

# Nordegg's FireSmart Experience:

## A Commentary

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**T**he residents and homeowners in Nordegg are aware that the policy, regulations and practices of FireSmart are in place to protect us and our homes in the case of wildfire.

We live in Nordegg in order to create businesses, homes, education, and leisure for our families. Our vision for Nordegg, supported by Clearwater County, is that it will become the tourism hub for the region. To that end, we are supporting the Bighorn Backcountry official designation as a Wildland Park managed by Alberta Parks. We also think that such a designation will support more responsible FireSmart practices by Alberta Agriculture and Forestry.

We would first comment that the ongoing, and in some cases unnecessary, FireSmart logging in the Bighorn Backcountry close to the community of Nordegg is not meeting best practices that are acceptable in an area identified for tourism and is undermining the stated tourism and economic development goals of the region. Second, we are concerned that lack of FireSmart in public green spaces immediate to our residences poses a real threat to their ignition should a fire close in on the community. We are concerned that indiscriminate clearcutting where the logs are then sold to commercial operators is being used instead of proper FireSmarting – using single tree and deadfall removal. The former is a cost recovery practice and the latter practice requires investment by Alberta Agriculture and Forestry.

### Regarding FireSmart Logging in Nordegg

Nordegg community members participated in the R11 Charette – a weekend planning exercise to develop objectives, indicators and targets for the R11 (Bighorn Backcountry) over a decade ago. The plan recognized that limited mechanical treatments would be allowed to reduce fire risk in areas not amenable to prescribed burning.

The Government of Alberta clearly committed that treatments would include residual material, be designed to minimize visual and tourism impacts, protect existing trails and that treatment activities would not create any new trails. There was also a commitment to report back on the achievement of these goals. Due to a lack of resources, this has not happened.

The Bighorn Backcountry includes no commercial forestry tenure, but past government FireSmart logging has been conducted in a manner that is indistinguishable from commercial clearcutting. In addition there appears to have been a lack of supervision of logging contractors or recognition that special rules and commitments were supposed to be met. In particular, there have been no visual assessments of mechanical treatments and screening buffers; topography and residual material have not been used to address visual concerns, as is required by the R11 plan ([http://aep.alberta.ca/lands-forests/forest-management/forest-management-plans/documents/ForestManagementUnitR11/R11\\_part1.pdf](http://aep.alberta.ca/lands-forests/forest-management/forest-management-plans/documents/ForestManagementUnitR11/R11_part1.pdf)). Another breach of the plan concerns the leaving of

inappropriate linear access to areas close to the community. These errors are inconsistent with the mandates of other government departments to promote and maintain tourism and recreation values.

We also firmly believe that the current Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) designation of the Nordegg region is a deterrent to two key outcomes. It does not encourage tourism and sustainable growth of Nordegg as a gateway community to the Bighorn. It also seems it has not supported the implementation of quality government FireSmart practices.

Over the past 18 months we alerted local Alberta Agriculture and Forestry personnel to our concerns. We met with Rocky Mountain House management staff in February 2016. This somewhat contentious meeting was followed up with a March 2016 tour of the FireSmart logging areas around Nordegg. The response from the frontline Agriculture and Forestry personnel leading that tour was constructive. Promises were made: to pull back roads that were built during previous FireSmart logging exercises; to place barriers and signage to stop access to FireSmart logged areas; and to selectively reforest with popular varieties for visual reasons and protection of wetlands that have been disturbed. Promises were made to contact the community at least annually to review concerns and to contact the community before any more FireSmart logging is planned.

## Regarding FireSmart in public spaces close to residences

To its credit, Clearwater County development regulations in Nordegg are FireSmart. As such these regulations put the county ahead of other jurisdictions. The residents of Nordegg are very aware of their responsibility to reduce the wildland fire fuel on their property. As with human nature there is variation in compliance on this responsibility. The county has twice used the long weekend in August to provide help transporting material to the local burn pile. The community responded well to these efforts but the service has been discontinued for financial considerations.

A major FireSmart issue within Nordegg is the need to reduce fuel on public,

mostly county, spaces close to homes. This lack of action reduces homeowners' enthusiasm for clearing fuel from their own property, as they rightly believe that lack of FireSmart public lands adjacent to their homes is a peril equal to the fire risk on their own property.

There are Alberta Agriculture and Forestry grants that could address this issue. We feel there is lack of logic involved in having residents write grants to get funds from Alberta Agriculture and Forestry to give to the county to carry out fuel reduction on public land close to homes when excessive FireSmart logging is being carried out just down the road. Notwithstanding we will engage in the established process and see where it goes.

In summary the Nordegg Environment

and Recreation Working Group has concerns that past FireSmart logging has not met the intent and commitments of the R11 plan and has created both poor esthetics in the area and unnecessary linear access to the treated areas. Because of the advocacy of the Nordegg Environment and Recreation Working Group, promises have been made to mitigate the worst outcomes of these poor FireSmart practices. Finally, the lack of jurisdiction, by Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, over the public lands close to Nordegg homes has created poor FireSmart conditions within the community. The route to dealing with that inconsistency seems convoluted and illogically involves community members writing grants to have work carried out on public land. 🌲