

Carrot Creek Fuel Break and Fairholme Prescribed Fire Tour

Mark Heathcott, Calgary

September 27, 2025

Subject: White Elephant?

Thanks for the tour, Cliff. The shape of old guard is perhaps worse than I thought and the upwind post-burn disturbance downright horrifying. I hadn't been in there since I went and scouted the approach to Peechee about a decade ago and remember little from that except the creek crossings post flood in the canyon. I guess it's not really a white elephant, it's a rogue one, just waiting to break free. The recent puny little fuel breaks for the Nordic Centre and Harvie Heights/Silvertip will have little impact on the outcome once the rampage is underway. A conservative estimate for just how fast this rampage could be is about 4 km/hr (I looked in the Banff fire danger database I compiled). Too bad this is for mature lodgepole pine with a crown base height of 8m; I imagine the reality is even faster fire than this but let's go conservative. This means that a fire starting at Johnson Lake would impinge on Harvie Heights in less than 2 hours. Holy smokes Cliff, the Alberta fire folks won't even have time to mix up a batch of napalm for their strange ideas of counter-firing various stages of regrowth and slash in cutblocks under extreme conditions. Besides every ship in the region will be busy trying to pluck tourists off the trails.

Canmore's wildfire mitigation strategy as written has no realistic operations or maintenance context. Cliff, it's downright wrong, and may be even criminal within the next decade. It seems Alberta has selected the town to be a failed model all for the glitter of a grant for a few dollars. The public report itself once I reviewed again this morning is incredibly short-sighted, and unless my compass is off, gets the direction of rampage wrong, and has overestimated ideas about the utility of previous thinnings, clearcuts, and burns; we saw what twenty years post thinning/burning looks like - bad fuel. Across the river, we saw what twenty years post clearcut looks like - bad fuel. The Fairholme Bench shows just what an initial fire will do in the montane that's missed about dozen fire cycles in the last 250 years, or more—very, very bad fuel. It opened it up and knocked it down and the next couple of fires will be high intensity with a real thick flame zone. If its back as pine, it will be a fast-spreading crown fire with a thick flaming zone producing dense black smoke. I slung about 40 loads of snot at this type fire out west of Pine Lake (Wood Buffalo) in the 1981 burn and let me tell you this shit is resistant to any form of control. The only hope for Parks is if a fire starts south of the boundary, then blows into Harvie Heights/Silvertip and/or the community by the Nordic Centre; otherwise, Parks will be liable when the rampage cleans off the Fairholme slopes as they once rightly identified the risk, took initial action, abandoned operations and then ignored the problem.

The inadequacies of the plan remind me of the Environmental Assessment Canfor sent to Wood Buffalo back when they were liquidating the last lowland spruce in Alberta in the early 1990's. Storybook with pictures. I tried to find permitting etc. but I imagine this would take some money for the Access to Information fees to see the paper on how they complied with the various acts and regulations in Alberta and federally; if this project doesn't trigger Fed Fisheries I'll eat my shorts. Spooky just how little information is available; just some bad media and this report? And now I

know no competitive bidding process and holy shit Cliff, the whole thing looks bad for post-disaster public consumption. Canmore will make Lahaina look like a picnic if I read the situation correctly and they'll rename the range the Nohomes. I can almost see the fire twister overhead with bent and crumpled Range Rovers all over the place. A two-hour beastly rampage is a wipeout.

Of course, what is required is a zonation system with a 1 year burning rotation zone directly adjacent and into wind, a two-year rotation zone, a five-year rotation zone, etc., all the way out to the 50-year rotation zone and treeline. You can determine the extents of the zones using various features related to fire behavior potential like aspect, elevation, lee or windward position, warm slope/cold slope, etc., but the longest fire rotation would be 50 years and this old growth must be a certain distance from the concentrated values, say 3-5km (unless of course you want to cover off the 1967 Sundance Fire in northern Idaho record for spotting of 10 miles). Burning initially could either be slash or boreal blackline immediately adjacent to values and would continue out annually, biannually, decadally, etc., with distance from the values in the spring under specific fire danger prescriptions to minimize smoldering persistence. The goal of course is a type change to either grass or aspen (or soot), reducing or eliminating conifer coverage by x percentage as you progress out in zones. Zones by necessity would be deeper to windward and narrower to the lee based on historical danger. After a few decades it would be penny's a hectare in the grass off the sprinkler lines, both as downwind and upwind containments. I imagine the burning could be conducted in a few days each spring and could become some sort of community festival with old Hank singing the theme song (attached). There is no other option to remove the sort of biomass that needs to go all the time and anyone who brings up the hand raking and tending seems mentally deranged. You do the tending with firesticks and it's into wind strip head firing or once things are well treated, you can go for downwind strips (burning into previous burnt areas between towns).

The current approach is hopefully happening with an eye to this sort of firing later? I'm sure it isn't but someone has to think this area will be burned soon and where is the best place to put the guards? Where are the natural burning blocks? How close to water, anchors, access, holding potential, the works? Any idea of emergency firing operations has to be nullified right of the bat as any such operation would be ludicrous when things could be fired well in advance of when the rogue goes into musth. That would be uh, every fire season as the 100-year plus fire danger record shows. So the grass in spring would be black in the zone 1 year rotation, half the grass, aspen and birch/willow, cinquefoil in zone 2 rotation short and immature, or black. Juniper would exist somewhere out there in the 50-year cycle zone, with lots of gravel, loess, rocks, the odd old veteran conifer and little else. A person would see a long way out there and the buffalo would be hiding out in the odd small stand of thermal cover. No, not looking exactly like the Morley Flats but damn close and the only thing missing would be the shacks and bent minivans. Yeah, this approach should happen right out to the Nakoda lands and be best to stretch right across them. After all, once the fire rolls out past Yamnuska, it's on another nations land and let me tell you it will roll across just like the 2017 Waterton Lakes fire rolled.

It's a real pickle for both towns and the other places but some decent forethought could nullify a lot of the pain. The fuel needs to go from bad to good, good being grass and aspen that was burned off just a few weeks ago in the spring. The hot slopes would support little but grass/forbs, bearberry

and other small shrubs plus the odd limber pine. Reduce the juniper cover!! Downed wood might exist in the 50-year cycle old growth portion of the community forest. The riparian areas close to towns would be deciduous, and young.

Better hope all your potential pals in Canmore listen to 2nd song. I think they would if they realized they were two hours from being homeless with stay the course. This is what must be hammered into those Canmorons you've been meeting with. Not sure what to call the people upstream but it's something in two official languages? Tête carrée? So it's a south wind blowing a tempest down the Spray and at Goat Pond down to the Springs, then a west wind across the airstrip to the Cadet Camp, and then a north wind down the Bow to Canmore, worst case takes out Deadmans first when it jumps into Wind Valley, then Banff, then Harvie Heights, Three Sisters and finally Cougar Creek and Exshaw. Or some facsimile of the above. I saw a fire like this in Wood Buffalo but it was being steered by a lone CB and actually formed a giant box. I would hit the Legion every evening until I ran into Cooper and get the wind thing finalized. "Better in the bar than in the bush" is what I wrote beside my name on the wall boards at the old Jackfish Cabin as part of the tradition for Peace River travellers for over a 100 years. This last aside just so you understand the benefits of the local's bar.

I would not think less of you if you just said to heck with it, let 'er rip, I quit. But if you persist, I suggest you get a look at the permits and other aspects of governance to make sure you know what exactly is going on. The public may be fooled into supporting emergency mega-clearcuts with no realistic purpose once, but you won't be able to fool them twice, especially after they fail. Any fail they will, just faster. I would also keep careful notes so you can write the international bestseller post holocaust.

Mark

p.s. If you want, I could plot various disastrous fire behavior scenarios, based on historical fire danger for the Bow Valley, on a standard 1:50,000 topographic map using a compass, ruler and pencil as per the sort of basic fire behavior training I once was tasked to deliver nationally and internationally to various responders, including Sailors, Cowboys, Indians, Dayaks, Vikings, Hutterine Brethren, etc. The Danes, all Afghani veterans, thought I was divulging state secrets, but I assured them it was in the public domain if they cared to look. I could train up Bow Valley locals too, even those at the Legion, but I must warn you this type of thing is pass or fail and I wouldn't want to embarrass anyone.

Attachments:

Hank Williams-Settin the Woods on Fire.mp3

Hank Williams-I Saw the Light.mp3