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# BRANCHING OUT

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SEPTEMBER 2026

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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. FRIAA 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 help Alberta manage its forest resource sustainably. Editorial material in this newsletter may be reproduced with the following credit: "Courtesy of Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta."



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Cover photo:  
Puffball fungi growing among moss on  
the forest floor near Whitecourt, Alberta

## CONTENTS

|                                                 |    |
|-------------------------------------------------|----|
| President's Message                             | 3  |
| Project Stories                                 |    |
| Building Opportunity at Kikino Metis Settlement | 4  |
| Breathing New Life into a Living Classroom      | 6  |
| Long-term Bird Monitoring                       | 8  |
| Annual Program Review                           | 10 |
| Highlights from FRIAA's 2025-26 Annual Report   | 11 |
| Program Funding Awards                          |    |
| Community Fireguard Program                     | 13 |
| FRIAA FireSmart Program                         | 14 |



Canada Thistle  
(*Cirsium arvense*)

# President's Message



As summer transitions into fall across Alberta, I'd like to extend a warm greeting on behalf of the FRIAA Board of Directors. I'm pleased to share another edition of *Branching Out* that highlights the meaningful work taking place in communities and forests across the province.

In June, FRIAA held its Annual General Meeting in Edmonton, providing an opportunity to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year and look ahead to emerging opportunities. We have included this year's annual program survey results, as well as highlights from our Annual Report.

This issue features projects that demonstrate the lasting value of investing in our forests and communities. The first story highlights the construction of the Kikino Metis Settlement Community Fireguard to help protect the community from wildfire. Our second feature explores the recent renovation of the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest, which has long served as an important hub for education, research, and public engagement. Our final story features a long-term bird monitoring project that is yielding promising data.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, thank you to everyone whose efforts make this work possible. We appreciate your continued commitment to Alberta's forest resources and look forward to sharing more success stories in the months ahead. As always, we welcome your feedback at [admin@friaa.ab.ca](mailto:admin@friaa.ab.ca).

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "R. Briand". The signature is stylized and fluid.

**Richard Briand**  
President, FRIAA



# Building Opportunity at Kikino Metis Settlement

At Kikino Metis Settlement, a community fireguard project is doing more than clearing a path through the forest. It is helping protect homes, critical community infrastructure and the settlement's core services area while opening new opportunities for local employment, grazing and future land use. Located in northeast Alberta, Kikino is home to more than 1,100 members and spans nearly 44,000 hectares. With funding through the **Community Fireguard Program**, construction of the Kikino Metis Settlement Fireguard began in October 2025 and the project is nearing completion.

For Kikino Metis Settlement Chair Scott Cardinal, who has served as the settlement's

local contact and project coordinator, the initiative has been both a wildfire resilience project and a community-building effort. "It's going to enable us to better protect our main hub," Cardinal said. He also pointed to nearby dugouts that can support cattle grazing as well as faster response to spot fires throughout the settlement. While reducing the threat of wildfire is the project's primary purpose, the benefits extend beyond emergency preparedness. Much of the fireguard falls within existing grazing lease areas, allowing cattle to help maintain the fuel-free area by minimizing vegetation regrowth. Kikino is also exploring future land-use opportunities, including hay production and a temporary gravel pit, though those opportunities are still under discussion.

A cleared section of the Kikino Metis Settlement Community Fireguard

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The project has also created meaningful local employment, with an estimated seven full-time equivalent positions supported over its course. For many members, the work carried both practical and personal value as they were working to protect their community. Logs from clearing activities were also made available to members, including elders, adding another practical community benefit.

As seeding and fencing continue through the summer, the Kikino Fireguard project stands as a strong example of how wildfire preparedness can also support local economies, community resiliency and practical land stewardship.

## Project at a glance

### Fireguard size:

200 hectares

### Dimensions:

8 km long and 250 m wide

### Protects:

Residences, schools, fire hall, store, administration office, and recreation facilities



An excavator works within the Kikino Metis Settlement Community Fireguard project area

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# Breathing New Life into a Living Classroom:

## Upgrades at the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest

For more than 25 years, the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest has welcomed tens of thousands of students to learn about forestry in Alberta. What makes the site unique is its ability to tell the story of Alberta's forests by providing an interpretive experience. Visitors can walk through areas harvested as part of a 1950s forestry research study, compare them with an area harvested in 2012, and see firsthand how forests regenerate, change, and thrive.

With sponsorship from West Fraser Alberta Wood Products Ltd., through the **Forest Resource Improvement Program**, Inside Education Society of Alberta completed a major set of upgrades to modernize the site, enhance accessibility, and expand educational opportunities for both students and the public.



Pioneer Middle School students participate in a fall 2024 program at the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest



"This project was about more than upkeep — it was about renewal," said Kathryn Wagner, Program Director, Inside Education. "[We] wanted to breathe new life into the site while staying true to its original purpose." That vision guided a collaborative effort involving educators, designers, contractors, and local trades, all focused on creating a more engaging and welcoming experience. The intent of the project was to make young people feel a part of, rather than apart from the forest resources of Alberta.

A large part of the project focused on 23 new interpretive trail signs that cover topics such as harvesting, reforestation, wildfire, wildlife, and career paths in forestry. The signage was designed to carefully balance educational clarity with aesthetics, encouraging visitors to pause and learn, effectively transforming the site into an outdoor classroom.

Additional improvements include accessibility upgrades to the washroom, and the conversion of an old bunkhouse into a replica modern-day trappers' cabin. The bunkhouse was originally built decades ago by the Junior Forest Rangers



and had fallen into disrepair. Through careful renovation, consultation with local trappers, and the sourcing of authentic materials and artifacts, the structure now serves as an interactive learning space that immerses visitors in Alberta's trapping heritage. "The cabin transformation reminds us that storytelling linking history, culture, and forest practices can deepen the educational impact," Wagner noted.

"The upgrades reaffirmed how much this site means to both the forestry community and the general public," Wagner said. "The interpretive content is being noticed and appreciated by visitors stopping to read, learn, and connect."

While the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest Site Upgrades project marked a major milestone, it is part of a longer journey. "Forests are always changing, and so should the way we teach about them," said Wagner. With these upgrades, the site is better equipped to support a new generation of students as they observe forest sustainability firsthand, compare current and past approaches, and ask questions that enhance their understanding of Alberta's forests.

Outdoor programming at the Des Crossley Demonstration Forest and installation of updated interpretive signage

# Long-term Bird Monitoring

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Barred Owl  
(*Strix varia*)  
photographed  
in the Grande  
Prairie area

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For more than two decades, long-term bird monitoring in the Pembina and Grande Prairie regions has helped build one of Alberta's most continuous and comprehensive datasets on breeding birds and owls. The monitoring project is made possible with sponsorship from Weyerhaeuser Company Limited, through the **Forest Resource Improvement Program**. The project now provides valuable insight into how bird communities respond to harvesting, wildfire, changing forest conditions, and other disturbances over time.

Project manager Lisa Priestley coordinates the monitoring project and continues to support field surveys, drawing on her long-standing experience with owls and forest birds. "Changes in their habitat are happening all the time and it also takes a long time for things to change, so having more long-term projects, are to me, very essential," Priestley says. The surveys track bird distribution and relative abundance, while species-specific work focuses on birds of management concern, including Canada Warbler (*Cardellina canadensis*), Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), and Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). These efforts help land managers understand where important habitat occurs and how forest management can support wildlife populations.

This year marks the tenth monitoring iteration in the Pembina region, representing roughly 30 years of survey data for both songbirds and owls. With multiple repeated survey cycles now complete, the team is beginning to analyze long-term trends. Priestley indicates that, "owl numbers often fluctuate with prey availability over time, however, one of the main species of concern, the Barred Owl, appears to be stabilizing and populations across the country

have been increasing." Another highlight from the most recent surveys was an unusually high number of Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*), Priestley says, "They're probably the most common owl in North America, but we had the highest number detected this year compared to any other year we've surveyed."

While weather, wildfire, and survey timing can create challenges, the project has evolved over time. For example, acoustic recorders have helped expand Common Nighthawk surveys by allowing crews to cover more area during the short evening survey window. Looking ahead, continued long-term monitoring will remain essential as forest cover, habitat conditions, and bird populations continue to evolve. As Priestley noted, "long-term projects help managers detect changes early, supporting proactive decisions before populations decline and become difficult to recover."

#### Monitoring timeline

**1999**

Pembina songbird and owl surveys begin.

**2001**

Grande Prairie songbird surveys begin.

**2007**

Grande Prairie owl surveys are added.

**2026**

Tenth Pembina monitoring iteration.

#### Why it matters

Long-term monitoring helps identify trends and support proactive forest management.



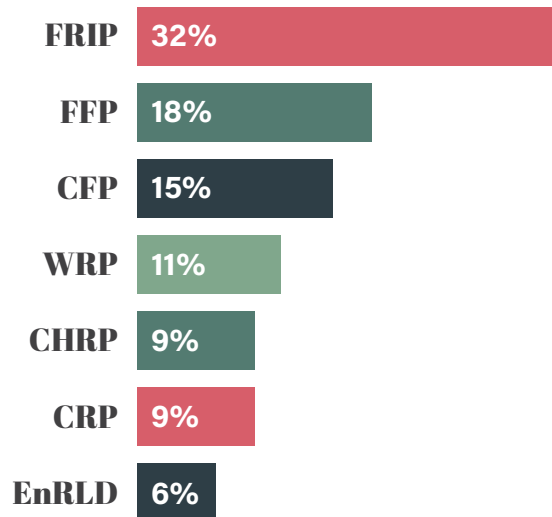
FRIAA Board members at the June 2026 AGM. From left to right: Allan Bell, Dave Wall, Wendy Crosina, M.J. Munn-Kristoff, Richard Briand, and Andy Neigel. Missing: Daniel Lux

# Annual Program Review

In April 2026, 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 273 stakeholders received the emailed survey and 76 responded (a response rate of 28%). About 61% 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 76 respondents providing 179 responses—an indication that several stakeholders are engaging in more than one of FRIAA's programs. Satisfaction with FRIAA's programs was strong: 76% of responses were described as satisfied or very satisfied, 17% of responses were neutral, and 7% 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 welcomes feedback and questions throughout the year.

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



*Note: Percentages represent 179 program selections from 76 respondents. Respondents could select more than one program.*

*Programs: FRIP, Forest Resource Improvement Program; FFP, FRIAA FireSmart Program; CFP, Community Fireguard Program; WRP, Wildfire Reclamation Program; CHRP, Caribou Habitat Recovery Program; CRP, Community Reforestation Program; EnRLD, Enhanced Reforestation of Legacy Disturbances.*

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# Highlights from FRIAA's 2025–26 Annual Report

FRIAA's programs aim to support responsible resource management, enhance the health of forest resources, support wildfire mitigation, and promote reforestation and habitat restoration.

The **Community Fireguard Program** has supported over 42 projects for the planning and construction of Community Fireguards, totalling over \$5.3 million in project payments since the program's inception.

The **Forest Resource Improvement Program** saw a record high of \$59 million in project payments in the fiscal year.

In 2025–26 the **Community Reforestation Program** planted more than 1.5 million seedlings on over 1,320 hectares.

The **Enhanced Reforestation of Legacy Disturbances Program** supports projects aimed at sequestering carbon by reforesting public lands disturbed by wildfire. The program has planted over 3.5 million seedlings across 2,463 hectares since inception.

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

The ratio of administration to total spending was 2.71%.

The **Caribou Habitat Recovery Program** has provided over \$46 million in funding for restoration activities to promote caribou habitat recovery since the program's inception.



FRIAA in collaboration with FireSmart Alberta attended the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association (AFCA) trade show in Red Deer. Left to Right: Michael Coutu (FireSmart Alberta), Wes Nimco and Jessica Hamilton (FRIAA representatives)

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# Program Funding Awards



Construction of the Stoneworks West section of the Bow Valley Fireguard was funded through the Community Fireguard Program

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# Community Fireguard Program

In May 2026, the Community Fireguard Program invited proponents who had completed planning projects under Phase 1 to submit proposals for Phase 2 fireguard construction.

In June 2026, the FRIAA Board approved funding for Kananaskis Improvement District to construct a community fireguard at the Lower Kananaskis Lake Cottage Subdivision.



Kikino Metis Settlement fireguard grazing area, seeded to wildfire resistance forage mixture

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# FRIAA Firesmart Program

From the December 2025 RFEI/RFP, the FRIAA FireSmart Program received 18 applications requesting a total of \$2,166,829.85. The Review Committee approved 14 proposals, for funding of \$1,572,950.85 in March and May 2026.

Approved projects include:

- 1 FireSmart planning
- 4 public education
- 9 vegetation management/fuel modification



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Below are a few FRIAA FireSmart project examples:

### **Lubicon Lake Band – Vegetation Management 2026**

**Term:** June 2026 – March 2027.

**Objective:** To complete first pass of thinning, pruning, and removal of dead/down trees; debris disposed of by pile/burn, portable chipper or tracked mulcher on 8.3 hectares.

### **Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo – Conklin Vegetation Management 2026**

**Term:** July 2026 – March 2027.

**Objective:** The project will complete first pass of thinning, pruning, and removal of dead/down trees; debris disposed of by pile and burn on 14 hectares.

### **Town of McLennan – Wildfire Risk Reduction 2026 Vegetation Management**

**Term:** November 2026 – January 2027.

**Objective:** Reduce fuel load by mulching a 20-metre-wide emergency access corridor along the northeast shoreline of Kimiwan Lake, adjacent to a high-risk tree line and nearby residential areas.



FireSmart fuel reduction in dense, steep-sloped mature conifer by thin, prune, mulch in the Town of Cochrane



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