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# BRANCHING OUT

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SEPTEMBER 2025

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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 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:  
Trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) near Conklin, AB

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Northern lights over  
Strathcona County, AB

# President's Message



Greetings on behalf of the FRIAA board of directors. In June we held FRIAA's annual general meeting in Edmonton, featuring a presentation on wildfire community preparedness by His Worship Mayor Tom Pickard, mayor of Whitecourt.

Keeping community preparedness in mind, this *Branching Out* newsletter includes two stories showcasing the great efforts being undertaken by communities to increase preparedness for the risk of wildfire. The first story outlines the efforts by the Town of Fox Creek to conduct a large-scale inter-agency tabletop exercise. The second story takes us to Big Lakes County, where a project has been recently completed to identify and map water sources, enhancing emergency responders' preparedness for future wildfire events.

Our final story focuses on biodiversity. Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc., in partnership with the Alberta Trappers Association, has led a collaborative research initiative to understand marten response to forest harvest practices.

The past year has been marked by significant advancements across FRIAA's programs, and I'm pleased to share a few highlights. Our annual program-review survey has shown overwhelming satisfaction with FRIAA's programs. We deeply appreciate the insights and support of our stakeholders.

Lastly, we are excited to share the recent program grant funding awards in the Caribou Habitat Recovery, Community Fireguard, and FRIAA FireSmart programs. As always, we welcome your feedback and invite you to connect with us via [admin@friaa.ab.ca](mailto:admin@friaa.ab.ca).

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "R. Briand". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

**Richard Briand**  
President, FRIAA



# Project Stories

Blueberry  
(*Vaccinium  
myrtilloides*)  
near Fox  
Creek, AB



# Strengthening Emergency Preparedness in Fox Creek

In April 2025, the Town of Fox Creek brought together municipal staff, regional partners, and contractors for a large-scale inter-agency tabletop exercise aimed at enhancing wildfire emergency response capabilities. Funded through the **FRIAA FireSmart Program**, the project simulated a wildfire approaching from a different direction than the evacuation in 2023, giving the team an opportunity to practise new response strategies and test the community's Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) procedures.

The exercise was coordinated by Emergency Safety Coordinator Samantha Benton, with Chief Administrative Officer and Director of Emergency Management Kristin Milne providing oversight. For Milne, this was also a chance to step back and observe how staff applied the training received over the past two years. "It was really neat to watch people's strengths and see where they shone," she noted. Over the course of the day, participants established a fully operational ECC, tested Alberta Emergency Alert communications, coordinated evacuation logistics, and practised inter-agency communication using the Incident Command System structure. The project achieved success across all six exercise objectives, as detailed in the post-exercise report.

One of the most valuable outcomes was the opportunity to build relationships across departments and with external partners. "Knowing who you might come into contact with during an emergency, and understanding what skills they bring, is an essential part of being able to react quickly and effectively," Milne explained. Benton added that the low-stress environment allowed staff to apply their training with confidence, making them better prepared for real-world events.

Town of  
Fox Creek  
emergency  
response  
training

The exercise also tied directly into ongoing vegetation management projects in the area. Maps, fire breaks, and fuel reduction work were integrated into the scenario, reinforcing how physical mitigation measures can support operational decision-making during an incident.

While Fox Creek's tight-knit municipal team often requires staff to take on multiple roles, the exercise highlighted the community's adaptability and resourcefulness. By identifying potential resource gaps and refining coordination processes, the project has strengthened the community's resilience against future wildfire threats. Milne encourages other communities to invest in similar preparedness initiatives: "These kinds of exercises build relationships and make your team more comfortable and practical in their training. It's time well spent."

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# Identifying Reliable Water Sources in Big Lakes County

Big Lakes County Fire Services is committed to protecting the communities within Big Lakes County. Led by the fire chief, deputy fire chief, and a team of firefighters, the county first responders and support staff serve to increase safety, resilience, and rapid response in preparation for a wildfire emergency.

Through the **FRIAA FireSmart Program**, Big Lakes County undertook a widescale project to identify and secure sustainable water sources for emergency responders to use in the event of a wildfire. "One of the main problems in a rural area is establishing a good water supply; having these sources mapped out and assessed prior to response allows responders to have a pre-plan in place," says Deputy Fire Chief Luci Martinson. Two major goals of the project were to identify viable water sources that could be used during wildfires in rural areas and to set up locations for dry hydrants to assist wildfire-fighters.

The County of Big Lakes covers a large area, with much of the population being spread out between farmlands. This presents unique challenges when trying to access a reliable water source during a wildfire emergency. Deputy Fire Chief Martinson elaborates: "Thinking outside the box led us to determine ways to establish water using existing water treatment plants and storage water sites to allow access for trucks to shuttle water during large operations." Overall, the goal of establishing reliable water sources for the county was achieved through the work of both Fire Chief Jason Cottingham and Deputy Fire Chief Martinson, along with their team of engineers. "Touring the area and working with engineers to establish water sources that were right at our fingertips and more accessible during future planning makes our response more assured in the end," says Martinson.

Field visits included the assessment of existing raw water facilities, dugouts, and natural waterbodies.





Potential water pump access near the intersection of the East and West Prairie Rivers

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# Tracking Marten Responses in Managed Forests

Through the **Forest Resource Improvement Program**, Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc. (AI-Pac), in partnership with the Alberta Trappers Association (ATA), is leading a collaborative research initiative to better understand marten response to forest harvest practices in aspen and mixedwood stands.

The project was born out of conversations between forest ecologists and trappers, both concerned about declining marten sightings in harvested areas. “We realized we had a shared

interest in figuring out how to manage harvest blocks in a way that still supports healthy wildlife populations,” said Tom Habib, project lead and an ecologist with AI-Pac.

Through a carefully designed field study, trappers placed remote cameras in three types of habitat features—retention patches, riparian corridors, and block edges. The early results were exciting: 48 unique marten detections in just the first winter season. “We’ve worked on other camera projects and rarely detect this



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many martens,” noted project biologist Chuck Priestley. “It’s a credit to the trappers’ knowledge of the land—they knew exactly where to go.”

The study is helping demonstrate the value of features like unburned debris piles, riparian buffers, and structural retention patches in keeping marten and other species in post-harvest landscapes. These findings will help forest managers refine harvesting practices while maintaining the biodiversity that communities depend on. “This isn’t just a research project—it’s about being seen, being heard,” said Ross Hinter of the ATA. “We spend our lives on the land, and projects like this show that our knowledge matters. It’s exciting for the whole trapping community.”

The study also offers an important example of how industry, Indigenous and local knowledge-holders, and scientists can work together to address shared concerns. A second field season is now underway, with cameras being redeployed to test new variables including debris management practices.

Ultimately, the results will inform future forest planning, contribute to published research, and support forest stewardship. As Habib puts it, “We manage trees, yes—but we also manage habitat, relationships, and values that matter deeply to people on the land.”



American martens (*Martes Americana*) captured on project cameras in northeastern Alberta

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# Annual Program Review

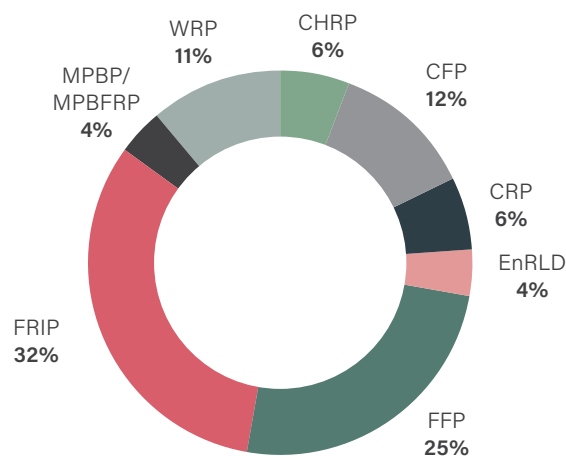
In April 2025, stakeholders who had engaged with FRIAA's programs in the past year were invited to participate in our annual program review survey. A total of 278 stakeholders received the emailed survey and 72 responded (a response rate of 26%). About 56% of respondents provided either a name or organizational affiliation, even though they were given the option to remain anonymous. Respondents could identify with multiple programs, which resulted in 72 respondents providing 145 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: 74% of responses were described as satisfied or very satisfied. Another 16% of responses reported neutral satisfaction with the FRIAA programs, and 10% were "not satisfied" or "very unsatisfied."

The results from the survey are consolidated into feedback themes related to delivery of the FRIAA programs and reviewed by the FRIAA board. FRIAA would like to thank all of our stakeholders who took the time to complete the survey. FRIAA is dedicated to maintaining open lines of communication with all stakeholders and warmly encourages ongoing feedback or questions beyond the annual survey. We deeply value your insights and look forward to future collaborations that strengthen our programs and their positive impact.

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

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## Response rate by program



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# FRIAA FUN FACTS

## Highlights from FRIAA's 2024–25 Annual Report

FRIAA's programs aim to support responsible resource management, 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 a record high of \$54 million in project payments in the fiscal year. FRIP committed over \$205 million to new projects to enhance the forest resources in Alberta.

In 2024–25 the **Community Reforestation Program** planted over 1.4 million seedlings on 1,330 hectares.

The **Mountain Pine Beetle Program** distributed over \$36.6 million to key projects since the program's inception.

Established in the fall of 2013, the **Mountain Pine Beetle Forest Rehabilitation Program** is now complete. Over the lifetime of the program, 23 projects have been funded to rehabilitate forest stands damaged by Mountain Pine Beetle infestation.


FRIAA provided \$5.3 million toward **FRIAA FireSmart** projects in 2024/25 aimed at protecting at-risk communities from wildfire.

FRIAA has committed \$17.3 million towards **Enhanced Reforestation of Legacy Disturbances Program** projects aimed at sequestering carbon by reforesting public lands that have been disturbed by wildfire.

The **Caribou Habitat Recovery Program** has over \$60 million in funds towards committed or completed projects for restoration activities to promote caribou habitat recovery.

The **Community Fireguard Program** received \$14 million in funding in the 2024–25 fiscal year. A total of 33 projects have been initiated, with over \$2.1 million in project payments since the program's inception.

The ratio of administration to total spending was 3.41%.

A close-up photograph of a Labrador tea plant. The image shows a cluster of small, white, five-petaled flowers with prominent stamens. The flowers are arranged in a dense, rounded inflorescence. Below the flowers, several green, elongated, and slightly curved leaves are visible. The leaves have a smooth texture and some small, dark spots. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a natural outdoor setting.

Labrador tea  
(*Rhododendron*  
*groenlandicum*)

# Program Funding Awards

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## Caribou Habitat Recovery Program

In February 2025, FRIAA published a request for proposals for **inter-cutblock restoration**. Seven proposals were received. Projects were awarded to **Tolko Industries Ltd.** and **West Fraser Mills Ltd.**

In February 2025, FRIAA published a request for proposals for **restoration** in the **Cold Lake caribou range**. Seven proposals were received. The project was awarded to **Westcore Contracting Inc.**



Seismic line restoration in the Cold Lake caribou range

## Community Fireguard Program

In February 2025, the Community Fireguard Program invited proponents currently developing projects under 'Phase 1: Planning' to submit proposals under '**Phase 2: Construction.**' In May 2025, projects were awarded to the **City of Grande Prairie** and the **Town of Canmore** (on behalf of the Bow Valley Corridor).

## FRIAA FireSmart Program

The December 2024 FRIAA FireSmart request for expressions of interest (RFEOI) and request for proposals (RFP) received 42 applications, asking for a total of \$5,520,296. In March and June 2025, the Review Committee approved 24 projects, for a total of \$2,782,930.

Approved projects include:

- 4 for FireSmart planning
- 3 for public education
- 1 for inter-agency co-operation
- 16 for vegetation/fuel management

The April 2025 FRIAA FireSmart RFPs for FireSmart Coordinators (public education discipline) received six applications, asking for a total of \$1,032,716. In June and July 2025, the Review Committee approved six proposals for \$967,422.

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Below are a few FRIAA FireSmart project examples:

### **Town of Banff – FireSmart Public Education**

**FireSmart discipline:** Public education

**Term:** January 2025 – December 2025

**Objective:** Deliver 150 FireSmart Home Assessments during 2025 and provide FireSmart information through public engagement events.

### **Fort McMurray First Nation – Vegetation Management**

**FireSmart discipline:** Vegetation management

**Term:** April 2025 – January 2026

**Objective:** Complete a second pass of thinning and pruning, with debris disposal through pile/burn on 16.75 ha.

### **Peerless Trout First Nation – Planning 2025**

**FireSmart discipline:** FireSmart planning

**Term:** March 2025 – December 2025

**Objective:** Develop a Wildfire Hazard & Risk Assessment and a Wildfire Preparedness Guide for Peerless Trout First Nation.

### **County of Grande Prairie – Regional Community FireSmart Coordinator**

**FireSmart discipline:** Public education

**Term:** August 2025 – August 2027

**Objective:** Build capacity with a Regional Community FireSmart Coordinator who is responsible for leading and coordinating FireSmart activities to enhance wildfire preparedness, prevention, and mitigation. The focus is on reducing wildfire risk and increasing community resilience.



Brule vegetation management through mulch thinning and hand pruning

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# New Funding Announcement

## FRIAA FireSmart Program

FRIAA is pleased to announce a request for expressions of interest (RFEOI) in the **FRIAA FireSmart Program**, for the vegetation management discipline.

Expressions of interest and proposal submissions are due no later than 4:00 p.m. on September 29, 2025, to the FRIAA submissions portal at [friaa.ab.ca/program-submissions](https://friaa.ab.ca/program-submissions)

FRIAA is pleased to announce a request for proposals (RFP) in the **FRIAA FireSmart Program**, for non-vegetation management disciplines: emergency planning, public education, inter-agency co-operation, cross-training, legislation, and development controls.

Abundance of fireweed (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*) after wildfire in Northwestern Alberta





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