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# BRANCHING OUT

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OCTOBER 2024

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## WORKING TOGETHER TO MANAGE OUR VITAL FOREST RESOURCES

*Branching Out* is the newsletter of the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta (FRIAA). It is published quarterly to communicate the objectives and activities of the association to members and other interested parties. The purpose of FRIAA is to enhance the forest resources of Alberta for the benefit of all Albertans. It encourages improved forest management activities over and above those required by government regulation. It is, uniquely, an organization that collaborates with academia, government, municipalities, industry, and the Government of Alberta ministry responsible for forestry. It has supported practical and applied research, on-the-ground forest improvement strategies, and innovative approaches to forest inventory and planning that helps Alberta manage its forest resource sustainably. Editorial material in this newsletter may be reproduced and disseminated with the following credit: "Courtesy of Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta."



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Cover photo:  
Forest mushroom, Whitecourt, AB

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Aerial view of boreal forest, southwest of Fox Creek, AB, Little Smoky caribou range, LSM11 compartment, Caribou Habitat Recovery Program

# President's Message



In June, we held FRIAA's annual general meeting in Edmonton, which was attended by nearly 80 members and guests, including our special guest, Minister Todd Loewen. We enjoyed hearing an update on the programs' status, shared a terrific meal together, and caught up with colleagues and friends. Our annual report was presented at the AGM, and we've extracted a few highlights to share with you in this newsletter. Each year FRIAA conducts a program review survey, and those results are also available in this edition.

Not long after this came shocking and devastating news from Jasper; the impacts of this fire event are still strong and ongoing for many of us. As we reflect on what FRIAA can do to assist communities in preparation for future wildfire events, we are pleased to share a FRIAA FireSmart story about a project developed and delivered by Jen Beverly at the University of Alberta on Wildfire Exposure Assessments. So much good work is underway but much remains to be done.

Of course, we all like to get out and enjoy recreating in our beautiful boreal forest, and two recent projects in the Forest Resource Improvement Program have undertaken enhancements on recreation sites with this goal in mind. This newsletter showcases a campground maintenance project west of Caroline at the Peppers Lake, Seven Mile, and Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Areas. Also featured in a story is a non-motorized trail development project in the Eagle Point Provincial Park near Drayton Valley.

We're excited to share a few recent program grant funding awards in the Caribou Habitat Recovery, Community Fireguard, and FRIAA FireSmart programs.

The Board and FRIAA management team welcome your feedback and invite you to connect with us via [admin@friaa.ab.ca](mailto:admin@friaa.ab.ca). We always look forward to hearing from you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. Briand". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Richard Briand**  
President, FRIAA



# Project Stories

View over Stone Mountain Village in the southwest corner of the Municipality of Jasper townsite, September 2024. These homes have been hardened against wildfire with asphalt roofs, stucco siding, and composite decking material. Firefighters removed objects from around the homes prior to the wildfire encroachment. A sprinkler deployment was used in advance of the incoming wildfire. The hill in the forefront, the hill to the west and north, and many homes directly north experienced the devastating effects of the wildfire. Jasper, AB





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# Wildfire Co-Planning Communities with University of Alberta

The Wildfire Co-Planning Communities (CPCs) project addresses the challenge faced by Alberta communities in understanding and utilizing wildfire hazard and risk assessments. Traditionally, these assessments follow a linear progression: researchers develop methods without interacting with end-users, agencies like Alberta Wildfire and FireSmart review and recommend practices, communities hire consultants for local data collection, and, finally, decisions are made based on the assessments. Wildfire expert Jen Beverly at the **University of Alberta** proposed a new and unique approach by requesting **FRIAA FireSmart** funding to develop and deliver a co-planning method that offers immediate benefits through practical wildfire hazard and exposure assessments for at-risk communities in Alberta. The project piloted five communities. "As a researcher, it's great to see that communities want to understand their risks. This is not a black box model—it's not super complicated. The results are tangible," Beverly says.

One of the objectives of the project was to assess alternative data sources and determine if there was value in obtaining commissioned data compared to the prolific readily available data. In short, at this scale of analysis, the readily available data was adequate. This is good news for communities.

Project tasks also included integrating assessment results into wildfire preparedness guides and mitigation strategies, supported by continuous co-planning engagement sessions. A pilot integration session in Whitecourt demonstrated that the format worked well to obtain input on the finalized exposure assessments.

The exposure assessments can assist a community to evaluate where fuel treatments have been done and where they should be done next to increase their "bang for buck" and prioritize treatment locations. This is done in conjunction with communication efforts with residents about "cleaning up" and hardening their homes against wildfire, including using fire-resistant roofing material and getting their neighbours to do the same. "We learned that much of a community's success in achieving wildfire preparedness was dependent on having a champion to drive the initiative forward."

Beverly noted what she came to understand as well, thanks to working with High Level: "One application that came out unexpectedly was for use in decisions for structure protection planning. This shows how the researchers are also learning from the feedback loop. Future uses could include informing evacuation strategies, assessing vulnerabilities, and doing emergency response planning."

*From a previous FRIAA FireSmart project, the link to "Wildfire Exposure Assessment" tool is [here](#).*



# Campground Maintenance to Peppers Lake, Seven Mile, and Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Areas

Peppers Lake, Provincial Recreation Area, off highway 40 near Saskatchewan River Crossing

The Peppers Lake, Seven Mile, and Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Areas are three recreation and camping areas located west of Caroline, Alberta, that are nestled within the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies. Historically, these recreation areas were managed by the Province of Alberta. The management responsibility was transferred to the non-profit organization **Friends of the Eastern Slopes Association (FOESA)** in 2021. FOESA takes great care to connect with the community that utilizes these recreation areas. It became clear that significant upgrades were required to the campsites to increase user accessibility and prevent further deterioration of the landscape surrounding the

recreation areas. The organization leaned on years of experience of recreating in the area and interacting with the community to plan the scope of work required for the improvements to the recreation area. **West Fraser Mills Ltd. (Sundre Forest Products)** sponsored a project through the **Forest Resource Improvement Program** to enable funding for this important project.

“We started 30 years ago with people volunteering their time to improve a single site with the Ya Ha Tinda campsite,” says Dale Marshall, president of FOESA. “The community has really helped with fundraising efforts and



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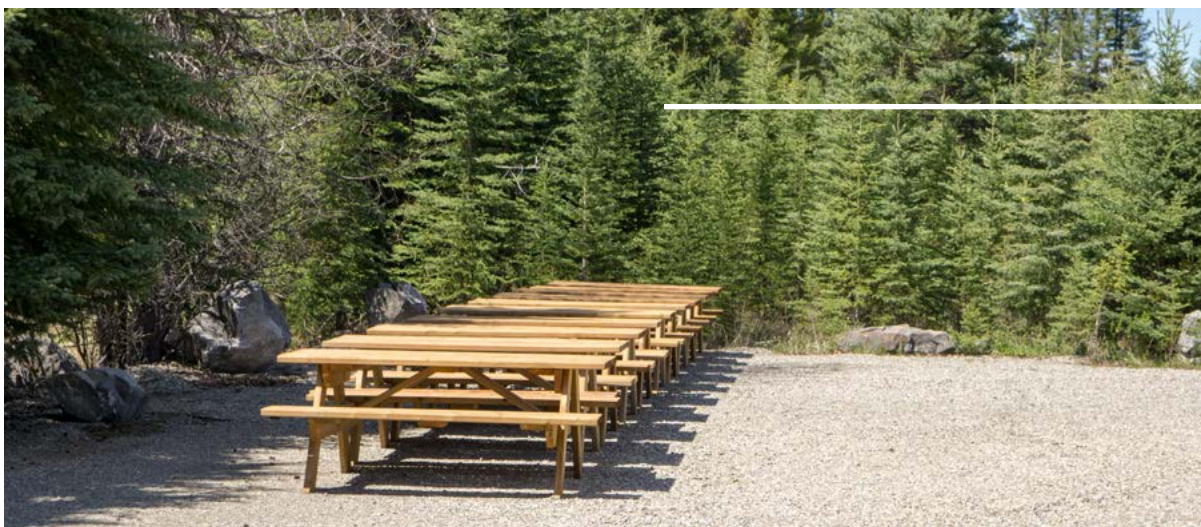
volunteering themselves and their equipment to get these improvements completed. We have a lot more people to turn to for help than ever before." FOESA has a strong network of community members to support this project, such as by recruiting volunteers to construct tables and acquiring raw materials from local suppliers. The three camping areas underwent significant improvements to the camping pads, firepits, and outhouses on site. "The feedback about the improvements to the recreational areas has been massively positive," continues Marshall. "We make a personal effort of stopping and talking to users and asking them what they think (of the recreation area) and what they

think about what we are doing and what they would like changed."

The impact of the campsite improvements has been noticeable within the surrounding communities, as the volunteer-led organization celebrated its 30th anniversary earlier this year with membership sales reaching nearly 3,000. "FRIAA has been instrumental in making all the difference in how we operate and how much work we can get done," Marshall said. "[The future work] looks exciting and it's going over really well with the community. These improvements make the area better and more accessible for the public to enjoy."



Clockwise:  
Clearing  
in-growth  
with a feller  
buncher; freshly  
graveled and  
levelled sites;  
new picnic  
tables ready for  
placement







# Recreation Trails Near Drayton Valley

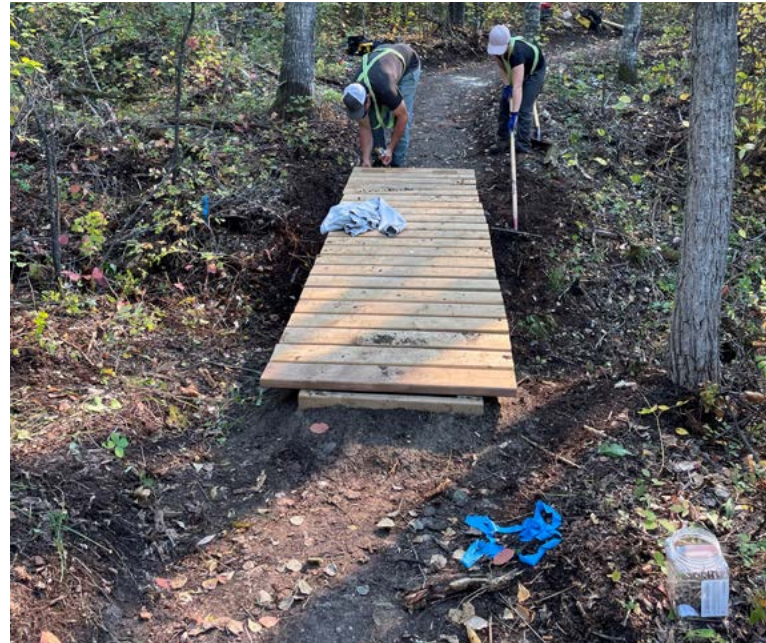
The Pembina Nordic Ski Club operates within the Eagle Point Provincial Park, directly northeast of Drayton Valley, Alberta. The club has been active since the 1970s, originally formed to develop and maintain the cross-country ski trails in the area. In 2007, the Government of Alberta officially designated the area as a provincial park with the Pembina Nordic Ski Club entering a lease agreement with the Ministry of Forestry and Parks to continue to maintain and develop recreational opportunities in the area. The club had initiated the planning for the routing of the single track and upgrading of existing multi-use trails, as usership increased during the summer months. The new trails allow for non-motorized hiking, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing.

Jeff MacKay, general manager at **Weyerhaeuser Pembina**, participates in the community and saw the opportunity for increasing the value of the recreational resource. "I've been here 20 years," he says. "I saw the need for the opportunity and we pieced it together." MacKay coordinated with representatives from the Pembina Nordic Ski Club to determine if the scope of the project meets the requirements of the **Forest Resource Improvement Program (FRIP)** and to develop the initial grant proposal. "Weyerhaeuser was able to add capacity to the project," continues MacKay. "We were able to provide expertise on managing contractors and ensuring the appropriate approvals were in place before the work began."





Clockwise:  
Custom boardwalk  
through wet  
soils; trailhead  
identifier map and  
route sign; a crew  
building a bridge  
over a drainage



The collaboration wasn't just at the proposal stage of the project. "Weyerhaeuser was very helpful with planning out where the trails had to go," says Stephen Brinks, board member of the Pembina Nordic Ski Club. "It was great to have someone [with the knowledge] to walk through our planned trails and point out areas that may be more prone to erosion or slumping and find alternative routes." Brinks said that speed of trail development in the area was in part due to securing grant funding from FRIP. "FRIAA was really great to work with," said Brinks. "The timeline speed for the approval process was much faster than anticipated. It was huge to see the proposal get approved and go 'Wow! This is really going to happen.'"

The trail system was recently completed in the summer of 2024 and the public feedback has been very positive. "I'm out here all the time," says MacKay. "There are people coming [to Eagle Point Provincial Park] from out of town now. School groups are very happy to use the trails too. It's amazing to see that the trails don't just bring out members from the Drayton Valley community but from other places as well."





June 17, 2024,  
FRIAA Annual  
General Meeting,  
Edmonton,  
AB, members  
and guests in  
attendance

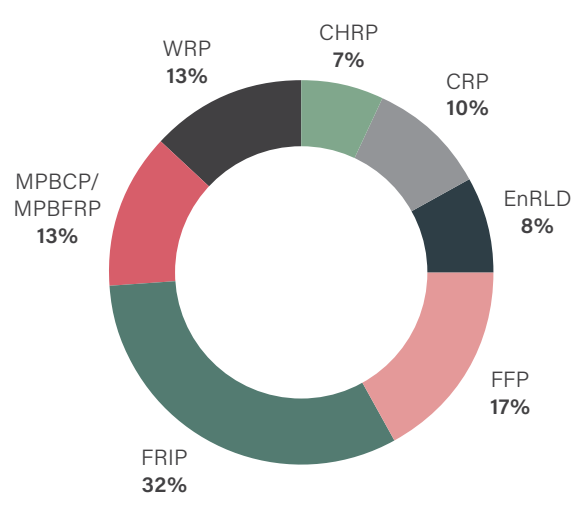
# FRIAA Annual Program Survey Results

In April 2024, stakeholders who had engaged with FRIAA's programs in the past year were invited to participate in our annual program review survey. A total of 303 stakeholders received the emailed survey and 56 responded (a response rate of 18%), approximately the same as the previous year's response rate. About 57% of respondents provided either a name or organizational affiliation, even though they were given the option to remain anonymous. Respondents could identify with multiple programs, which resulted in 56 respondents providing 136 responses—an indication that several stakeholders are engaging in more than one of FRIAA's programs.

Involvement with FRIAA's programs was met with overwhelming satisfaction: 87% of responses were described as neutral, satisfied, or very satisfied. In total, there were three "not satisfied" responses. Two respondents reported "not satisfied" with FFP and one with EnRLD, without stating any reasons. Two respondents reported "very unsatisfied" with WRP. One respondent provided no reason, and one stated the lack of funding and uncertainty around timely decisions.

Program descriptions and outlines are available on each program's web page to provide information on each program's purpose, objective, and eligible activities. See [www.friaa.ab.ca/programs/](http://www.friaa.ab.ca/programs/).

## Response rate by program





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# FRIAA FUN FACTS

## Highlights from FRIAA's 2023–24 Annual Report

FRIAA's eight programs all support responsible resource management, aim to enhance the health of forest resources, promote ecosystem health, support sustainable economies, and enable the public to experience outdoor recreation.

The **Forest Resource Improvement Program** saw over \$46 million in project payments (the highest project expenditure in the last 25 years). FRIP committed \$178 million to new projects to support projects that enhance the forest resources in Alberta.

In 2023–24 the **Community Reforestation Program** planted 2.1 million seedlings on over 880 hectares.

Last year the **Mountain Pine Beetle Program** distributed over \$263,000 to key projects delivered by members and their contractors.

FRIAA has committed \$14.1 million towards **Enhanced Reforestation of Legacy Disturbances Program** projects aimed at sequestering carbon by reforesting public lands that have been disturbed by wildfire.

FRIAA provided \$5.1 million toward **FRIAA FireSmart** projects aimed at protecting at-risk communities from wildfire.

The **Community Fireguard Program** received \$5 million in funding.

In the last year, the **Caribou Habitat Recovery Program** funded one seedling survival assessment project, one planning project, one restoration project, and four vegetation inventory projects with total project payments of \$9.8 million.

The ratio of administration to total spending was 4.65%.



Echo Creek,  
FRIAA  
FireSmart,  
Town of  
Banff, AB

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# Program Funding Awards







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## Caribou Habitat Recovery Program (CHRP)

In June 2024, FRIAA published a request for proposals for **operational planning** in the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou ranges. Six proposals were received. In August 2024, the project was awarded to **Forcorp Solutions Inc.**

## Community Fireguard Program (CFP)

As follow-up to the request for proposals announced in March 2024, three additional communities were successful in developing proposals for grant funding for Phase 1: Planning of community fireguards. These projects were approved in June 2024.

- Beaver Lake Cree Nation
- Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement
- City of Grande Prairie

## FRIAA FireSmart Program

The December 2023 FRIAA FireSmart request for expressions of interest and request for proposals (RFEOI/RFP) received 42 applications, asking for a total of \$3,263,543. In March and May, the Review Committee approved 28 proposals for \$2,866,345.

Approved projects include:

- 7 for FireSmart planning
- 3 for public education
- 1 for development and
- 17 for vegetation/fuel management.

See the full list of approved projects on the [FRIAA website](#).





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Below are a few examples:

### **Inventory of Water Sources**

*(Big Lakes County)*

**Discipline:** Development

**Term:** May 2024 to December 2024

**Objective:** Identify water sources for structure protection from wildfire. The dry hydrant planning project would identify sites within the county in which emergency services can gain access to a sustainable water source, in the event of loss of power, and avoid using the limited supply of treated water.

### **Wood Buffalo FireSmart Home Assessments 2024**

*(Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo)*

**Discipline:** Public education

**Term:** May 2024 to September 2024

**Objective:** Deliver FireSmart home assessments to 1,000 residents within the RMWB during the summer of 2024 and provide FireSmart information through public engagements events.

### **Driftpile Fire Mitigation**

*(Driftpile Cree First Nation)*

**Discipline:** Vegetation management

**Term:** May 2024 to March 2025

**Objective:** Vegetation treatment for areas identified based on the location of critical infrastructure. Treatments consist of thinning/pruning, removing dead and down trees, and disposing of debris on 10.3 hectares.

Thinning stems to break up crown connectivity and pruning branches and ladder fuels helps keep fire out of the tree tops, preventing crown fire. Removing juniper bushes reduces highly flammable fuels. FireSmart work was previously completed around the Jasper townsite, supported by FRIAA. Hillside behind homes at Bonhomme Street and Lodgepole Street, north of homes in the southwest corner of Jasper, AB, September 2024







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