



January 28, 2025

The Honourable Ravi Parmar
Minister of Forests
Via email: FOR.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Parmar:

RE: Cooperative Community Wildfire Response Program

The Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) wishes to express our concerns regarding the recent changes to the Cooperative Community Wildfire Response (CCWR) program. The revised program represents a substantial shift of responsibilities from the Province to local governments, imposing expectations that are both operationally and structurally misaligned with our emergency management framework.

The RDCK Emergency Management program operates as a regional service, encompassing 9 municipalities and 11 electoral areas, with a small and efficient team. Our mandate spans the four pillars of emergency management: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Incorporating the CCWR program, as currently outlined, would require significant administrative oversight and operational capacity—neither of which we have the ability to absorb without jeopardizing our existing responsibilities.

The CCWR program, as described in the program materials and emails from the BC Wildfire Service, is limited in scope to support activities such as expediting resources, mopping-up, and patrolling to prevent flare-ups. However, many community members eager to form CCWR groups misunderstand these limitations, believing the program enables direct fire attack. These expectations place local governments in the difficult position of managing and correcting community assumptions, which strains relationships between residents and local authorities. Also, while the CCWR program is presented as "optional," the misalignment between community expectations and the CCWR program will only further strain the relationship between residents and local government when it comes to emergency management and wildfire response.

We are also concerned with how the CCWR program was introduced. The consultation process with emergency management practitioners was very limited, focusing instead on select elected officials. Further complicating matters, communications about the program were directed primarily to FireSmart staff, even though the program's scope does not align with FireSmart principles or practices. These oversights in consultation and communication have created confusion and hindered the effective dissemination of accurate program information.

Funding for the CCWR program through the UBCM Community Resiliency Investment (CRI) grant stream further exacerbates the issue. The blending of FireSmart initiatives with emergency response and wildfire suppression blurs critical distinctions and risks diluting the effectiveness of each program area.

The RDCK also faces challenges related to equity in program delivery. As designed, the CCWR program is intended for areas outside of fire protection zones which constitute only a fraction of our regional district area. This would require the establishment of new service(s) to operate the CCWR program or if adopted by the RDCK without the creation of new service(s) will mean the CCWR program is operating under an existing service with the majority of service participants outside of an area supported by the CCWR program. This creates an imbalance where the majority of participants would be funding a program from which they derive no direct benefit – a clear misalignment with the regional district model under which we operate.

Feedback from the *Argenta Safety and Preparedness Society (ASAP)*, the only 2024 CCWR pilot group in the RDCK, and deployed in 2024 under BCWS, further highlights the challenges with the new model. Key concerns raised include:

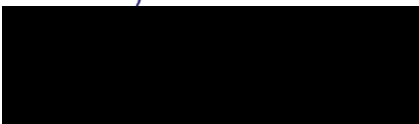
- The critical importance of rapid response and local knowledge for effective wildfire mitigation, which is undermined by adding the RDCK as an administrative intermediary.
- The erosion of direct relationships between local CCWR groups and BCWS Zone and Fire Centre staff, which have been instrumental to past successes.
- The operational burden placed on regional districts to manage volunteer brigades, including training, equipment, and oversight, which exceeds the capacity of many local governments.
- The loss of flexibility and efficiency in wildfire response, as demonstrated by the Argenta brigade's ability to act quickly and effectively due to their direct collaboration with BCWS.

The RDCK urges the Province to reconsider the implementation of the CCWR program and how it aligns to jurisdictional responsibilities for wildfire fighting outside fire protection zones, which is under BCWS. This should inform which agency should assume responsibility for direct funding, training, PPE, and ensuring operational readiness of the CCWR groups. The realignment we propose would help address the misalignment of funding mechanisms to better support distinct program objectives and preserve a direct relationships and oversight between BCWS and CCWR groups to maintain the agility and effectiveness of wildfire response efforts. This direct relationship would also help ensure program scope clarity to community groups and prevent unrealistic expectations during CCWR activations.

We value the Province's commitment to wildfire response and preparedness and are eager to work collaboratively to develop practical solutions that enhance community resilience without overburdening local governments. We urge your office to engage in open dialogue and seek adjustments that reflect the operational realities and capacities of regional districts like ours.

Thank you for considering these concerns. We look forward to engaging in further dialogue to address these issues and strengthen our collective response to wildfires.

Sincerely,



Aimee Watson
Board Chair, Regional District of Central Kootenay

cc:

- Hon. Brittney Anderson, Minister of State for Local Governments and Rural Communities
- Hon. Kelly Greene, Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness
- Hon. Steve Morissette, MLA Kootenay-Monashee
- Cliff Chapman, Director of Operations, BC Wildfire Service
- Kaitlin Baskerville, Provincial Operations Manager of Preparedness BCWS
- President Mandewo, UBCM
- Regional Districts