

BCCFA 2025 Conference May 27, 2025

Breakout Session: Bringing Burning Back: Integrating Prescribed Fire into Community Forest Operations

Session description: Prescribed fire is increasingly recognized as a vital tool for reducing wildfire risk and restoring ecological health. As a provincial priority, it plays a key role in the work of the BC Wildfire Service–BCCFA Partnership. This session will highlight the practical, locally informed steps that community forests can take to incorporate prescribed fire into their operations. Discover how community forest managers and other practitioners are building relationships, working collaboratively, and using fire to support a range of land management goals.

Speakers:

- Garnet Mierau, Former Logan Lake Community Forest Manager, now with BC Forest Professionals
- Erik Leslie, Manager, Harrop-Procter Community Forest
- Hayden Leo, Forestry Technician, Spel'kúmtn Community Forest - Líl'wat Forestry Ventures
- Josh Macy, Land and Resource Specialist, BC Wildfire Service

Moderator: Dr. Kira Hoffman, Silviculture Innovation Program

Notes compiled by: Maeve McAllister

Main Topics Discussed:

Garnet Mierau

- Discussed regulated practice, exclusive right to title/practice.
- Work with Ktunaxa and BC Wildfire Service to establish fire programs.
- Creating definitions for wildfire risk reduction and prescribed fire competencies.
- Development of extension tools and workshops.
- Emphasis on community of practice and authority via regulation.
- Encouragement to join the profession and keep learning (e.g., webinars)

Erik Leslie:

- Applying prescribed fire in wildfire risk zones.

- Long-term planning and relationship-building with BCWS.
- Methods: machine pile and burn, hand treatments, broadcast burns.
- Site specifics: NW-facing slopes, high-severity landscape, mixed fire regimes.
- Burning adjacent to private lands – detailed burn plans and fire preparation.
- Spring low-intensity burn with community participation.
- Integration of contract community with BCWS.

Hayden Leo:

- Reviving family-managed mountainside burning traditions.
- Knowledge loss addressed through training and elder learning.
- Firefighting and fire effects training (Stillwater/Wildfire).
- 120 trained; 50-60 currently active; many from the ministry.
- Projects with BC Wildfire, Cheakamus, and Spel'kûmt'n Community Forests.
- Burned owl units with full crews (30 from each side).
- Focus on community needs, returning species, and economic opportunities.
- Observations on fire beyond cut blocks – habitat and wildlife recovery.

Josh Macy:

- Message: shifting from resilience *to* fire to resilience *through* fire.
- “Objective 0 – “Learn to Burn”
- Build capacity and relationships
- Focus on building capacity, public resources, future-oriented planning.
- Partnering with post-secondary students.

Q&A Themes

Smoke Management

- Smoke issues hinder planning and social license.
- Workarounds: community relocation (bus trips), prescription adjustment.
- No "secret sauce" for venting; political and technical challenges.

Stand Qualities for Burning

- Depends on objectives (e.g., mushrooms, underbrush).
- Prioritizing resilience, terrain, tree species, and access.
- Adapt harvesting to burning strategy, not vice versa.

Consultants and Burn Boss Bottlenecks

- Limited qualified personnel.
- Importance of simplifying burns (e.g., small teams, accessible sites).
- Non-gov't pathways and certification equivalencies (e.g., NWCG, Parks Canada).

Burn Boss Numbers and Certification

- Type 1: very few, Type 2: ~10, Type 3: ~50 with double in training.
- 10-year progression typical.
- Government certification pathway not available to non-gov't without workaround.

Carbon and Community Concerns

- Explain tradeoffs: smoke now vs. catastrophic wildfire later.
- Focus on fine fuels to preserve belowground and large biomass carbon.
- Emphasize survivorship and site-specific benefits.

Cultural vs. Prescribed Fire

- Legal distinction: Indigenous-led cultural fire vs. regulated prescribed fire.
- Cultural fire involves traditional values, community participation.
- Recognition that practices differ across Nations; no one-size-fits-all.
- Historical use of fire by many cultural groups (e.g., Quakers, Doukhobors).

Key Takeaways:

This session highlighted the growing momentum behind re-integrating fire as both a cultural practice and a forest management tool, emphasizing the importance of building relationships, expanding training pathways, and navigating regulatory frameworks to support fire use on the landscape.

Panelists shared firsthand experiences implementing prescribed and cultural fire through community forests, multi-agency partnerships, and Indigenous leadership, stressing the need to address bottlenecks in burn boss certification, adapt planning to site conditions, and engage communities early to foster social license.

A key insight was that resilience to wildfire requires proactively working with fire—drawing on legacy knowledge, regulatory evolution, and intergenerational learning to make fire a viable, safe, and culturally rooted part of forest stewardship.

Action Items:

- Develop and distribute extension materials and workshops to define prescribed fire competencies and support professional development.
- Expand training opportunities and certification pathways for burn bosses, including recognition of non-government and equivalency routes.
- Engage communities early around prescribed fire, including strategies to manage smoke impacts and build social license.
- Clarify regulatory definitions of wildfire risk reduction and prescribed fire to support broader participation in fire stewardship.
- Support interdisciplinary training events, such as the upcoming TREX event in Cranbrook.
- Encourage collaboration with local governments to navigate regulatory challenges and strengthen prescribed burn planning.

Q & A

1. What time did you do the burn?
Lit up around 11:00am – 5:00pm.
2. Was any water present?
Sprinklers were set up; machinery surrounded the area; the logging plan integrated burn logistics.
3. Do you think it's worthwhile to go to the municipalities and districts?
Yes—engage local government early; important for social license.
Community safety exemptions exist; some communities bus residents out on burn days.
4. What stand qualities do you look for to prepare a site for prescribed fire?
Depends on the objective—e.g., mushroom growth, cultural outcomes.
Avoid wet sites; partial cuts harder than clearcuts.
Build fire planning into block design from the start—don't retrofit.
5. Where are we at with consultants or contractors?
– Asked about third-party capacity for burn planning and execution.
Consultants are engaged but underused; much expertise has been lost.
Look internationally/nationally; training standards need to be more accessible.

Burn boss capacity is a bottleneck—need to simplify burns and lower crew sizes.

6. How long does it take to make a qualified burn boss?
“How long is a piece of rope?”—around 10 years of focused work; multiple pathways including certification and demonstration of equivalency.
7. How many fully functional burn bosses do you have?
~50 Type 3, fewer for Type 2 (~10), very few for Type 1.
Outside government, about 5 certified burn bosses.
8. What would you say to a community member who appreciates the value of prescribed burning but is worried about the carbon being released into the atmosphere?
Invite them to the site; choose the “best case” scenario.
Target fine fuels to preserve carbon stored in large wood.
Frame as a choice between short-term smoke or worse wildfire smoke later.
Burning increases below-ground carbon retention.
9. Can you speak to the difference between cultural and prescribed burning?
Professional Governance Act recognizes Indigenous-led burning as separate from regulated prescribed fire.
Cultural burns are guided by stories, elders, and practices.
Prescribed fire is planned and technical; cultural fire is place and community defined.
First Nations are diverse; cultural fire looks different in each place. (Dukhobors and Quakers also have history of prescribed fire).

Important Details/Quotes:

“We rented a bus and took people into town to go shopping for the day to get them out of the smoke zone – worked well for community buy-in.”

“When humans were first learning how to interact with fire 2 million years ago we were all

“How do we as a collective talk about fire? What do we need to regulate inside of that?”

“Always face-to-face—don’t try to explain it over email.”

On cultural fire: “That’s for Indigenous communities to lead.”

“We’re trying to plan prescribed fire into the forestry system from the start”

“Bottleneck in the burn boss world – fire zones have a limited amount of capacity.”

“Lower the workload to make it easier to pull off a burn.”

“Each family would manage a valley by themselves.”

“Community needs and forest stewardship – both the same thing.”

“Wildfire doesn’t have any boundaries—we’re boxing it in by keeping it in our cut blocks.”

“Must bring the community out there, show them the value of this land burning—it’s going to be worse later on.”

“This is what a fire looks like on the ground in BC.”

“We’re shifting from resilience *to* fire, to resilience *through* fire.”

“No secret sauce for managing smoke in the airshed—the sure fire way to lose social license is to smoke out a community.”

“How do you like your smoke? A little localized in the shoulder season or months of heavy smoke during wildfire season?” “BC is a fire adapted ecosystem, no matter what we’re going to experience smoke.”

“The goal is to work ourselves out of a job.”

“Put fire back in the stewardship landscape.”

“Be 10% or 5% less efficient in harvesting so you can burn more effectively.”

“Think internationally as well as nationally”

“Cannot really attach words because there’s multiple uses of wildland fire in the region and that will be defined by place and people.”

Connections to Other Sessions:

BCTS session (Forest Policy) did not talk about prescribed fire as explicitly in their overview but their new mandate may have consequences for the climate regarding prescribed fire. Curious if there will be more in the July 15th report.

Resources Mentioned:

BC Wildfire Service – Frequently referenced as a key partner in both prescribed and cultural fire initiatives. No direct URL was provided, but their site:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status>

Professional Governance Act (British Columbia) – Mentioned in relation to the legal distinction between prescribed and Indigenous cultural fire practices:

<https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/18047>

Wildfire Act (British Columbia) – Referenced as the legislative framework that sets out objectives for open fire use:

https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/04031_01

National Wildfire Coordination Group (NWCG) – Cited as a route for non-government burn boss certification and training resources: <https://www.nwcg.gov/>

TREX (Prescribed Fire Training Exchange) – A multidisciplinary fire training event mentioned as upcoming in Cranbrook: <https://firelearningnetwork.org/trex.html>

Foundations of Forestry Webinar Series – Referenced as an extension education effort linked to fire knowledge; no direct link provided, but potentially hosted through the Association of BC Forest Professionals: <https://www.abcfp.ca/>

Thoughts/Observations:

Really interested in the history of prescribed fire within agency burning and how some of that knowledge loss could be revitalized to support an increase in prescribed fire in community forests. Less discussing of cultural fire and Indigenous fire practitioners than expected, doesn't feel like this reflects the conversations in community forests and fire as landscape revitalization. The lack of clarity between definitions of cultural and prescribed fire was brought up as an action item for BC wildfire Service, but the consequences need more attention.

Feedback/Suggestions:

A future session could benefit from more explicit discussion of consent, jurisdiction, and knowledge sovereignty. Additionally, while the technical detail was valuable, a brief overview of current certification pathways and workforce development programs (e.g., burn boss training) in handout or visual form could have supported accessibility for attendees newer to this field.

