

In this Issue:

Bella Coola—A Close Call

Today At Coastal

“We know this kind of planning works,” says Forests and Range Minister Pat Bell. “The fact we only lost seven structures this summer, under conditions that rivalled Firestorm 2003, is a testament to the effectiveness of removing hazardous debris from interface areas.”



Bella Coola—A Close Call

The Bella Coola valley is a remote area in the northernmost region of the Coastal Fire Centre. The valley contains the communities of Bella Coola, 4 Mile Reserve, Hagensborg, Firvale and Stuiie, along with rural homes.

This conscientious and forward-thinking group sought UBCM funds in 2005 to assist in mitigating the impacts from wildfire.

Their preliminary proposal was forwarded to the Coastal Fire Centre from the UBCM, to ensure their ideas were practical from a technical perspective. Coastal’s Fuels Management Specialist reviewed their concept and recommended to the UBCM that funding be provided for a more in-depth evaluation and proposal. The UBCM notified the group that the Bella Coola Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) proposal was accepted.

The UBCM was advised by Coastal’s Fuels Management Specialist that the CWPP was comprehensive and effective, so the UBCM was able to release funding to the community.

The Bella Coola Valley CWPP acknowledges that ‘virtually all of the Bella Coola valley residences and businesses are located in, or near, the interface fire zone and are consequently at risk from wildfire.’ It also states that the ‘valley is located in a fire based ecosystem where forest fire is the natural process of forest renewal’ and that ‘it is inevitable that forest fires will occur again.’ Wind was

identified as the most dangerous factor in the spread of wildfires through the valley, as under certain conditions ‘the valley becomes a massive wind tunnel.’ Along the valley floor, the predominant fuel type is mixed coniferous and deciduous with moderate to high

flammability with a danger of crown fires. The density of development in the Bella Coola Valley is predominantly rural, and the CWPP noted ‘rural continuous forest is the most hazardous.’

In late July 2009 when a lightning storm plowed through the valley, it was no surprise that the resulting fires started in areas of high fire probability. The Saloompt, the Nuxhalk and the Stuiie fires were all within the areas highlighted as high fire probability areas, with a high percentage of coniferous fire fuel, and with a likelihood for burning

at moderate to high intensity.

The CWPP indicated the possibility of power and telephone disruption as wooden power poles were vulnerable to wildfire, but this summer it was a telecommunications tower that was initially threatened in Stuiie. Determined efforts by the firefighters prevented communication disruptions.

‘Fires can last from a few days to a number of weeks, so there could be prolonged disruption in the valley’ states the CWPP. No one can dispute that this was the case for residents as Highway 20 was, for a period of time, closed to public traffic and all goods were shipped in by boat. The population expanded with the influx of firefighters sent in



Bella Coola fires 2009
Reprinted from:
<http://www.cbc.ca/bc/photogallery/bc/>
By Heather Beavis—August 3/09



Coastal Fire Centre

wildfire News

To Date in Coastal

Fires to Date

Person Caused **206**

Lightning Caused **329**

Total Number of Fires Actioned **536**

Hectares burnt **7174**

Number of Incidents Responded To this year **1882**

Fire Danger Rating



Low

Be Safe!

to fight the fires and some groceries were voluntarily rationed in stores.

The plan also noted that some ‘evacuations of people and livestock can be anticipated and homes and infrastructure lost.’

The actuality of an evacuation alert and order for sixty-one homes due to the Nuxhalk fire

Crews still busy

Despite the current low fire danger today within the Coastal Fire Centre, crews have still been responding to wildfires.

Since last Friday, there have been 5 new fires. The largest fire was on Saltspring Island which started last weekend, which grew to 5 hectares in size.

The Coastal Fire Centre responded to a request from the local fire department when the fire grew beyond it’s resources. The fire was burning in Mount Maxwell ecological reserve, was person cause and is under investigation, and appeared to have started in a stump on a steep slope.

This stubborn fire took several days to contain, as the fuel was grassy and with broken stands of Gary Oak, and heavy equipment could not be used.. The fire burned into stumps and underground fuels beneath rocks that were too large to move by hand. The Coastal Fire Centre provided 14 crewpersons, and worked alongside the local Fire Department to deal with this fire.

As of today, the fire is 100% contained, and will be patrolled to ensure it does not reignite due to burning underground fuels.

This fire is a good reminder that, despite the rain, forest fuels are still dry where they are protected from rainfall by rocks and slash. The public are reminded to take care with any activities that could result in a wildfire, despite the time of year.

this summer was a harrowing experience for those involved. With alternative evacuation routes out of the valley limited, it was decided that all residents living adjacent to the fire should be evacuated for their safety and to ensure firefighters had freedom of movement in the area. This summer, there were no homes lost despite the fire moving within 100 meters of some structures.

The safe and timely manner in which organizations responded to this emergency is due to a high level of professionalism and co-operation among several agencies, including the Central Coast Regional District, the Fire Departments within the Bella Coola District, the Coastal Fire Centre and the Ministry of Forests and Range. Relationships forged during the CWPP process were further strengthened during wildfire events.

The Bella Coola CWPP has proven extremely accurate in its fire predictions and the results. As part of the plan, there are a number of suggestions to mitigate the danger of wildfire in the Bella Coola Valley. Reducing forest fuel loads and expanding fuel breaks are just two of the suggestions for reducing the wildfire threat.

New funding opportunities are now available to all communities to mitigate wildfire risk. The Coastal Fire Centre has additional staff to assist communities in their initial proposals and with their on-the-ground fuel management projects. The shift of the funding ratio of UBCM’s funding from 50 to 75 per cent of the cost is further incentive for communities to get a CWPP in place.

Many of the components of the plan are financially viable if the community is willing to organize and raise awareness among private landowners, implement the principles of the FireSmart program, and make wildfire protection a priority within their community.

For more information on the FireSmart program go to www.bcwildfire.ca