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## REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2026

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**SUBJECT**     **Strategic Wildfire Risk Reduction in Regional Parks**

### **ISSUE SUMMARY**

To report back on the Regional Parks Committee's October 22, 2025, Motion Arising regarding a potential Strategic Forest Management and FireSmart Plan, including budget.

### **BACKGROUND**

At its October 22, 2025 meeting, the Regional Parks Committee carried the following Motion Arising:

*That staff be directed to investigate and report back to the Regional Parks Committee on a potential Strategic Forest Management and FireSmart Plan including budget.*

In response to the motion, staff assessed what is required to develop a Strategic Forest Management Plan.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **CRD Approach to Wildfire Risk Reduction**

The CRD currently addresses wildfire risk reduction through a combination of community-based FireSmart programming, targeted operational practices in the CRD Watershed Protection Area, and a broad set of prevention, preparedness, and stewardship activities within Regional Parks. Together, these approaches provide important context for understanding existing capacity and identifying opportunities to strengthen wildfire resilience across the regional parks system.

#### *CRD Protective Services - Community-Level FireSmart Programming*

In the CRD, community-level wildfire risk mitigation is primarily delivered through the FireSmart program, administered by the CRD's Protective Services division and focused on communities within the Electoral Areas. Outside the CRD's mandate, wildfire mitigation is the responsibility of local authorities elsewhere in the region.

Established in 2018 and supported by a dedicated FireSmart Program Coordinator since 2021, the program has been fully grant-funded. It focuses on wildfire risk reduction through public education and prevention, including free home ignition zone assessments, public information sessions, community wood-chipping events, and coordination with local fire departments and emergency programs. Program activities are guided by Electoral Area-specific Community Wildfire Resiliency Plans to ensure efforts align with local risks and priorities. A key objective is to reduce pressure on volunteer fire departments by emphasizing prevention and preparedness before fires occur.

### *CRD Watershed Protection - Wildfire Risk Reduction*

CRD's Watershed Protection division, which manages over 22,400 hectares of protected drinking watershed, has developed one of the most advanced and data driven wildfire risk reduction programs in the region. In collaboration with the Canadian Forest Service, CRD Watershed Protection completed regionwide wildfire burn probability mapping in 2019 using empirically based fire behaviour models. The mapping confirms that, while large fires are generally uncommon in local forest types, the region experiences predictable periods of elevated wildfire risk and identifies where ignitions are most likely to occur under extreme conditions. This work provides an evidence-based foundation for prioritizing wildfire risk reduction efforts in locations where treatments are most likely to be effective.

Operational experience in the watershed also provides valuable cost benchmarks that can inform planning in regional parks. Hand treatments generally range from approximately \$12,000 to \$18,000 per hectare, while mechanized treatments, where terrain and site conditions allow, typically cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000 per hectare. While not all watershed approaches are directly transferable, the emphasis on risk-based prioritization, modelling, and cost tracking offers important lessons for Regional Parks.

### *CRD Regional Parks - Current Wildfire Risk Reduction Practices*

The CRD's Regional Parks division currently undertakes a wide range of prevention, precaution, and preparedness activities that collectively form the foundation of wildfire risk reduction across the park system. These include consistent implementation of provincial fire restrictions aligned with fire danger ratings, a year-round prohibition on open fires (outside designated campground facilities), and sustained public education delivered through signage, park patrols, and enforcement—particularly in areas with a higher likelihood of human-caused ignitions.

Operational preparedness is supported through close coordination with local fire departments and the BC Wildfire Service (BCWS), maintenance of equipment caches, staff training for response during high-hazard periods, and ongoing information sharing with CRD Watershed Protection regarding wildfire conditions and activity across the region. Regional Parks also maintains a cost-sharing agreement with BCWS for parks located within Electoral Areas outside established fire protection districts, helping to ensure appropriate response capacity when wildfire incidents occur. Operational practices are also adjusted during wildfire season to comply with the BC Wildfire Regulation and to minimize the risk of staff-caused ignitions.

Stewardship staff and volunteers play an important complementary role in wildfire risk reduction through ecosystem-based management. Efforts to control invasive species, restore native vegetation, and protect sensitive ecosystems contribute to healthier, more resilient forests that are better able to withstand disturbance and recover following fire. In some areas, these activities also reduce the presence of highly flammable invasive species.

Staff are working with conservation organizations and covenant holders to explore opportunities for collaboration and shared resources that support ecologically informed fire-risk management in natural areas.

Together, these actions represent the current approach to wildfire risk reduction in regional parks. This existing foundation provides a strong platform from which staff can further explore more coordinated, risk-based, and proactive approaches to enhancing wildfire resilience across the regional parks system and develop a Strategic Forest Management Plan.

### *FireSmart Program Suitability in Regional Parks*

The term FireSmart is generally used to describe the province-led FireSmart Program that provides proactive, evidence-based guidance to help residents and communities reduce wildfire risk to buildings and other structures. While these standards are valuable for protecting park facilities, the Program is not intended for broad application across natural forested landscapes. FireSmart measures are designed to focus on a localized zone, generally within 30m of structures.

In regional parks, wildfire risk reduction at a landscape-scale is more effectively guided by fuel management and forest health practices. These approaches focus on reducing ladder fuels, improving stand structure, and supporting ecological resilience. These approaches are complementary. FireSmart principles can be effectively applied around critical park infrastructure, while landscape-scale wildfire risk reduction strategies provide the appropriate framework for managing risk across the broader park environment.

### **Proposed Approach**

Strategic Forest Management Plans are long-term policy documents that assess current forest conditions, define a desired future state, establish management objectives, and outline harvesting, regeneration, and other management activities to balance and protect multiple forest values within a management area. While they can inform wildfire management, their scope is broader and their development requires substantial planning effort.

As such, building on existing wildfire prevention, preparedness, and stewardship practices, staff propose a phased and scalable approach to improving wildfire resilience in regional parks. This approach is intentionally structured to allow learning, refinement, and decision making at each stage, while avoiding premature commitments to long-term actions or costs.

The proposed work begins with a focused planning phase to establish the information, scope, and partnerships required to develop a Strategic Forest Management Plan for regional parks. Subsequent phases would only proceed subject to future Board direction and funding.

#### *Phase 1: Strategic Forest Management Plan Development (2027-2028)*

With a specific focus on wildfire risk reduction, staff propose retaining a qualified consultant to work with Regional Parks to design the Strategic Forest Management Plan, rather than to complete all technical analyses or operational planning upfront. This phase would focus on defining how wildfire risk reduction and forest management should be approached in regional parks.

Key objectives of Phase 1 would include:

- Defining the scope, structure, and decision-making framework for a future Strategic Forest Management Plan.
- Identifying information gaps (e.g., wildfire exposure, ecological sensitivity, cultural values, community readiness) and outlining how they should be addressed in later phases.
- Clarifying the role of FireSmart principles in relation to broader landscape-scale wildfire risk reduction and forest health objectives.
- Establishing a clear, transparent process for collaboration with First Nations, conservation partners, and local communities.
- Developing cost ranges, sequencing, and resourcing considerations for future phases.

This phase acknowledges that existing provincial and regional wildfire products provide useful context but are not sufficiently detailed for site-specific decision making for regional parks. The consultant's role would be to design a tailored planning approach that integrates available data sources (e.g., Community Wildfire Resiliency Plans, Canadian Forest Service modelling, CRD GIS data) while respecting ecological constraints, cultural values, covenants, and public use considerations unique to regional parks.

The outcome of Phase 1 would be a clear roadmap for future work, enabling informed decisions about whether, where, and how to proceed with further analysis, pilot projects, or implementation.

#### *Future Phases (Conceptual and Subject to Future Approval)*

While not proposed for funding at this time, Phase 1 would position the CRD to consider future phases if supported by the Board. These could include:

- *Phase 2: Foundational Analysis and Prioritization*, such as detailed wildfire exposure mapping, ecological and cultural values assessment, and identification of high-priority areas for risk reduction.
- *Phase 3: Pilot Project(s)* developed collaboratively with interested First Nations, community, and conservation partners to test approaches such as fuel management, ecological restoration, prescribed fire, or cultural burning within the operational realities of Regional Parks.
- *Phase 4: Strategic Forest Management Plan Finalization and Implementation*, informed by lessons learned, refined cost estimates, and demonstrated feasibility.

Each phase would build on the outcomes of the previous phase, allowing the Regional Parks to scale its approach incrementally.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

### *Alternative 1*

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:

That in 2027, staff dedicate core operating funds to initiate a Request for Proposals process, valued at up to \$75,000, to retain a qualified consultant to assist in developing a Strategic Forest Management Plan framework guiding future wildfire risk reduction and forest resilience efforts.

### *Alternative 2*

That this report be referred back to staff for additional information.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### *Climate Implications*

Projected climate conditions are increasing the frequency of wildfire-prone weather, extending dry seasons, and contributing to fuel accumulation in some ecosystems. These trends are consistent with the findings of the CRD Corporate Climate Change Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (2021), which identifies wildfire as a growing regional risk under future climate scenarios. Ecologically informed fuel management can help moderate fire behaviour, support forest health, and reduce the likelihood of high intensity burns, particularly in ecosystems experiencing increased drought stress.

### *Environmental Implications*

Fire plays an essential ecological role in many regional park ecosystems by clearing organic debris, recycling nutrients, opening forest canopies, and supporting biodiversity and regeneration of fire-dependent species. Fire-risk reduction strategies, therefore, focus not on eliminating fire but on mitigating high-severity events that threaten homes, structures, and infrastructure. All prescriptions will be designed to maintain or improve ecological integrity by reducing hazardous fuels while supporting native biodiversity, including the removal of high-risk invasive species and, where appropriate, planting native, fire-tolerant species. Treatments will be tailored to ecosystem type, species at risk considerations, and sensitive habitats, with archaeological and cultural assessments completed where required.

### *Financial Implications*

In 2027, a Request for Proposal valued at up to \$75,000 would be undertaken to retain a qualified consultant to assist Regional Parks in developing a Strategic Forest Management Plan framework (Phase 1). This one-time expenditure would be funded through Regional Parks core operating budget. These funds would support planning and scoping activities only and would not include implementation of wildfire risk reduction or forest management treatments. There are no ongoing operating costs associated with Phase 1.

Staff anticipate pursuing external funding opportunities where available to offset costs associated with the planning phase and to support any future phases, should they be considered by the Board. Potential sources include fuel-mitigation grants, Indigenous partnership funding, and grant-funded initiatives such as the Braided Wildfire Knowledge Mobilization initiative led by the Protective Services Division. Staff will continue to monitor funding program changes and emerging opportunities to identify alternative funding sources as this work progresses.

Any future phases, including detailed analysis, pilot projects, or implementation, would be subject to separate Board approval and would be accompanied by more detailed cost estimates and funding strategies.

### *First Nations Implications*

Alternative 1 includes identifying opportunities for collaboration with First Nations and other partners. Staff will work through established relationship protocols to support respectful engagement through the proposed and future phases of this initiative.

### *Intergovernmental Implications*

Regional Parks already implements a range of prevention and preparedness measures aligned with provincial regulations. Staff coordinate closely with local fire departments, the BC Wildfire Service (BCWS), and CRD Watershed Protection. The work in Phase 1, would further investigate and consider roles, gaps and opportunities for future consideration.

### *Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities*

This work supports Board priorities related to climate adaptation, community and visitor safety, Indigenous relations, and evidence-based decision-making. It also advances long-term resilience in the face of increasing wildfire risk.

*Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies*

The proposed approach is consistent with the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan commitments to conservation and climate action and resilience. It aligns with work underway in Watershed Protection, creating opportunities to share methodologies and cost information.

**CONCLUSION**

In response to the Regional Park Committee’s motion, a phased and risk-based approach is proposed to develop a Strategic Forest Management Plan for regional parks. Key considerations include integrating wildfire risk reduction, ecological values, cultural considerations, and FireSmart principles within a regional parks context. Staff recommend retaining a qualified consultant to develop the scope, structure, and decision-making framework to guide this work. Subject to Committee direction, staff will report back with options for next steps, including potential pilot projects, scope, timing, and budget.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:  
That in 2027, staff dedicate core operating funds to initiate a Request for Proposals process, valued at up to \$75,000, to retain a qualified consultant to assist in developing a Strategic Forest Management Plan framework guiding future wildfire risk reduction and forest resilience efforts.

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