. The question remains, then, why the spirit of the plan was shelved so quickly in this particular instance.

Given that the strategy of letting fires burn in part of WWP is a significant leap of faith for departments involved in decisions on fire suppression, we wonder if there is a certain lack of comfort, or resistance, by SRD to make that jump. Another question is the level of influence of the Grande Cache Community





Protection Plan, which is barely mentioned in WWP's fire plan, in the latest decisions on the Sheep Creek fire.

Although officials from Community Development have stated they are comfortable that the decisions were warranted, it is not enough to ask the public simply to trust these decisions made in protected areas. An effective communication strategy would go a long way toward answering questions the public may have as to why exceptions to the fire plan are made in fighting specific fires in WWP. News releases, emails to stakeholders, and an active website to obtain details of and reasons for fire suppression in Willmore's Extensive Zone could be some of the methods government departments could use to inform the public of their activities and decisions in WWP.

AWA has asked the ministers of SRD and Community Development to provide assurances that Willmore's proposed fire management plan will be approved and adhered to, and that heavy ground equipment will not be brought into Willmore in the future. We also requested that they hasten the approval of the draft plan and make completion of an overall management plan for Willmore a priority.

On a positive note, a spur of the fire at Sheep Creek burned in the Famm Creek valley, but apparently topography and exposed rock played a key role in the decision to let this section of the fire burn itself out without having to bring people and equipment in to suppress the fire. This real-time informal application of the new fire plan should allow those involved to observe in WWP the progression of natural fire processes and patterns as per the plan's intent.

Additionally, as there was a prescribed burn scheduled for this area, this natural fire may suffice, according to Graham, a co-author of the proposed fire plan. Nature may have restructured, on its own, this particular natural firebreak, which was one of the objectives of the fire management plan.

Deeper concerns are present with respect to SRD's possible approach toward management of WWP. At the recent MPB Summit 2006, it became clear that WWP is SRD's ground-zero for attacking MPB, with SRD Minister David Coumts essentially declaring war on the much maligned insect. We hope that WWP does not become a casualty in this war.

Being bold and sticking to a rational, measured, and science-based fire management plan, with ecological integrity a top goal, may ultimately be the best way to combat the serious MPB problem. At minimum, restoring natural processes of fire, forest structure, and MPB in WWP may be its best defense, rather than an expensive, drawn-out battle that has already been lost in British Columbia.

At the recent MPB Summit, B.C.'s Minister of Forest and Range Rich Coleman said that in the war on MPB, the fact that pine is in a park should not be a barrier to action. He commented that Alberta is fortunate that we do not have the problem of public resistance to doing things in parks, which may imply that he has been told that there is an effective carte blanche in Alberta for fighting MPB. Mr. Coleman emphasized that Alberta would be right to protect the overall asset, including stopping beetle attacks in the parks. This sounds more like the strategy of a forestry company than someone interested in conservation of our wilderness parks and wilderness processes.

We hope that fire suppression in WWP is not used as an excuse to validate a widespread and destructive MPB fight in the Park, which may be contrary to Willmore's ecological and science-based fire management strategy as outlined in the draft plan. If we continue to try to micro-manage landscapes like Willmore, we may lose invaluable ecological and economic knowledge about one of our most valuable assets: the secret of how nature manages itself.

