



*Brandt Tractor took Timberjack's wood residue bundler on demo across the Interior last fall to show one possible way to harness forest fuels constructively. Last year's fire season brought renewed interest in "fireproofing" stands, especially near interface communities, but there are no over-night answers, according to Steve Schmidt, fire centre manager, Southeast Fire Centre. "We should look for small successes – it's a process, not a project."*

## Long Hot Summer

**There are no quick answers when it comes to reducing the impact of forest fires. Still, we are not helpless, and the time to get started is now.**

**By Doug Pyper**



It was a summer that residents of British Columbia's southern interior won't soon forget – although most would prefer to. The fires are gone, but in their wake they have left colossal devastation, not only in the forests they devoured, but in the communities and human

lives they affected.

Kevin Matuga, information officer with the Ministry of Forests in the Kamloops Fire Centre states: "Although 1994 saw more fires and hectares burned, the threat to populated areas this summer was the worst in provincial history and hence the most expensive season to date, both in cost of fighting the fires and in personal property loss."

As of Oct. 6, with the season not entirely over, a total 2 518 recorded fires had burned 264 174 ha in the province. Maximum daily firefighting personnel at any given point was 7 600, including military and out of province workers. In total, 334 residences and 10 businesses had been destroyed or damaged, and over 50 000 people had been forced from their homes because of interface fires. The allocated annual provincial budget for direct firefighting of \$55.38 million dollars had been spent by Aug. 25 because of the extreme fire season, and an additional \$6 million a day was being spent at that time.



*Plumes rising over distant mountains was an all too common site last summer, although preferable to plumes rising over nearby mountains. As of Oct. 6, 2003, with the season not entirely over, a total of 2 518 recorded fires had burned 264 174 ha across British Columbia, mostly in the southern Interior (Photo: Gene Desnoyers).*

## Wide Swath Burned

The fire season peaked in August with the Kamloops and the Southeast Fire Protection Districts being the hotbeds of the province. The Okanagan Mountain fire that plagued Kelowna and neighbouring Naramata was catastrophic. It burned 25 600 ha, 238 homes were destroyed or damaged, 12 heritage wooden railway trestles were lost, and 33 300 people were evacuated, with 4 000 of those forced to leave their homes a second time. Maximum resources tallied up to 700 personnel, 250 pieces of heavy equipment and 20 helicopters – for one fire. The McGillvray (11 400 ha) and McClure (26 500 ha) fires similarly took their toll on the communities of Chase and Barriere, affecting 92 homes and nine businesses, including Sun Peaks Ski Resort and Tolko's Louis Creek sawmill, which was destroyed and will not be rebuilt. In total, 6 200 people were forced to leave.

To the southeast in the Kootenays, the Lamb Creek fire (11 000 ha) was an ongoing threat to communities near Cranbrook, where 195 people were evacuated. Simultaneously the Kutetl fire (8 000 ha) raged near Kootenay Lake in the greatly inaccessible West Arm Provincial Park, its billows of smoke looming ominously over the communities of Nelson, Proctor, Harrop, and Balfour, and threatening the Whitewater Ski Resort.

The cost of such disastrous fire seasons to the BC government, the forest industry, the tourism industry, and affected rural populations is monumental. The total bill for this season has been estimated at between \$500 and \$600 million. Emotional trauma resulting from personal loss and smoke inhalation from inescapable atmospheric pollution raised health concerns as well.

## Hope for Next Year?

Fire is a natural process orchestrated by natural causes – primarily lightning and dry weather – and is essential to forest ecology. Nonetheless, given the overall trend toward drier seasons, and an increasing population flow to the BC Interior, what can we learn from disastrous

interface fire seasons like this summer? Should we be re-visiting basic issues like causes, prevention and control of wildfires? Factors like human ignition and over-abundant fuel supply resulting from years of fire suppression come into ques-

**“Long-term drying of forest fuels made fire behaviour this summer difficult and dangerous, if not totally unpredictable.”**

tion – and even global warming on a broader scale. If these issues are considered, then prevention through education, more efficient use of control resources, and even altering forest methodology and harvesting tactics become topical.

Even before the fires, in February 2003, BC's auditor general released *Follow Up of Performance Report – Managing Interface Fire Risks*. What progress is the ministry making in implementing these proposed recommendations? Little concrete. By way of a new “Wildland Fire Act” prepared over the last two years, the ministry should formalize, through legislation this year, its “response priorities” to the protection of human life, property and natural resources.

As well, the ministry will continue to play a significant role in developing and delivering programs to raise community awareness about interface fire risks. In the past they helped develop the “Fire Smart Manual” to help communities determine means to protect themselves from wildfires, and implemented a standard fire prevention planning template to ensure the consistent application of fire prevention measures in vulnerable communities. They continue to map moderate to high hazard areas in unorganized portions of the province, as vegetation grows and communities expand. Co-operation agreements with local fire departments and interface communities have been established on the Coast and in the Kamloops and Kootenay areas to address unified command and other organizational issues. The forest service consults with and assists communities in fire prone areas with

adjacent forest fuel management, including prescribed burning.

In response to this ruinous fire season, and to see if more can be done, there is a planned *Provincial Review of 2003 BC Interface Wildfires* under the co-ordination of Gary Filmon, former premier of Manitoba. In the words of BC Premier Gordon Campbell, this will be “a no-holds-barred review.” Public meetings will be held in most fire-affected communities, including Kelowna, Kamloops, Barriere and Cranbrook. All stakeholders and the public at large will be invited, creating a potpourri of municipal officials, forest industry workers, ministry fire protection managers, insurance companies, and land use planners. “In my perspective,” Filmon explains, “the review will be categorized into planning, preparation, response, communication and recovery efforts. It's a tight timeline, but we hope to put forth recommendations by this February.”

## No Time to Waste

In formulating a more immediate perspective regarding this summer's fires, Steve Schmidt, fire centre manager, Southeast Fire Centre, reiterates what everyone involved knew by mid-August: “Long-term drying of forest fuels made fire behaviour this summer difficult and dangerous, if not totally unpredictable and beyond control a large portion of the time.” He explains that “fires aren't automatically devastating to the environment, but they do impact society's use of commodity resources like timber and watersheds. And protecting personal property and public safety this year became an issue like never before.”

Given the tinderbox conditions this season, it seems almost ludicrous to sight causal factors other than drought. But issues like human ignition and fuel buildup through fire suppression must be addressed. Human starts are as high as 50% province wide, with as much as 10% attributed to the forest industry. Denis Gaudry, fire center manager, Kamloops, himself fire-evacuated from his home in 1987, states, “Escaped prescribed burns, friction from machinery, and, particularly, smoldering landing fires can cause fires and must be addressed more fully. Conversely, we have an excellent working relationship with forest industry people – they support the ministry with machinery and help us to fight fires, especially

this summer when the bush was closed.”

In addition, years of misconstrued fire suppression contribute an overabundance of fuel to a dry forest, especially in fire maintained ecosystems like BC's Rocky Mountain Trench. “This situation cannot be addressed quickly,” Schmidt says. “Prescribed burning is effective, but harvesting and mechanical treatments are often required beforehand and their dependence on public funding (stakeholders) can be very challenging. Prescribed burning is also an effective method for fireproofing interface communities in non-fire dependent ecosystems, as is planting less flammable hardwoods like birch, maple and cottonwood on town perimeters. “We have the ability to do this, the question is how?” he asks. “It will take a solid partnership between provincial and local governments, the forest industry and the communities involved. There is no ecological barrier to this, it just requires co-operation and a common will.”

Now is the time for that common will. Five of the hottest, driest fire seasons of this century happened in the last 10 years

– statistics indicate we are encountering climatic change in the Pacific Northwest States and Western Canada. It appears to be a long-term trend, and things could realistically get worse.

### **Emphasis on People**

“Our job is getting more difficult,” notes Schmidt, “and the continuing migration of people to rural BC has moved the investment of limited resources from commodity protection to public safety. Education and community fireproofing will help to free up manpower and funds to once again protect natural resources. People re-locating to rural areas bring with them urban expectations about fire protection, coupled with a lack of awareness of the dangers and responsibilities of living in interface communities. Given the present situation, ‘people-caused fires’ are no longer acceptable. We are working on specific concrete plans to provide local solutions to community specific problems through education, combined with co-operatively funded fireproofing programs. Realistically we should look for small suc-

cesses – it’s a process, not a project.”

Shawn Morris, Ministry of Forests, has worked the front lines on BC fires for many years as a member of the elite Initial Attack Crew in Nelson. He believes education is a sensible approach to reducing human fire starts. “There were fewer human-caused fires percentage-wise in our region this summer simply because of awareness created through publicity – media coverage and forestry bans. The ramifications of carelessness became overwhelmingly obvious. We visit schools in the winter months to create awareness and provide information on living in fire zones.”

His final comment on the summer of fires: “Fire behaviour this season was erratic and frightening – as a firefighter, it certainly kept your senses heightened. Often our efforts were futile. Mother Nature just wouldn’t take No for an answer.”

*Doug Pyper is a professional photographer and freelance writer based in Nelson, BC.*

