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Clearwater Council Approves New Wildfire Mitigation and Initial Attack Crews

The District of Clearwater is pleased to announce two critical initiatives aimed at significantly improving community safety and wildfire resilience: the establishment of the Clearwater Fire Department Initial Attack (FDIA) Crew and the expansion of the FireSmart Fuel Mitigation Crew. These initiatives were approved by Clearwater Council on March 18, 2025.

These programs respond directly to the growing wildfire threat facing Clearwater, recently identified as the most at-risk small community in Canada by 2050 through advanced wildfire risk modeling.¹ Recognizing the urgent need for local response and prevention capabilities, Council has approved a structured approach to both immediate wildfire suppression and long-term mitigation strategies.

Clearwater Fire Department Initial Attack Crew²

The FDIA Crew will provide more resources to respond quickly to wildfire ignitions, greatly reducing the time to initial response. According to Clearwater Fire Chief Mike Smith, "The Initial Attack Crew will significantly reduce response times by providing an immediate, specialized wildfire suppression capability directly within our community. Equipped with a tactical water tender, and a wildland bush truck specifically outfitted for off-road wildfire response, this crew will be ready to deploy swiftly to wildfire incidents, ensuring rapid containment and suppression before fires escalate."

The FDIA Crew will operate across multiple strategic response areas as outlined under the Provincial Interagency Agreement³:

- **District of Clearwater (55.65 km²)**
In conjunction with Clearwater Fire structural firefighters and apparatus, immediate response to wildfire ignitions within municipal boundaries, prioritizing early containment.
- **Up to ~10 kilometers beyond District Boundaries (Section 7.12 of Interagency Agreement)**
Voluntary deployment with approval from BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) for incidents near Clearwater posing potential threats.
- Responses beyond the 10 kilometers will be at the direction of BCWS.

Crew members will complete rigorous wildfire-specific training, ensuring readiness for deployment and enhancing their physical fitness to meet the demanding nature of wildfire response operations.

Expanded FireSmart Fuel Mitigation Crew⁴

Clearwater is also expanding its FireSmart Mitigation Crew, significantly increasing its capacity from two part-time positions (300 hours annually) to three full-time seasonal positions (1,920 hours annually). This crew will greatly enhance the District's ability to perform fuel reduction and mitigation projects around critical municipal infrastructure, district roadways, evacuation routes,

¹ <https://cfjctoday.com/2025/01/20/district-of-clearwater-presses-on-with-firesmart-efforts-after-topping-ai-calculated-wildfire-risk-list/>

² Proposal: <https://districtofclearwater.civicweb.net/document/95798/>

³ https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/wildfire-status/wildfire-response/inter-agency_agreement.pdf

⁴ Proposal: <https://districtofclearwater.civicweb.net/document/95604/>

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and targeted private properties. Additionally, the expanded crew will be equipped with a new wood chipper, enabling debris removal during fire season when open burning is restricted. FireSmart Coordinator Chance Breckenridge emphasized, "Expanding our Mitigation Crew will substantially increase our ability to proactively reduce wildfire hazards. With more hours and better equipment, we can complete extensive fuel reduction projects throughout the community, creating safer, more defensible spaces that protect homes, roads, and critical infrastructure."

Funding and Community Support

Funding for the FDIA Crew and expanded FireSmart Mitigation Crew will primarily come from existing reserves, and provincial grant programs.

The FDIA Crew's initial setup will be funded by an allocation from the Wells Gray Community Forest Reserve, previously established through community forest donations. The District acknowledges the Wells Gray Community Forest's⁵ past contributions that have made this critical wildfire protection initiative possible.

The expanded FireSmart Mitigation Crew will be fully funded through 2027 by a combination of the District's Local Government Climate Action Program (LGCAP)⁶ reserves and annual FireSmart Grant contributions.

Mayor's Statement

Mayor Blackwell shared Council's perspective on these initiatives:

"I have long said that Clearwater is not an interface town; we live within a forest instead of being surrounded by one.

Many Clearwater homeowners have more trees on their lots than there are trees in entire neighbourhoods in other cities or towns.

We see no imminent return of BC Wildfire Service Initial Attack crews to Clearwater, despite extensive lobbying efforts by Council.⁷

We have seen consistently longer and hotter wildfire seasons. Clearwater Council and Staff had to acknowledge that risk and respond accordingly.

One response is to reduce wildfire risk by creating an expanded FireSmart program that includes our own wildfire fuel management crew. Staff came up with a solid proposal for this that is funded through grant dollars for this crew.

The second part is to understand that living within a forest means that you need to ramp up your Fire Department to tackle forest fires within your town boundaries. Staff came up with various configurations for our own version of an Initial Attack Crew, and Council worked with them to land on a version we thought the citizens would find value in. I find it no different to adding new fire equipment in the city if you were to have taller apartment buildings being built; to increase public safety, you must adapt to changing conditions. In this case, those changing conditions relate to hotter, dryer, more extreme wildfire seasons."

⁵ <https://www.wgcfc.ca/>

⁶ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/climate-change/local-governments/local-government-climate-action-program>

⁷ <https://cfjctoday.com/2025/02/24/no-dice-for-clearwaters-latest-push-to-bring-back-permanent-bc-wildfire-initial-attack-crews/>



Join Clearwater's Wildfire Response Team

The District will begin recruitment immediately, seeking up to six local residents to join the new Fire Department Initial Attack Crew—a specialized wildfire suppression team. While applicants with prior firefighting experience, certifications, or forestry backgrounds (such as forestry technicians, those with logging experience, equipment operators, or outdoor professionals) are encouraged to apply, the District is committed to training the right candidates who demonstrate a willingness to learn, physical fitness, and enthusiasm for protecting the community. Successful applicants do not need to commit to traditional structural firefighting duties and will be provided comprehensive wildfire-specific training. All training sessions and response activities will be compensated.

Further details about qualifications, expectations, compensation, and training schedules will be announced shortly.

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