

Cariboo Forest Region works to restore grasslands

By Sage Birchwater - Williams Lake Tribune

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Harry Jennings, team leader for ecosystem restoration in the Cariboo Forest Region is doing his part to bring back grasslands that once dominated the landscape, west and south of Williams Lake.

Before modern forest management practices interfered with the natural order of things, much of the land in the dry interior of British Columbia was modified by frequent, low intensity wildfires and fires set by First Nations inhabitants. On a regular basis forest fires took out great swaths of pine and spruce forests, cleaned out the understory beneath interior Douglas fir forests, and kept the broad grasslands open and expansive.

After a century of putting out forest fires as quickly as possible, the landscape and nature of the forests and grasslands of British Columbia started to change. One of these changes was the increasing encroachment of forests onto the grasslands. Without wildfires pushing back the edges of the forest, young trees quickly start to take root on land previously occupied by bunchgrasses and other native plants.

“These were fire-maintained ecosystems,” Jennings explains. “We’ve been documenting the grasslands and estimate we’ve lost 30 to 50 per cent of them in the last 50 years due to encroaching forest. There were a lot more natural fires in the old days.”

Jennings rolls out a map in his office showing two different air photos of Becher’s Prairie. One taken in the 1960s shows large open areas of grassland. The other taken more recently, shows the land covered by forest.

Jennings says the First Nations people were experts in keeping the grasslands open, so it only stands to reason to call upon their expertise to restore the grasslands once again.

Thanks to funding from the Forest Investment Account, Ministry of Forests and Range grants awarded to the Grasslands Conservation Council, and most recently the Job Opportunities Program, Jennings was able to direct almost \$400,000 to hire workers from Canoe Creek, Stone, Toosey, Redstone and Anaham First Nations to slash small trees encroaching on the grasslands. So far they’ve cleared about 2,500 hectares.

“Right now workers from Canoe Creek and Toosey are slashing small trees on about 1,300 hectares, that will continue this fall and winter. It’s fairly simple work, labour intensive, ready work for local guys.”

Jennings says he hopes to do a major prescribed burn of the grasslands next spring. But there are a lot of variables.

“It depends on the weather. We’re trying to reintroduce fire in a responsible way. We’re hoping it can become a regular management tool. Burning is a matter of timing, early spring or late fall.”

Ideally the burning should occur every five to 30 years, depending on the site in question.

Jennings says recent grassland restoration projects got started in August, 2007 after a large prescribed fire conducted by the Central Cariboo District in October 2006, and a number of larger trees were knocked down that winter.

“We got a lot done in a short space of time, and probably put 20 to 30 people to work. Many First Nations, government agencies, and stakeholder groups are involved in directing the program on Crown land,” Jennings says. “Hopefully we’ll get private landholders more involved in the future.”

He says staff from three forest districts, Central Cariboo, 100 Mile House, and Chilcotin, have been heavily involved in the project to widen out established grasslands.

Jennings says his hope is to make the grassland ecosystem restoration work a sustainable, collaborative program based on the support from several outside funding sources.

Forest Minister Pat Bell says the current work underway is funded by the provincial government’s Job Opportunities Program.

“It builds on an initial funding of \$55,000 to the Toosey Band. There’s an additional \$33,000 for a total of \$88,000.”

He says the Job Opportunities Program is designed to provide employment to people in forest-dependent communities where there have been impacts as a result of the forestry downturn.

“So the intent is to do things like forest fire hazard abatement, ecosystem restoration, fish passage restoration. It’s anything that’s labour intensive that helps provide employment and achieve outcomes that fit within the government’s objectives.”

Bell says the program has just over \$26 million available in it.

“So far there’s been about \$7 million of that put out. So there still remains significant funding that we are accepting applications for.”

He says a wide variety of applications will be considered.

“We’ve had applications from the cattle industry for fencing projects, applications from snowmobile clubs for trail improvement projects, lots of work around forest fire hazard abatement, improving forest service rec sites, campgrounds, trails, you name it.”

So far Bell says 325 direct jobs have been created through the program, which will continue as long as the money holds out. He estimates that will be about two years.

“We’re looking for projects that are labour intensive, and that deal with some of the issues like noxious weeds, restoration, forest fire abatement, all of those sorts of activities,” he says.

Bell says the money for the program is federal money given to the province to administer.

“It’s a total of \$127 million that came to the province to help support the forest industry. We took \$26.25 million and put it in this specific fund. Other funds were designed to help with retraining programs, and the early retirement package.”