Policy Brief: Wildfire Salvage

Overview

Wildfire salvage or salvage logging is the practice of harvesting timber from areas affected by wildfires to recover economic value from dead or dying trees before they decay. While it can provide a source of wood for industry, it can also disrupt forest recovery and ecosystem health if not done responsibly. Wildfire salvage presents a growing strategic opportunity for First Nations to engage in forest restoration, economic development, and stewardship across their territories. With evolving provincial policies, including streamlined processes and agreements designed to facilitate access and leadership, salvage operations now present a promising pathway for First Nations.

Policy Context and Existing Approaches

Recent updates to BC's wildfire salvage policies, including the issuance of Wildfire Salvage Opportunity Agreements (WSOAs) and new streamlining measures, represent a shift toward supporting Indigenous participation in salvage operations. However, implementation support, capacity development, and long-term strategy integration remain areas for further improvement. Resources like the Wildfire Timber Salvage Planning & Administration Guidance are intended to assist in planning, but operational barriers persist.

Updates to the Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) and related initiatives are helping to modernize how wildfire recovery is approached in BC. Revisions to Section 108 improve how relief and funding are delivered, while new authority for the Minister to declare Areas of Catastrophic Damage (ACD) enables landscape-level reforestation planning. Post-wildfire fibre recovery is being prioritized through joint planning with districts, First Nations, and licensees. Updates to the Interior Appraisal Manual have revised stumpage pricing for burned timber to better reflect its value and support more timely salvage. The Forest and Range Evaluation Program (FREP) has released Extension Note #44 to guide riparian management in salvage areas and help protect sensitive ecosystems. These changes reflect a shift toward more coordinated, locally informed recovery efforts that balance economic, environmental and cultural values. There are also proposed updates to the provincial species-at-risk list to better protect biodiversity.

HIGHLIGHTS

Tŝideldel First Nation & Tl'etinqox Government:

Partnered to restore post-fire pine ecosystems in the Chilcotin region after the 2017 Plateau Fire, focusing on landscape rehabilitation.

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Secwépemcúl'ecw Restoration & Stewardship Society:

Formed after 2017's Elephant Hill fire, spearheading joint restoration efforts including tree planting, watershed rehabilitation, and ecological monitoring.

Read Story

KEY RESOURCES

- **BC Wildfire Timber Salvage Planning**
- **Wildfire Salvage Opportunity Agreement**
- **Damaged Wood Recovery**
- **Post Wildfire Recovery Guidance**
- **First Nations Accelerate Wildfire**

Opportunity

Salvaging wildfire-damaged timber offers First Nations a significant opportunity to access valuable resources and generate economic returns from areas affected by wildfire. Beyond economic benefits, engaging in salvage activities allows Nations to assert their jurisdiction and leadership in post-wildfire recovery efforts across their territories. The Province of BC has introduced streamlined processes, including Wildfire Salvage Opportunity Agreements (WSOAs), to help facilitate access for First Nations.

Challenges

Lack Despite the potential benefits, there are significant challenges that Nations must consider before pursuing wildfire salvage opportunities. Salvage operations require rapid mobilization to recover timber before degradation occurs, which can be a barrier for Nations with limited operational capacity or technical expertise. Administrative processes, even with streamlining, remain complex, requiring navigation of provincial regulations, environmental standards, and planning requirements. There is also the challenge of balancing economic objectives with stewardship values and community priorities, ensuring that salvage operations align with Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural considerations. Additionally, many Nations may need to establish new partnerships or secure external support to scale up operations effectively, given the large areas affected by wildfires. Careful planning and investment in internal capacity will be essential for Nations to fully realize the opportunities presented by wildfire salvage while managing associated risks.

Recommendations

Where appropriate, First Nations are encouraged to pursue wildfire salvage opportunities as a way to recover usable timber before it deteriorates, reduce economic losses, and support community safety through the removal of post-fire hazards. Salvage operations can also accelerate reforestation efforts and contribute to long-term forest health and resilience. However, not all salvage practices are beneficial, and care must be taken to avoid impacts to ecosystems, water, and wildlife. Selective, low-impact approaches that are informed by local values, cultural knowledge, and ecological conditions are recommended to ensure that wildfire salvage supports both recovery and sustainability.

Developing and communicating detailed salvage plans and protocols for a territory before a fire happens is the best way to be proactive and ensure wildfire salvage happens when and where it is acceptable for the community.