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ABSTRACT: “Healing the land and bringing our people together”: joint leadership for wildfire recovery in Secwepemcúlecw

The record-breaking 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons in British Columbia (BC) highlighted the risks posed to human and ecological communities and their wellbeing by large, intense wildfires. First Nations communities and their/our territories were disproportionately affected, and social, cultural, economic and ecological recovery processes are still ongoing. In the wake of these ‘megafires’, many First Nations were catalyzed to action - to advocate for Indigenous-led processes of wildfire recovery and restoration. Alongside these community-driven processes, Canada’s and BC’s adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and stated commitments to reconciliation have created further opportunities to advance Indigenous co-management and stewardship of Indigenous territories. This was seen with the 2017 ‘Elephant Hill’ fire, which burned approximately 192,000 hectares throughout the heartland of the Secwépemc Nation’s territory (Secwepemcúlecw).

Drawing on our ongoing collaborative research with the Secwepemcúlecw Restoration and Stewardship Society, including interviews with over fifty staff and leaders from Secwépemc communities and the Province of BC, we discuss how Elephant Hill created an opportunity to develop a new approach to government-to-government collaboration and land-based wildfire recovery. Our findings show the value of this process for building lasting relationships and trust between First Nations and the province, and highlight community priorities for wildfire recovery including protection of cultural heritage and archaeological values; managing impacts to wildlife and water; and upholding Secwépemc stewardship values, laws and roles as yecwminmen. However, diverse and at times conflicting perceptions of ‘success’, and of the meaning and scope of ‘wildfire recovery’, pose challenges to ongoing collaboration. Our research shows that true co-management and restoring both ecological and cultural wellbeing in Indigenous territories requires long-term commitments and resources to strengthen capacity; fostering shared decision making; supporting Indigenous peoples in exercising their/our rights; and rebuilding Indigenous lands and stewardship systems that have been passed down since time immemorial.