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Figure 1 Photo Credit: Thompson Rivers University

Preparing for a Future with Fire: TRU's New Wildfire Diploma is Underway

As wildfire seasons in BC grow longer and more destructive, Thompson Rivers University (TRU) is positioning itself at the forefront of wildfire education.

In 2025 TRU launched the Diploma in Wildfire Studies along with four wildfire certificates. "The program aims to integrate operational personnel, researchers, students, and faculty," said Shannon Wagner, TRU's Vice President Research and head of the wildfire portfolio. It

expands beyond traditional forestry models to incorporate diverse disciplines of culture, communication, and societal impacts.

The Thompson-Nicola Region and Interior BC have been heavily impacted by wildfires. Residents are no stranger to smoke-filled valleys and red summer skies. Wagner said it is a natural fit for TRU to lead wildfire education and has received strong support from surrounding communities. The program proactively strengthens future prevention, management, and research of wildfire.

The TRU Wildfire program is centred around four pillars: research, education, training and innovation, with four subcomponents: fire science, social and community, health and well-being, and Indigenous fire stewardship.

The two-year diploma consists of four certificate programs: Wildfire Science, Sociocultural Dynamics of Wildfire, Wildfire Leadership, and Wildfire Communications and Media. Offered through many different departments at TRU to provide an interdisciplinary approach reflects the complex reality of wildfire management.

It was designed in a way that creates “research to practice and practice to research,” Wagner said, describing the intention to integrate disciplines and the four pillars to generate “serendipitous interactions that lead to great ideas.”

Wagner said the long-term goal is for the diploma and certificates to ladder into a four year degree, allowing students to recognize themselves in an academic discipline of Fire Science.

The positive partnership with BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) as the program has developed and unfolded has brought extensive knowledge and experience to the table. BCWS subject matter experts contribute to training and curriculum management alongside faculty and administrators. The partnership has allowed people from diverse backgrounds to contribute to the goal of student and program success.

Kayla Pepper taught one of the three courses in the Wildfire Communications and Media Relations certificate alongside Mike McCulley, and Kevin Skrepnek. The three instructors have years of experience in wildfire communication and crisis management that brought personable and unique learning opportunities for students.

Figure 2 Photo Credit: Thompson Rivers University

Pepper's class built a comprehensive emergency communications plan for a community in BC. Through sequential assignments, students developed strategies for real-world crisis scenarios.

Pepper was blown away by the results saying, "I was so excited to see how much growth and intelligence, and heart the students put into that progressive assignment."

While wildfire is often framed as a battle to be fought, Mahed Choudhury, an Assistant Professor in Wildfire Studies, sees it differently.

"Disaster essentially involves humans," Choudhury said, "that's why we need to understand the social, cultural, human dimension of [wildfires]."

Choudhury braids Indigenous research, knowledge, and perspectives into his courses including the concept of two-eyed seeing or two legs walking as a focal point of the courses. The phrase refers to the ability to see from one eye the strengths of Indigenous knowledge, and from the other eye, the strengths of Western knowledge.

Choudhury's students learned in a variety of methods including case study analysis and guest speakers like Joe Gilchrist. Gilchrist is a globally renowned Indigenous Fire Keeper from the Skeetchestn Indian Band part of the Secwépemc Nation, who advocates for the revitalization of Indigenous fire stewardship traditions.

Figure 3 Photo Credit: Gurjit Lalli. Gilchrist with Choudhury's Class

Choudhury challenges students to analyze "science worldviews [and] the idea of fire *fighting* as opposed to living with wildfire." He encourages students to critically examine the management and mismanagement of wildfires through history and how future approaches can be more collaborative, culturally informed, and sustainable.

Wildfire response extends beyond the fireline.

Beyond tactical skills, students focused on self-regulation, leadership, and community relationship building. Pepper emphasizes what she calls "compassionate crisis leadership," the ability to remain grounded and emotionally aware while supporting communities in distress. Students examined Indigenous rights and governance, as well as the role of the Information Officer to expand their knowledge of crisis communication situations.

Pepper ensures that the skills that students develop in the Communication and Media Relations certificate are highly applicable to the wildfire environment, but are just as easily transferrable to other governments, Indigenous communities, public sector agencies and other entities. This allows students to "translate critical, sometimes very complex, information in a way that's accessible in all terms to those who need to receive it," she said.

For Olive K.E. Taylor, a student at TRU in the Bachelor of Communication and Digital Journalism, the Wildfire Communications and Media Relations Certificate was a natural addition to her studies.

Taylor pursued the certificate because of its specialization and real-world impact, noting the severity of previous wildfire seasons and the societal and environmental recovery.

“Our three teachers, Kayla Pepper, Mike McCulley, and Kevin Skrepnek, … brought so much expertise and passion to each session,” Taylor said. “[T]he courses really opened my eyes to how much effort goes towards wildfire suppression and how many people and different moving pieces are involved. … It’s not always as simple as putting the fire out, and that was a huge takeaway for me.”

The experience, she said, deepened her appreciation of the coordination, risk and hard work behind wildfire response and hopes the program continues to bring recognition to these roles.

The TRU and BCWS partnership reaches extends beyond curriculum development and student enrollment.

TRU and BC Wildfire Service were awarded a grant of over $1.5 million through the federal government Natural Resources Canada to provide funded training programs for communities.

The initial goal was to train 260 wildfire fighters over the course of the program and grant. That number is expected to be generously surpassed in the first year.

She said the team is “very happy to be able to say that the training is rolling out and folks in communities are gaining wildfire skills.”

As wildfire seasons continue to reshape life in British Columbia, TRU's wildfire program represents more than an academic pathway but a shift in how institutions approach disaster education to integrate science, culture, communication, and community in a unified response. TRU is also a founding member of the federally funded Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada and a partner of the UN Global Fire Management Hub.

For Wagner, the program's significance is both professional and personal saying the program has provided her unique opportunities and will positively impact the community. She says it represents "an educational institution and a response institution coming together to create something that really matters, not just for students, but for society."

In a province learning to live with fire, TRU is taking deliberate steps to resilient and responsible wildfire education.