

BC Wildfire Service “Uncontrolled” burn causes Shuswap Firestorm 2023

THE STORY AND THE EVIDENCE



*August 17 th at 7pm from Line 17th on the bench above Celistia looking
towards Scotch Creek at the fire approaching from the west.*

Backburn that Backfired and Devastated the North Shuswap

By Jim Cooperman

Most North Shuswap residents struggle to comprehend how the BC Wildfire Service can claim their controlled ignition was a success that “saved hundreds of homes” when it is blatantly obvious to them that this backburn was responsible for destroying 176 houses, cabins and structures and damaging 50 more.* I was a witness to the disaster, as we live just two kilometres south of the powerline where the 10 km long controlled burn was lit with an aerial ignition at 4 pm on August 17, 2023.

One hour later we saw a massive mushroom cloud of smoke rise above the hills behind us. We were aware of the planned ignition, as we had watched the 2 pm BCWS press conference, at which BCWS spokesperson Forrest Tower explained that because a strong windstorm was forecasted to arrive from the northwest at 11 pm, they would take advantage of the current southerly wind to ignite a controlled burn to remove the fuel between the powerline and the existing fire. But by 6 pm those winds arrived and began blowing a massive amount of smoke to the east.

That night residents on the south shore of Shuswap Lake witnessed a massive fire above Lee Creek spreading east towards Scotch Creek. Meanwhile in the Meadow Creek Valley above Celista, local farmers had to work feverishly to protect their properties after the fire jumped Scotch Creek that evening. Shortly after noon on the following day, residents witnessed the fire quickly moving down into the community of Scotch Creek. Yet, the Columbia Shuswap Regional District (CSRD) did not issue an evacuation order until 2:16 pm, leaving little time for residents to leave.



Lightning strike that started the fire! Photo by Heather Brown

A view from our house of the initial smoke from the backburn at 5:09 pm about 1 hour after the backburn was ignited. Photo by Kathi Cooperman



Fortunately, we received a phone call about the fire and left shortly after 1 pm, but by the time others were ready to leave, the fire had engulfed the only paved road out and thus they had to evacuate either by boat or by driving the long, dusty logging road to the isolated community of Seymour Arm. It was not until 4:13 pm that the CSRD issued the evacuation order for Celista and by that time many of the homes there had burned down. It was a miracle that no one died.

There were two fires that ignited on July 12th from lightning strikes above Adams Lake on the west side and the east side.

A few days later, BCWS used skimmer planes in an attempt to control these blazes, but their primary strategy for the fire on the east side was to monitor it because it was in rugged terrain. Both fires grew steadily, and when the fire on the east side moved down the mountain to threaten homes and cabins at Adams Lake, BCWS was forced to bring in more resources as residents left by ferry.

On the day of the disaster, the fire on the west side also turned into a firestorm and soon engulfed the field where BCWS had their camp for approximately 300 firefighters, before it destroyed 85 homes and businesses in Squilax and then jumped the Little River into Sorrento and Turtle Valley. As their tents were ablaze, they too evacuated and were nowhere to be seen the following day, leaving those residents who stayed to fight fires. It took five days before the BCWS made it to Celista and yet the CSRD used police to enforce the evacuation order, making criminals out of the local heroes who saved countless homes and properties.



Adams Lake East fire on the first day

Photo taken from Magna Bay on Aug. 18th at 7:32 pm of Celista





In this aerial photo you can see how the backburn spread southeast along the power line to where it crossed over Scotch Creek and devastated North Shuswap communities. Notice the wide green expanse of forest at the top, which lies between the existing fire and the uncontrolled burn. This photo is above location 2

Since the firestorm, I have been collecting evidence that clearly shows how the backburn exploded and devastated our community. Photos show the smoke blowing east and the fire's movement into the community. A satellite image and aerial photos of the burned area clearly show how it was the backburn and not the original fire that turned into the horrific firestorm. A fire expert has also explained how one giant fire creates its own weather and can pull an adjacent fire towards it, which explains how the fire on the west side also exploded and jumped over the Adams River to burn much of Tsútswecw Park.

One month after the failed backburn, I journeyed up to the powerline to see firsthand how the firestorm took off. At the west end, it crept under the powerline in Lee Creek canyon before climbing the hills and moving into the small community above us where it destroyed 10 homes. To the east, I saw the remains of where BC Hydro had slashed the powerline in the spring and the dry brush, which had

quickly ignited and helped spread the flames to the east. The view from the top of the hill above the Scotch Creek canyon was a horrific scene as the burnt forest stretched as far as one could see and there was still smoke billowing in the distance from multiple fires.

The drought this summer has made the entire province a tinderbox, and already more the 2.4 million hectares of forest has burned, which is nearly twice the previous record set in 2021. We are in the midst of a climate "boiling" emergency, and yet the BCWS does not have the resources available nor the mandate to extinguish fires when they first begin. Plus, they are now likely responsible for devastating a community with an uncontrolled burn lit before a windstorm. Clearly, there is a need for major changes, as this province has yet to implement the recommendations from previous firestorm reviews, and there must be a full public inquiry into the 2023 Shuswap Firestorm.

The following pages are a series of photos, screenshots and satellite images that clearly show the BC Wildfire Service's Aug. 17th 10 km long aerial ignition. Resulting in an uncontrolled burn that became a firestorm devastating the North Shuswap community burning 176 homes, cabins, structures and businesses and damaging 50 more. Such a travesty!



Sept 6 satellite image – guide for locations



An earlier satellite image of the burn that shows locations

Location 1 top left where the power line turns to the right



Aerial view of East Lee Creek, where I live. Here you can see how the uncontrolled burn swept under the power line over the Lee Creek canyon (location 3) where it then blew to the east and destroyed ten homes. Notice how the uncontrolled burn fizzled out to the west, leaving a large strip of green forest between the powerline and the original fire.



On the left a photo from September 17, one month after the uncontrolled burn that shows how it blew along the power line covered in dead brush to where it crossed down below and moved into Meadow Creek. Location 1

Panorama photo taken on Sept. 17, 2023 that shows where the uncontrolled burn spread south under the power line. Location 3



Location 4 where the aerial ignition began

Above location 2 looking towards location 1, where the aerial ignition ended



BCWS screenshots from video of the uncontrolled burn

Over Lee Creek Canyon (location 3) looking east



Location 4 where the aerial ignition began



Close up of location 4 - It looks like the controlled burn crept along the road to the west where it went back on the power line - further to the east is likely the west fire expansion



BCWS map from their Aug. 17th media showing their plan for the backburn and the location of the existing fire - note that the video of the burn shows that the aerial ignition ended south of where they intended it to go



The Sept. 6th satellite image of the burn showing the locations of the photos and the outline of the existing fire



The view of the uncontrolled burn smoke from the lake at approximately 5:30 pm



Photos showing the progression of the fire

View of the smoke rising from the uncontrolled burn from our field at 6:35



Aug. 17th at 7pm from Line 17th on the bench above Celista looking towards Scotch Creek at the fire approaching from the west





From Eagle Bay at about 7:30 pm

From Sorrento at 8:49 pm



From Sorrento at 9:04 pm



From Sorrento at 9:20 pm



From Sorrento at 10:30 pm



From Scotch Creek



From Scotch Creek at 10:19 pm



The fire arriving at the end of Meadow Creek valley on Aug. 18th at 4:02 am



Meadow Creek, August 18th at 4:42 am





*Scotch Creek, Aug.
18th, 12:30 pm*



*Photo from near
Anglemont on Aug.
18th at 6 pm*

*Photo from Line 17 at 6:45 pm
(flames were 300 feet high!)*



*Photo below taken from
Magna Bay on Aug. 18th
at 7:32 pm of Celistia*



Scenes of the destruction

Lee Creek



Lee Creek



Scotch Creek



Scotch Creek



Scotch Creek



Celista



Celista



FOOTNOTE

*see **Planned ignition not to blame for 2 wildfires merging in B.C.'s Shuswap, officials say B.C. Wildfire Service's director of operations says 'hundreds of homes' saved by planned burn CBC News.** Aug 22, 2023

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/planned-burn-in-shuswap-2023-wildfires-1.6942625>

Learn more

August 17th Wildfire Update - K21620

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rh1EmLqAb8>

Aug 15th K21620 Wildfire Update 14:30

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVzyfz_ZE4Y&ab_channel=BCWildfireService

'Unrecognizable': Wildfire damage aftermath seen during drive through Shuswap

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTpGcylIWyw&ab_channel=CastanetNews

BC wildfire update (August 19, 2023) – min 13 to 15

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1p7aSLnYoeA&ab_channel=GovernmentofBC

A BC Wildfire Service video of the Aug. 17 controlled burn above Lee Creek

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXyng6eQPQg&ab_channel=JimCooperman

Aug. 21, 2023 BC Wildfire Service media briefing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZw5HXPnvPU>

What it's like to flee a wildfire in B.C.

<https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-wildfire-evacuation-shuswap/>

Some B.C. residents stayed to fight wildfires amid resource shortage, defying evacuation orders – The globe and mail

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-some-bc-residents-stayed-to-fight-wildfires-amid-resource-shortage/>