

B.C. Safe Silviculture Project

Contractor Capacity-Building in Wildland Fire Management

There is significant need to increase the capacity of the private-sector wildland fire resource in British Columbia. The 2003 fire season revealed a shortage of trained and qualified personnel to carry out not only the traditional work of extended attack and mop-up but also to carry out the dangerous and demanding job of initial attack. The results of the 2003 fire season also revealed the need for more aggressive fuel treatments including the use of prescribed fire. The contractor community is well poised in B.C. to carry out much of this work because of: (a) the scale of the work; (b) the necessity to treat large areas in a short time frame; (c) the relative cost efficiency of contract crews versus government union crews; and, (d) the poor availability of government crews once fire season begins (because of the CIFFC relationship the onset of fire season includes any province's fire season, not just B.C.).

In order to take advantage of this potential increase in contract opportunities, however, significant improvements and additions in contract crewperson training and skill development is necessary. One striking lesson from the 2003 fire season in B.C. is the rapidly changing nature of fire behavior – especially in the dry forests of southern B.C. and in the large areas of bark beetle attack. With changing fire behavior must come an added focus on safety. Safety, therefore, is the foundation of the training and qualification program. The second critical goal is the need to meet mission objectives. Fire management is changing from the old paradigm of simply fire suppression to wildland fire management. This new paradigm includes “managing” existing wildfires to meet natural resource management objectives and the use of management-ignited prescribed fire to meet natural resource management objectives. New skills need to be instilled in the contract work force in order to meet the demands of this new mission.

The advantages to the contract community if they take the necessary steps at skills development are many. The province of B.C. would like to retain a specified number of contract crews that are trained at the highest level, Type I, for initial attack either here in B.C. or possibly outside the province. Prescribed fire currently suffers from a pervasive fear of financial liability; from both the government and the forest industry. The industry in fact lists risk of escape and resulting financial liability as its single most overriding opposition to its use. With a highly skilled and disciplined workforce the issue of risk and liability can be placed in its proper context – not completely eradicated but certainly significantly reduced from its current hysterical level. Prescribed fire use can then greatly increase with realistic liability insurance rates for contractors and greater peace of mind for the forest industry, communities, and the provincial government.

Workplan

1. We will assemble a consulting team to review the existing provincial position descriptions, including associated standards for training and qualification, for both wildfire suppression and prescribed fire. The review will focus on the key elements of safety and ability to meet task objectives. The team will identify areas of deficiency and areas of compatibility with the review focus.
2. The team will structure the standards along the lines of an existing supervisory hierarchy, if it already exist, or develop one if it does not already exist. The

- hierarchy will include duties, skills, and qualifications for each identified position in both the wildfire suppression and prescribed fire fields.
3. We will then identify appropriate course curricula and practicum requirements for each position utilizing materials from British Columbia as well as neighboring jurisdictions.
 4. The team will also develop a methodology for determining “compatibility” between the wildfire suppression positions and the prescribed fire positions.
 5. The team will then identify standards for qualification “currency,” i.e., how long does a person remain qualified to function in a specific position.
 6. Because of the number of current practitioners with highly variable backgrounds, we will then need to develop a program for converting “prior learning” into accepted standards of competency.
 7. It is likely that this project will identify the need for a significant investment, on the part of the province, in training. This will immediately create an issue for trainer capacity as currently there are few trainers who are familiar with many of the courses that will need to be taught. There have concomitantly been issues in the past with the qualification level of trainers. In order to deal with the training capacity issue up front the team will identify the minimum standards of a “train the trainer” program including training curricula, required experience, insurance requirements, and qualification currency.
 8. Once an individual is qualified to perform in a specific position he/she must maintain “currency” in that position. Over time, one’s ability to remember the core skills and responsibilities of that position diminishes. The rate at which one can maintain the appropriate level of skill and competency is referred to as “currency.” The team will identify appropriate “currency” standards as well as a system for tracking the experience and qualifications of individual resources.

Schedule

Work will commence this spring with the collection of key background documents from B.C., Alberta, and the U.S. Team meetings will be held in mid-June to apportion tasks and set deadlines. A draft product would be available by mid-October and a Final by Mid-December.