



RESORT MUNICIPALITY OF WHISTLER

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STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

PRESENTED: December 5, 2023 **REPORT:** 23-119
FROM: Climate and Environment, **FILE:** 7200-20
Protective Services & Whistler Fire Rescue
SUBJECT: COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RESILIENCY PLAN PROGRESS REPORT

RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

That the recommendation of the General Manager of Climate Action, Planning, and Development Services and the General Manager, Corporate Services and Public Safety be endorsed.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That Council receive Information Report No. 23-119 regarding progress towards delivering on the Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update Council on progress towards delivering on the Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan, lessons learned in 2023, and to give an overview of planned activities in 2024.

Information Report Administrative Report (Decision or Direction)

DISCUSSION

Background

Wildfires are the largest climate change related risk and vulnerability for the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW). Increasing the resiliency to this risk and ever-increasing threat has been an organizational priority since the development of Whistler's first Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in 2005. The original CWPP was updated in 2011 which was followed by the development of a Wildfire Protection Strategy in 2017 which focused on resources and strategies to implement outstanding CWPP recommendations. Since the development of these plans, the RMOW has implemented many of the recommendations including the creation of the Whistler FireSmart program (WFP), planning and completing wildfire fuel reduction projects throughout the Whistler Valley, and integrating a Wildfire Protection Development Permit Area in the Official Community Plan (OCP).

On April 5, 2022, Council adopted the [Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan](#) (CWRP), which is the next iteration of a master wildfire-planning document to guide wildfire related activities over the next five plus years. This CWRP assessed the RMOW's current wildfire risk and resiliency and provides an action plan to proactively protect the community, infrastructure, and natural landscape within the RMOW from a potential wildfire event. The main goals of the CWRP are to increase the efficacy of fire suppression

and emergency response, enhance FireSmart public education, reduce potential impacts and losses to property and critical infrastructure from wildfire, and reduce wildfire behavior threat within the community. It does so by focusing on Whistler's wildland urban interface (WUI) areas which is a one-kilometer buffer surrounding Whistler's Urban Development Containment Area. The CWRP provides 32 recommendations related to the seven FireSmart disciplines: education, community planning, increasing interagency cooperation, increasing cross training, enhancing emergency preparedness and continuing strategic vegetation management (FireSmart Disciplines).

This report provides updates and learnings from early implementation of the CWRP, as well as progress updates on the 32 recommendations in the seven FireSmart disciplines as outlined in the CWRP.

2023 CWRP implementation

Implementation is coordinated through a strategically aligned approach across the organization:

- **RMOW internal CWRP implementation:** Following the CWRP recommendation, the RMOW Wildfire Internal Coordination Group was reinstated in 2022 with staff representatives from Whistler Fire Rescue Services (WFRS), WFP, Planning, Protective Services, Infrastructure Services, and Climate and Environment (C&E). These staff representatives meet regularly to plan and coordinate the delivery of all Whistler wildfire related actions as well as to update on progress towards implementing all recommendations in the CWRP. The represented teams each advance specific initiatives included within the CWRP while also collectively coordinating to ensure that shared goals and objectives are integrated into all ongoing activities.
- **Wildfire consultants supporting CWRP implementation:**
 - Behr Integrated Solutions was hired in 2023 to assist the RMOW in developing the Wildfire Defence Plan (WDP) which addresses the implementation of 17 recommendations in the CWRP including the development of tactical structure defence plans for each neighbourhood within the RMOW.
 - Frontera Forest Solutions was hired in 2022 to assist in strategically advising the RMOW on delivering the vegetation management recommendations of the CWRP in a cost-effective manner. Frontera staff develop fuel thinning prescriptions that take all forest values and uses into consideration. In collaboration with the C&E department, a comprehensive strategic plan is developed at the onset of each calendar year outlining planned activities for the year while also undertaking advance planning for future years. In addition, Frontera developed a Fire and Fuels Monitoring Program which was implemented in 2023. The goal of this monitoring program is to determine the overall effects (positive and negative) of fuel reduction treatments in the RMOW, and to better understand how particular approaches can be improved in order to protect forest health, ensure long-term resilience, and improve wildlife habitat.
- **FireSmart:** WFP has been very successful in building interest, momentum and engagement with private homeowners. The result has been widely successful on the individual properties but collectively does not yet create complete continuous areas of FireSmart treated properties. WFP will continue to strategically direct hazard mitigation in high priority areas and build a more robust layer of neighbourhood protection that spans the intersection between forest and private properties in alignment with the ongoing priorities of broader fuel thinning activities across the community.

Progress towards CWRP implementation in 2023

The following section provides an overview of the RMOW's main advancements towards implementing the 32 recommendations as outlined in the 2022 CWRP. Aligned with the seven FireSmart Disciplines, the highlights listed below align with the six key strategies of the 2022 CWRP.

1. **Education:** Educate residents and visitors of the RMOW about FireSmart principles and wildfire prevention, resulting in behavior change and action on properties.
 - A strategic communications plan was developed that aligns messaging and fire related communications from WFRS, C&E, Emergency Planning, and WFP.
 - In 2023, WFP delivered 96 Home Partners Program FireSmart reports and eight neighbourhood FireSmart Assessments to educate and guide hazard reduction. These assessments and reports establish a baseline for private property owners to plan short- and long-term land use planning activities to improve wildfire resilience. The neighbourhood reports have been an excellent tool at bringing neighbours together to establish relationships and work together.
 - The RMOW C&E department continued to address concerns and increase education around fuel thinning projects. These elements are realized in a fuel thinning project specific communications plan that is enacted and implemented at the onset and throughout each fuel thinning treatment area project.
 - A multidisciplinary event was hosted at the Whistler Public Library in June 2023. The event was titled Fireside Chat and featured the Fire Season book by Amory Abbott and Liz Toohey-Wiese. The event was presented in partnership with the RMOW, C&E, WFP, and WFRS.

2. **Legislation and Community Planning:** Adapt legislation and community plans as they relate to wildfire preparedness in the RMOW.
 - WFP received \$200,000 from the UBCM Community Resiliency Investment to support operational and administrative functions of WFP, and \$33,000 from Ministry of Transportation for Highway 99.
 - The first milestone was achieved to link wildfire considerations to the RMOW GIS platform including the Whistler WUI, historic wildfire fuel thinning areas and FireSmart assessed neighborhoods and individual parcels, WFP treated municipal forest, and FireSmart Work Day participation among neighbourhoods. The goal is to identify and share where developed land reflects FireSmart measures to get a sense of progress and built-world resilience.
 - Early action is underway to adopt a policy to notify property owners and to take actions to mitigate fire hazard on private land, especially on large undeveloped parcels with a high wildfire risk. This work is part of the WDP (more details below).
 - Improved alignment of all wildfire related departments, in particular WFP, WFRS, C&E, ensures that co-benefits can be achieved. This includes collaboration on policy and workplan development as well as wildfire risk mitigation projects on public and private land.
 - Initial work is underway towards amending the OCP Wildfire Protection Development Permit Area exemptions and guidelines as identified in both the Wildfire Resiliency Plan and the Big Moves Strategy. Work completed to date includes identification of issues by Planning Department staff. Future amendments are part of the Planning Department 2024 workplan and will involve contribution from the Wildfire Internal Coordination Group and alignment with the WDP.

3. **Interagency Cooperation:** Increase interagency cooperation within the RMOW and between external stakeholders and integrate planning for all wildfire resiliency measures throughout the municipality.
 - Staff continuously collaborate with the Cheakamus Community Forest (CCF) staff to manage fuel on the landscape and integrate harvest planning with other fuel management tracking. The secured Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) funding will enable high-risk area treatment within the CCF which would not have been possible without the DMAF funding source.
 - RMOW, District of Squamish and Village of Pemberton FireSmart programs established the Sea-to-Sky Community FireSmart Resiliency Committee to support each jurisdiction in FireSmart program delivery. One recommendation in the 2023 WDP is to expand the Resiliency Committee terms of reference to include wildfire defense and protection strategies and tactics.
4. **Training:** Increase cross-training between members of WFRS, BC Wildfire Service, WFP, RMOW Staff, Whistler Blackcomb staff and external emergency management personnel.
 - As recommended in the 2023 WDP, WFRS continuously applies for grant funding to provide the WSPP-115 Structure Protection Wildfire training for members to increase the number of members certified in the use and deployment of the Structure Protection Unit during wildfire events.
 - Wildfire Mitigation Specialist training was delivered to WFP staff in 2023.
 - Whistler residents are continuously engaged via Whistler specific FireSmart videos produced by FireSmartBC and Shaw in 2021.
5. **Emergency Planning:** Enhance emergency preparedness within the municipality; focusing on major access/egress corridors and neighbourhood level protection.
 - The development of the Whistler WDP was started in 2023 with completion anticipated by spring 2024. The development of this plan is an important initiative led by WFRS towards implementing new approaches and increased emergency planning related coordination. The plan will include assessment of the community's general wildfire defense posture, a review of water supply and delivery systems, a structure defense strategy, an evaluation to identify whether the WFRS wildfire/structure protection equipment is adequate to protect an entire interface neighbourhood during a wildfire event, and an assessment of the feasibility of a rooftop sprinkler program and secondary first-responder vehicle access throughout RMOW neighbourhoods.
 - Assessment and mitigation of wildfire hazard along primary neighbourhood access routes, such as Alta Lake Road and the Highway 99 corridor is underway. A fuel thinning prescription was developed by Frontera Forest Solutions Inc. in collaboration with the RMOW C&E and Planning Department, WFP, and WFRS.
 - \$20,000 in budget approved to improve wildfire public education and potential updates to the community fire danger rating signs.
 - Preliminary work has been initiated by WFP to evaluate the need for additional road upgrades and/or thinning projects along the Flank trail and Green Lake Loop to provide safe and reliable vehicle access for fire crews.
 - The revised RMOW Operational Evacuation Plan is nearing completion. It will meet requirements of the new Emergency and Disaster Management Act
6. **Vegetation Management:** Continue strategic vegetation management efforts at the community level, while ensuring that multiple forest values continue to be managed. These principles can be applied to address forest resiliency at the landscape level.

- The 2023-2025 FireSmart Strategic Plan was completed, with a focus on sequentially treating high priority neighborhoods and zones. In 2023, Highway 99 at Creekside to Bayshores, and at Whistler Way, was treated with funds from Ministry of Transportation, work in the Balsam site continued and Alta Lake Road at Old Mill Lane was completed.
- WFP mitigated the landscape at 13 Critical Infrastructure sites.
- The Contribution agreement for the Federal Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation grant funding was signed which enables the RMOW to significantly reduce the wildfire risk in twelve areas within the WUI that were identified as CWRP high-risk areas. The work is underway and will be conducted until 2030. Table 1 lists the completed and planned treatment areas within the RMOW and the CCF, respectively. Note that treatment timelines may be adjusted based on weather and fire ratings. Figure 1 shows a map of these planned treatment areas.
- High priority fuel treatment areas completed in 2023 included Riverside, Rainbow 1, Kadenwood Gondola (see Fig. 1). Brio was also partially completed. In 2024 the following high priority sites are scheduled to be treated: Emerald West, areas along Highway 99, the remaining areas in Brio (refer to Table 1 and Fig 1 for details).
- Planning for the 16 Mile Creek fuel break treatment area is underway to provide strategic low-hazard anchor points throughout the RMOW and CCF.
- A vegetation management monitoring plan was developed by Frontera in 2022 and implemented in 2023 with the goal to evaluate the effects of various past and current fuel thinning practices on ecosystem health, wildlife habitat, and other forest and natural area values, including long-term wildfire risk reduction potential. A detailed sampling approach has been followed for five representative fuel thinning treatment areas around Lost Lake, Callahan, and Taluswood. Early results will be presented in 2024.

Table 1: High Priority fuel thinning sites that will be funded through the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund

TREATMENT AREA	Hectares	Year planned
RMOW sites		
Rainbow 2	19	Completed in 2022
Kadenwood Gondola	4	Completed in 2023
Riverside	7.2	Completed in 2023
Brio	22	Started in 2023
Highway 99 Egress	49	2024 - 2026
Emerald West	35	2024 - 2024
Alta Lake Road north	24	2025 - 2028
Blueberry Hill	24	2029 - 2030
Cheakamus Community Forest sites		
Rainbow 1	61	Completed in 2023
Stone/CCF6	12	2025 - 2026
16 Mile Creek fuel break	42	2025 - 2027
Sproatt	56	2027 - 2029

Map of RMOW, DMAF funding locations

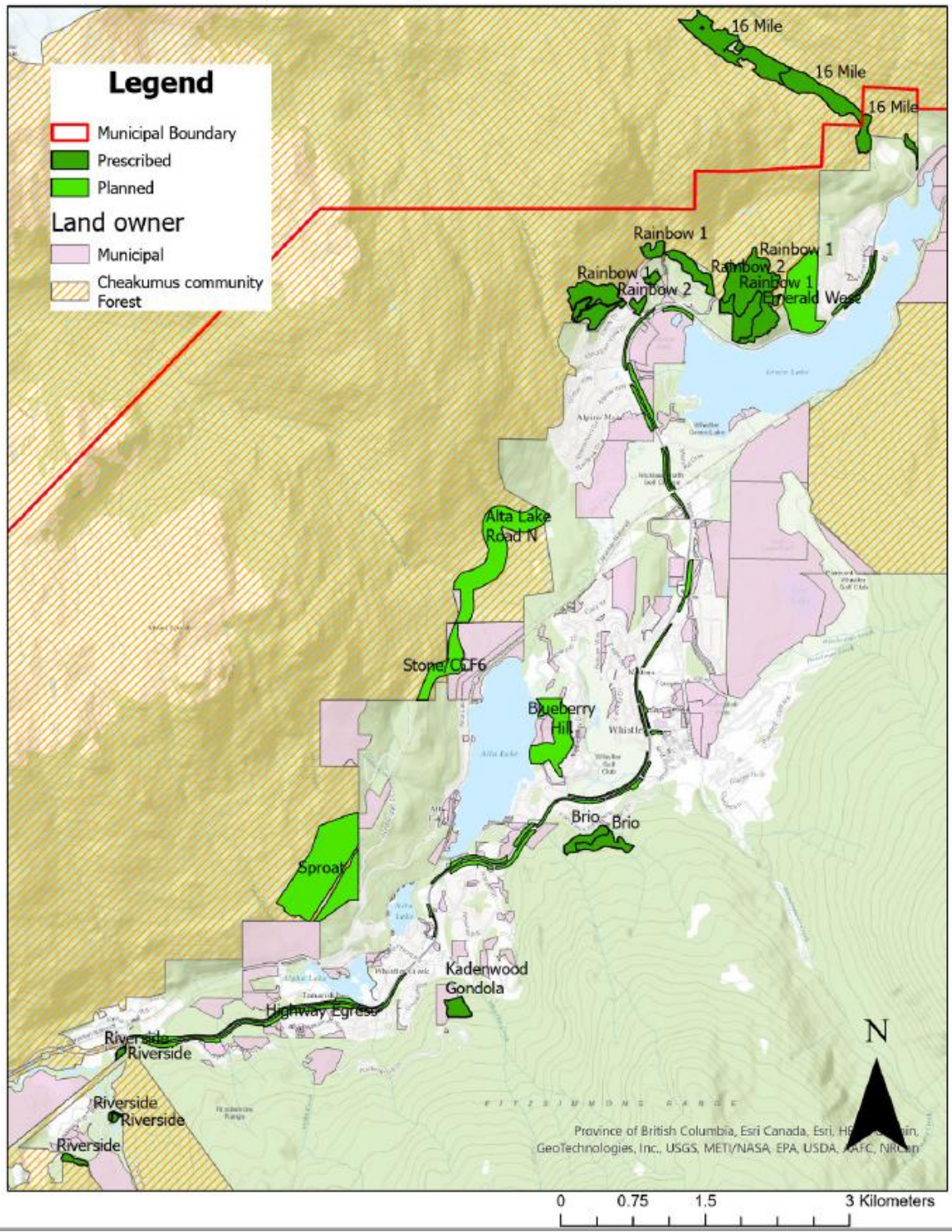


Figure 1: Map fuel thinning treatment areas as per DMAF funding agreement

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions

Council approved the previous CWPPs in 2005 and 2011 and the [CWRP](#) in 2022.

[Administrative Report No. 22-052 – Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan Report](#)

2023-2026 Strategic Plan

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the high-level direction of the RMOW to help shape community progress during this term of Council. The Strategic Plan contains four priority areas with various associated initiatives that support them. This section identifies how this report links to the Strategic Plan.

Strategic Priorities

- Housing
Expedite the delivery of and longer-term planning for employee housing
- Climate Action
Mobilize municipal resources toward the implementation of the Big Moves Climate Action Plan
- Community Engagement
Strive to connect locals to each other and to the RMOW
- Smart Tourism
Preserve and protect Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure
- Not Applicable
Aligns with core municipal work that falls outside the strategic priorities but improves, maintains, updates and/or protects existing and essential community infrastructure or programs

Community Vision and Official Community Plan

The OCP is the RMOW's most important guiding document that sets the community vision and long-term community direction. This section identifies how this report applies to the OCP.

OCP Chapter 7, Goal 7.2 directs that natural areas are proactively managed for resiliency to climate change. The first objective is focused on updating the community wildfire planning and continuing to deliver the wildfire risk reduction and FireSmart programs. Implementation of the 2022 CWRP is the key to meeting the OCP policy goal and objectives.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

The CWRP has been developed with the goal to be pragmatic, but scalable, understanding that the municipal budget is continually under pressure. Staff understand that the wildfire program incurs significant, ongoing expense and will make strategic decisions that maximize outcomes in a cost efficient manner. Staff will also continue to actively seek outside funding and partnerships that can reduce the municipal budget requests. The staff Wildfire Internal Coordination Group will prioritize projects, and budget requests will be managed through the regular budgeting process.

LÍLWAT NATION & SQUAMISH NATION CONSIDERATIONS

The RMOW is committed to working with the Lílwat People, known in their language as *L'il'wat7úl* and the Squamish People, known in their language as the *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* to: create an enduring relationship; establish collaborative processes for Crown land planning; achieve mutual objectives; and enable participation in Whistler's resort economy. This section identifies areas where RMOW activities intersect with these relationships.

There are no specific considerations to include in this report, although recommendations regarding wildfire risk management and vegetation management cover activities on Crown land that may be of interest to the Squamish Nation and the Lílwat Nation. The Squamish Nation and Lílwat Nation are partners with the RMOW in the CCF so have significant input in that respect, but every Crown land wildfire fuel-thinning project is referred for comment. Typically, a preliminary archaeological review is requested and completed.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

Inform Consult Involve Collaborate Empower

Implementation of CWRP recommendations requires adjustment of the level of community engagement depending on the project or initiative. For example, wildfire fuel thinning projects generally consult nearby residents, while FireSmart programs aim to collaborate with and empower residents.

SUMMARY

Wildfires have been identified as the highest climate change related risk and vulnerability for Whistler. The RMOW has been actively working to reduce that risk of wildfire in the community for over 15 years. This report provides a progress update on implementation of the recently adopted CWRP and highlights actions taken on recommendations related to the seven FireSmart disciplines.

SIGN-OFFS

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