



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
April 15, 2025

From Risk to Resilience

ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation Leads Wildfire Mitigation Work in the Kootenays

Windermere, B.C. – The ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation, with funding support from the Forest Enhancement Society of BC (FESBC), has been carrying out an operational fuel treatment project east of the ʔakisq̓nuk Reserve and two kilometers north of Fairmont Hot Springs. The goal is to reduce the fire behaviour of future wildfires that could impact the community and surrounding areas. The project, set to be completed this fall, has also realized other benefits, including enhanced wildlife habitat and family-supporting jobs for Ktunaxa members, serving as a catalyst for future projects led by the Nation.

“For over 100 years, forests have been seen as lumber leading to any natural process, such as fire that was perceived as threatening the harvesting of trees, being suppressed. This unnatural management has led to challenges in the health of our ecosystems and restricted *ʔa·kxam̓is q̓api qapsin* - All Living Things,” shared ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation Chief Donald Sam. “Through the funding made available by the Forest Enhancement Society of BC, we have been able to interact with the forests in a manner that reduces fuel loading, increases the health of trees and grasslands, and imitates natural forest succession. The added benefits include residential fire safety and mental wellness.”

Historically, the area being treated had been influenced by low intensity and reoccurring stand maintaining wildfires. In absence of these fires, the forest had high density Douglas-fir and high levels of fuels. Initially proposed in 2018, the project was designed as a landscape-level fuel break or an area that would create a partial barrier around the south end of the reserve, focusing on the reduction of flammable shrubs and conifer trees in the understory. Fairmont Hot Springs is also close to the treatment area and has benefited from the activities. The fuel management prescription for the area proposed both mechanical harvesting and hand treatments to be undertaken by local forestry workers.

“There were two main treatment areas. The first was about 50 hectares, and it was a mechanical treatment where we retained trees with diameters greater than 32.5 cm and smaller trees below that were removed,” explained Grant Glessing, RPF, Natural Resources Manager, ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation. “Merchantable fibre was sold to local mills, with the revenue used to offset costs against the project allowing us to maximize the area treated. Once done, we used excavators to stack the remaining fuel throughout the block into piles.”

The hand treatment portion of the project, which began in November of 2024, was carried out by Nupqu Development Corporation (Nupqu) and covered nearly 17 hectares.



“This work included thinning the understory of the forest floor, piling, and burning of the material, with the final piles planned to be burned this fall,” noted Brian Watson, RPF, Operations Manager with FESBC. “The team is also looking to grass seed any exposed soils to reduce the impact from noxious weeds.”

By thinning out all of the small trees in the understory and retaining larger diameter Douglas-fir trees, the stand will more closely resemble what it did at the turn of the century prior to the exclusion of fire in the Rocky Mountain Trench. These activities occurring in the Wildland Urban Interface of the two communities will not only reduce wildfire risk but will also provide meaningful benefits to wildlife in the area.

“Every time I have visited the site after it was treated, I have seen lots of wildlife, especially deer and elk. The careful forest management work has created more of a grazing area with more food sources for these animals,” explained Glessing.

In addition to these environmental benefits, the treatment has further created meaningful employment for Ktunaxa members and other individuals.

“As a First Nations owned company, we feel proud to help carry out such an important project on land that will benefit the whole valley and neighbouring communities. We like work that better protects our surrounding communities while also helping us reconnect to the land,” shared Lawrence Williams, Nupqu Foreman.

With an investment of \$365,000 from FESBC, this work aligns with the Society’s objectives to reduce wildfire risk while enhancing wildlife habitat.

“This project was long in the making, and FESBC had great patience while seeing it through. There was a period when the ʔakisq̓nuk land staff was limited due to COVID-19. By FESBC not giving up on us or the project, we could finally see it to fruition,” expressed Glessing.

The project was also made possible thanks to the collaboration with the local Forest District staff, who helped provide the authorizations required for the work to be completed.

“The Forest District was instrumental in working with the team at ʔakisq̓nuk, helping them get all their permits in place. This work can not happen without the correct paperwork in place, the authorization and stewardship staff at the Rocky Mountain Natural Resource District went the extra mile to get this project ready to go,” noted Watson. “This is where collaboration is so critical to ensure the right work is done in the right area in a timely manner.”

Forestry Minister Ravi Parmar is pleased with the collaboration, work completed, and work to come.



“This project is a powerful example of what happens when we work together—First Nations leadership, local forestry expertise, and provincial support all pulling in the same direction,” said Parmar. “The work being done by the ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation, with support from FESBC, is reducing wildfire risks and supporting wildlife, but it’s also creating good, local jobs and strengthening our response to climate change. This is the kind of partnership that better protects people, communities, and the land, and I’m proud to see it in action.”

In the next few years, the ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation will be working on new projects, building capacity, and strengthening relationships for future collaborative opportunities.

“We are currently working on an ecosystem restoration project that has evolved from this project,” shared Glessing. “At the same time, this work has given us the momentum to establish a working relationship with the University of British Columbia, supporting their graduate students in researching the treated block to deepen our understanding of climate change. This truly marks the start of something we can expand upon for future projects that will have a greater impact.”

For an interview with FESBC or the ʔakisq̓nuk First Nation, contact:

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About [FESBC](#): FESBC’s purposes are to advance environmental and resource stewardship of B.C.’s forests by preventing and mitigating the impact of wildfires, improving damaged or low-value forests, improving habitat for wildlife, supporting the use of fibre from damaged and low-value forests, and treating forests to improve the management of greenhouse gases. FESBC has been granted millions of dollars in funding and has partnered with the governments of B.C. and Canada to support hundreds of projects throughout B.C.

FESBC would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the
Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Forests.