

# Episode 2 Transcript and Show Notes: Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley

Title: “Challenging, beautiful bioregion”

**Website Summary:** *This episode features my interviews with poet Sharon Thesen; foresters Daryl Spencer, Dave Gill, and Gord Pratt; UBCO Living with Wildfire project lead Mathieu Bourbonnais; forest technologist Jeff Eustache; and FireSmart program lead Kelsey Winter. We discuss protecting communities in and around the Okanagan Valley from wildfire danger in light of recent wildfire seasons.*

**Editorial Note:** *Sharon Thesen has edited her words in the transcript to most clearly reflect her meaning in written form, and so there are small, intentional discrepancies between the posted written and audio forms of this interview.*

**[00:00:00]**

**Narration, Judee Burr:**

Hi, it's Judee. This is the second episode of my thesis podcast, *Listening to Fire Knowledges*. This episode includes a number of conversations about surviving wildfire events and living in their aftermath. My heart and thoughts go out to those who have lost something in a disastrous wildfire event, including to my aunt and uncle who lost their home in the California Camp Fire in 2018. I know conversations about wildfire disasters can be challenging to hear, so I hope you can take care of yourself, and listen when you are ready. Thanks for being here.

**[00:00:41]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Well, I love the dry heat.

[Music begins<sup>1</sup>]

I love the smell of the earth. I love the blue and gold, the blue sky and the gold grass. I love the orchards. They always seemed so beautiful in an almost biblical way: these orchards with all this fruit hanging, the gift of that. And the gift of its warmth, its welcoming warmth. Maybe it's the smell of the pines too, that resinous perfume. I mean, you come from a different place and so you would have your experience of this place too.

**[00:01:34]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

My name is Sharon Thesen. I'm professor emeritus of creative writing at UBC's Okanagan campus. I've been a writer, a poet, a critic, and an editor for many decades in the Canadian, BC, and Cascadian worlds – Cascadia being the bioregion that encompasses most of BC, including the Okanagan and the coast and Washington State and Oregon and part of Northern California. It's an extremely unstable region –

geologically – prone to fire, tsunami, earthquake, volcano, flood, avalanche. It's a landscape that's very vibrant, very beautiful, but also dangerous. It creates challenges for sure. And in this challenging beautiful bioregion, I've been living for most of my life.

**[00:02:41]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Living in Vancouver, I was always aware, as a writer, of being in a different zone from the rest of Canada. It seemed that we writers – a lot of us poets in Vancouver – had deeper aesthetic and poetic connections with our counterparts in the States. But the quote-unquote “rest of Canada” was not involved in these poetics. There was always an east-west stretch. There was a sense of not belonging, really, to either of them. Okay, so then what do you belong to? So, here is this very prominent geography and landscape.

[Music ends]

**[00:03:35]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

But I always had a soft spot for the interior. I spent probably about ten years of my young life, living in the Kamloops and Vernon areas, and always wanted to come back. I appreciated the spectacular landscape on the coast, but my body, my heart, was here. So, when we started coming back here, I would feel at home. Because I could smell it. I could recognize the weeds – when you're a little kid, you're closer to the ground and you're seeing the weeds and all that small stuff. It's all about those weeds, right? And it still is.

[Music begins<sup>2</sup>]

It still is the place of my heart, and my deepest being is this landscape.

**[00:04:34]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

You sat down with another student, Amy Thiessen, almost two years ago, who was another student in the AMP Lab, like I am, to record a digital edition of your poem “The Fire,” which was really wonderful to listen to. You talked about your experience of living through the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire, and I'm really grateful that you're willing to revisit these experiences again. It sounds like that was the year that you moved to Kelowna was the year of this fire. I wonder, if you, if you're comfortable talking about it again, talk about what you remember of that fire happening and the experience of having to be evacuated at that time.

[Music changes<sup>3</sup>]

**[00:05:20]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

We had moved into this new subdivision. We were thrilled to be able to live in a beautiful house that was new, and certainly didn't cost nearly as much money as a house like that would on the coast at the time, especially then. I did have doubts about it, but, anyway, we moved there.

On every side of the house, was forest. And it was beautiful. We had these two dogs, I'd take them to walk every morning. There was trees, forest, coyotes. There was a little lake. It was really, really hot for a couple of weeks prior to the fire starting, but we didn't mind. We liked it.

**[00:06:05]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Can I read this little paragraph?

**[00:06:06]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Please do.

**[00:06:09]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

[Reading from *Locations of Grief*<sup>4</sup>]

Hundreds. The subdivision was called South Ridge and there were about forty houses off a T-shaped roadway. "A park" was made somewhere in the middle and a new road was already being built just above ours. Hundreds of acres of woods, streams, and meadows flourished just beyond where the roads ended, having not yet succumbed to the inferno that would engulf the landscape a couple of months later – that's when we first moved – June and her husband, David, lived a little farther up the hill, while we were closer to cherry orchards and large, old properties that until then had been somewhat out of town. Deer hunters still stalked the woods not far from our houses back in 2003 when I first met June. Late one night after a lengthy heat wave, we were awakened by a thunderclap and, in the morning, a plume of smoke could be seen rising into the sky to the south. This plume, by the time June and I got to the beach that afternoon for our regular swim, was starting to develop an ominous anvil shape on its eastern edge. Two days later, you could hardly see or breathe for the smoke. And there were reports of houses burning in a residential area far to the south. But, for some reason, we weren't quite sure about that, even though evacuation alerts were being handed out in neighbourhoods farther down from us. We tried to stay calm as falling embers burned holes in our lawn chairs. Paul – that's my husband – Paul and I had made a casual arrangement just in case, with friends who lived in Penticton should the worst come to the worst which we didn't think was possible. Surely the fire wouldn't jump the blocks-wide clearing where the big power lines were.

[Stops reading]

**[00:07:57]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

By the time they started trying to put it out, it was out of control.

[Music changes<sup>5</sup>]

And the wind was blowing. And the wind is the worst thing that can happen with a fire. When a fire gets really bad, as this one did, it became the worst level of fire you could have, a rank six firestorm. People even farther north than us were getting evacuation alerts. So, we're just thinking "Oh well, they must think we're going to be okay then," right? Because we didn't get one. But it got to a point where I was starting to get really nervous. I was starting to think maybe we should pack some things up. To go through that process is horrible.

**[00:08:45]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

We phoned our friends in Penticton, and Paul said, "You go and I'll stay here and hold the fort." And – it was that afternoon – it was pitch dark from smoke, and driving down to Penticton you saw the whole east side of Okanagan Mountain Park, from Kelowna to Naramata, on fire. That side of Okanagan Lake used to be green and forested. There was that little railway near the top.

[Music ends]

Paul went down to June and David's for dinner.

**[00:09:29]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Who lived in that same subdivision, nearby?

**[00:09:31]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Yeah, nearby. So, they were eating dinner inside, and June went out to see how things were. And there was the fire coming right down the hill. So, Paul jumped in the car, drove back to our place. I had packed some stuff and he was throwing it in. The police were going up and down and saying get out right now, right now, right now.

**[00:09:56]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

And you hadn't received an evacuation alert prior to that?

**[00:09:59]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

No.

**[00:10:00]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Wow, it was moving that fast.

**[00:10:02]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

It was moving that fast, and, also, I think that the authorities didn't really even know we were still there, because it was such a new development. We probably weren't even on the map. So, he had to drive down through what was an old quarry and is now called "The Quarry." June and David decided to go back to White Rock, and they stayed overnight at our friends in Penticton in their car.

[Music begins<sup>6</sup>]

**[00:10:34]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

There was a period of time when they thought the whole town was going to go up in flames. And there was still so much chaos, and the fire still wasn't really out for quite a long time. It was the Winfield fire department that saved our place. I still see the tracks of their boots in our little flower beds around the house where they were working, but they had given up. The fire was coming. It was too hot. It was terrifying. They could have died. But the wind changed. The wind changed and took the fire north to an area called Crawford and burned up most of the houses there. Ours were left standing. But we didn't know that for a long time.

**[00:11:24]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

So, when did you find out that – when were you able to return back to your house?

**[00:11:31]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

The fire department held a meeting in the big Trinity Baptist Church downtown, because they were not saying what areas had burned. There were roadblocks keeping people out from the badly affected neighbourhoods. All those people were to sit in Trinity Baptist Church while whoever it was pointed out all the lots on a map, which houses burned and which were still standing and which were damaged. And so, can you imagine that meeting?

**[00:12:24]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

No.

[Music begins<sup>7</sup>]

Do you remember anyone talking about fire danger before the fire?

**[00:12:32]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

No.

**[00:12:41]**

**Narration, Judee Burr:**

Anyone who was living in the Okanagan in 2003 remembers the firestorm. It was a season stoked by drought.<sup>8</sup> This fire started in a park where people had been warning of the accumulating fuels and fire danger for years, but little had been done.<sup>9</sup> The Okanagan Mountain Park Fire burned more than 25,000 hectares, caused 33,000 residents to be evacuated, damaged or destroyed 238 homes, and caused \$200 million in damages. It was one fire of many in “Firestorm 2003,” a summer that set a record high number of forest fires burning in British Columbia.<sup>10</sup>

[Music ends]

A Provincial Review team was established after this fire season was over to evaluate the response to these fires and make recommendations for the future. The resulting Filmon Report explicitly linked the severe wildfires of 2003 to the build-up of fuels caused by decades of fire suppression.<sup>11</sup> Between then and the time I write this in early 2022, the Okanagan Valley has experienced even larger fire seasons.<sup>12</sup> Here is Matthieu Bourbonnais again.

**[00:13:46]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 14 January 2022:**

Do you have any specific fires that have happened in the Okanagan that you point to, to explain what our wildfire situation is here in the Valley? Or examples you use to think through how we live with wildfire and what the challenges are?

**[00:14:07]**

**Mathieu Bourbonnais, Interview Recording from 14 January 2022:**

Yeah, the Okanagan, the communities here, have a lot of like experience with fire. The 2003 Okanagan Mountain Fire was – if we look back over the last twenty years – it was one of those fires that put fire as a big threat to communities back in people’s minds. We lost a few hundred homes, there was thousands of people evacuated for over a month, and it’s something that’s ingrained in the mentality here in the Okanagan. You hear people who lived through it still talk about the 2003 fire. And if you go up into that area where it burned, there’s infographics and signs talking about the fire and what happened. So, that’s one that people that have been here for a long time, they remember it.

**[00:15:08]**

**Daryl Spencer, Interview Recording from 6 January 2022:**

It was unpleasant, to understate it. Yeah, it was quite smoky and fiery and scary. Houses were being burned, and it was really kind of apocalyptic. And I remember seeing the fire, the smoke start. When the fire first started and I heard about the

lightning strike and the fire started burning, and people were out looking at and it just kept burning northward and northward and started destroying homes.

[Music begins<sup>13</sup>]

So yeah, it was quite a scary occurrence to happen. And at the same time there are some health risks too – I was into different athletic events back then, that was when I was into marathons and running and so forth, and it really interrupted my training schedule which wasn't good.

[Both laugh]

Either that, or I was going to just be smoking all day while I run through this smoke. I remember the smoke being so thick at times you couldn't see more than 20 feet through it.

**[00:16:02]**

**Daryl Spencer, Interview Recording from 6 January 2022:**

So, my name is Daryl Spencer. I've been a registered professional forester since 1985, so it's been a few years. I've done fire management and planning amongst other things in the Okanagan Valley for the past twenty years. My current role – I work for the government. I work with the Forest Practices Board, which is an environmental watchdog for the Province. We look at various things that fall under the Forest and Range Practices Act and the Wildfire Act.

**[00:16:30]**

**Daryl Spencer, Interview Recording from 6 January 2022:**

Certainly there was fires, but not as predominant as, say – 2003 was like a fulcrum kind of point where fire seemed to take off for me anyway. I think that fire, like I said earlier, was a launching point or staging point for more awareness with municipalities, the parks, and the government and served as a bit of a wake-up call for, say the city of Kelowna, BC Parks, and the Ministry of Forests. And it raised awareness of the importance of managing interface fuels and so forth. So, that was a key thing there. And I mentioned all those homes were burned down. It was a situation where Okanagan Mountain Park, which was back then a Class A park – I think it still is – and Class A parks are left unto themselves to evolve ecologically. So, there's huge mats of pine needles on the forest floor up to two or three feet thick and gathers in areas. So, a lightning strike in that fuel – which is readily burnable and burns quite rapidly – started that fire and all these homes were being developed adjacent to this park without the thought of fuel management. So, that resulted in a lot of these homes burning up. So, that was kind of a wake-up call for city planners and parks and so forth to start setting up interface and buffer areas and so forth to protect homes.

[Music ends]

**[00:17:52]**

**Dave Gill, Interview Recording from 15 February 2022:**

The night the fire started, our oldest who's twenty now ... it was a thunderstorm on a Saturday night, I think it was, or a Friday night. And it woke her up. I remember walking around, holding her and trying to console her and get her to go back to sleep. We saw these flashes of lightning, and I was thinking to myself exactly about this guy that was on his horse back in that area just a few weeks before that. And thinking, wow, you know, it's been so dry all summer, this is going to start something. And the next morning, yes, for sure –

[Music begins<sup>14</sup>]

it had cleared off and there was this wisp of smoke going right over our house. It was this odd yellowy colour, and it was just a thin strip of smoke. And it was fairly hot, and I thought, "Oh, man. It did, it started."

[00:18:49]

**Dave Gill, Interview Recording from 15 February 2022:**

My name is Dave Gill. I am a registered professional forester, and I work for Westbank First Nation, a company called Ntityix Resources, which is Westbank's forest management company.

[00:19:04]

**Dave Gill, Interview Recording from 15 February 2022:**

We heard them on it, we could hear the helicopters on the fire. We thought that they'd bring it under control, but within a couple days, we realized it was much more than that. It wasn't long before people were starting to crowd on the streets around us, and higher up on the hill behind us, just looking at this thing. A few days later we were told to leave.

[00:19:39]

**Dave Gill, Interview Recording from 15 February 2022:**

That was the way I was initiated to fire in the Okanagan, and that in itself changed the way I thought about fire –

[Music ends]

from what I learned to, you know, on the ground what I've been hearing from people that that live here, rather than what I had learned in school. From there, we had the Filmon Report, and we had a lot of other, I guess for the most part, high-level reports that came out about fire. And that maybe we've been taking the wrong approach with fire for about a hundred years.

[Music begins<sup>15</sup>]

[00:20:23]

**Mathieu Bourbonnais, Interview Recording from 14 January 2022:**



More recently, just even the last few years – Mount Christie fire, White Rock Lake fire – again fires that really, really quickly came right to our doorstep. These aren't fires that – oh, there's an evacuation alert, or you need to be kind of prepared. It was just, pretty quickly, it was right there. That's the situation that we have in the Okanagan where oftentimes there are really dry conditions that are really conducive to fire spreading quite quickly. And what we should be expecting moving forward is really more of that. It's unfortunate, again people lost homes. It disrupted a lot of people's lives. You always try to take that into context, but those are examples you can point to – like this is what we should be expecting, and we need to kind of prepare better for that. From 2003 to now, we look at this last year: the heat dome, these extreme kind of weather conditions that, regardless of where you are, if there are those kind of conditions, there is a good chance that, if a fire happens, you're going to have a lot of problems.

[Music ends]

Yeah, definitely landscape management is a part of it, but also just our legacy and our history of how we've managed this valley combined with how our climate is changing. You can see the progression now as you look back over the last kind of twenty years.

[Music begins<sup>16</sup>]

**[00:22:06]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Just hearing about that experience of really not having a lot of conversations about fire and then having this massive fire happen, I wonder how fire seasons since then have been for you. Do you hear more conversations happening about fire preparedness and FireSmart? Also, what's it been like for you for these past fire seasons that have been bad, again, to have to live through those kind of smoky summers again?

**[00:22:42]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

Smoky summers. It's true, I'm extremely anxious every summer. We moved to Lake Country. I guess it felt like a new start or a fresh start. Or to go somewhere where there hadn't been that kind of destruction and damage. Yes, Smoky summers, the heat, the wind, extreme anxiety. Then it gets cooler in the fall and you kind of forget about it.

Then everybody says, "Oh, it's not going to happen here." Or, "Oh, they know enough about it now that they will make sure that there's protection." But anyway, last May, half of the fire departments from around the Okanagan, were in our very neighbourhood practising putting out forest-interface zone fires.

[Music begins<sup>17</sup>]

And I'm sort of like "Ha ha, just practice! Not rehearsal I hope!" This last summer, because we live in a place where we can see northward up the lake toward Vernon, there was that Monte Lake fire that was burning for about a month and a half.

**[00:24:11]**

**Jeff Eustache, Interview Recording from 16 February 2022:**

Yeah, there's a lot of work needed. Just speaking to the Okanagan Band lands here and the fire that they experienced last summer was quite devastating for the community and the loss could have been a lot worse. But if you look at the landscape, from about a kilometre from here, I'm on the north end of the Reserve, to the south end, which is probably at least ten kilometres in length – once you get off the lake you get into interface forest and it's quite thick. Very dead, decayed pine and fir. I know they do fuel reduction projects, but you're talking ten, twenty hectares at a time.

[Music changes<sup>18</sup>]

And you probably need fifty thousand hectares to be done along the whole interface to make a difference.

**[00:25:05]**

**Jeff Eustache, Interview Recording from 16 February 2022:**

My name's Jeff Eustache, I'm a registered forest technologist. I'm from the Simpcw First Nation just north of Kamloops, but I live and reside on the Okanagan Indian Band lands. And I work as the emergency program manager for IPO [Indigenous Partnerships Office] West, Natural Resources Canada.

**[00:25:24]**

**Narration, Judee Burr:**

Before moving over to Natural Resources Canada recently, Jeff had worked for the First Nations Emergency Services Society of British Columbia since the mid-2000s. That's how I found his work. As head of the Fuel Management Department, Jeff supported First Nations communities in taking care of wildfire hazards on their land. This also included working on the "Revitalizing Cultural Burning" project in 2019 with the BC Wildfire Service, the Bridge River Indian Band, and the Shackan Indian Band. This project provided funding for these First Nations communities to conduct cultural burns and document their Indigenous fire stewardship knowledge in videos, reports, and infographics. I'll put the link to those projects in the show notes.<sup>19</sup>

In all of my interviews, including this one with Jeff, we talked about much more than you'll hear in this podcast. But it was significant for me to hear Jeff – someone with extensive wildfire hazard management experience – reflect on living through the White Rock Lake fire last summer on Okanagan Indian Band land.

**[00:26:25]**

**Jeff Eustache, Interview Recording from 16 February 2022:**

That fire that came through here last year, it started at Monte Lake, which is about, I don't know, thirty kilometres from here. When they kept on talking about it, I said well it's never going to get here. They'll knock it down over there somewhere. The next thing you know, we're getting evacuated. I was pretty surprised at even how it came into the

community, because I know there's some – what I thought would have been pretty good fire breaks. I was pretty surprised that it made it that far.

[Music changes<sup>20</sup>]

We got kind of lucky; we're a little bit further away from where the fire actually was. We got displaced maybe three times over the summer, but some were displaced for probably most of the summer. Unfortunately, some haven't been able to go home because they lost their homes, right?

**[00:27:19]**

**Jeff Eustache, Interview Recording from 16 February 2022:**

So, you can see the need for higher-level, landscape-level treatments. You can do the fuel reduction outside at the doorstep there, but once it starts rolling like it did, it takes a lot more than a fifty-, hundred-metre fuel treatment to stop that. I think it's going to require a lot more aggressive fuel reduction treatments. I know my wife's family members, they actively go out – and it's really about, I would say, not even five kilometres from here – they would actually go out every spring and do some burning outside of their property. I'm fairly sure that resulted in a few of their structures being saved, because it didn't have that understory that could have ignited and swept through there. I was pretty surprised there was not a lot more losses along the valley here where it came down. It hit pretty hard, but I'm fairly sure that the burning practices of that family really helped. Because they would go in the forest, it wasn't just grass burning, and they'd go up the hillside and that really, I think, resulted in some protective measures for them. You need to try to increase that more and more. Otherwise, like I said, once it starts rolling that quickly, it's pretty hard to stop.

[Music changes<sup>21</sup>]

You actually can't stop it.

**[00:29:04]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

I'm Gord Pratt, a professional forester who works as an operations manager with the Forest Enhancement Society of BC.

[Music ends]

And yeah, just happy to be able to join you here today, Judee.

**[00:29:17]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

I was actually on the Peachland fire, back in 2012, I believe. I remember being in Kamloops that day, and it was one of those hot, early September days where, you know what, you're starting to think you're past the fire season in many ways. But it was windy, super windy. I actually remember having a conversation with a friend of mine who was

pretty active with BC Wildfire, who said, “This isn’t a good day. If we get a start, it’s going to be a problem somewhere.” Right? And, sure enough, later that weekend, Peachland was on evacuation. It started up, I believe, in the top end on the Coq [Coquihalla Highway] and it ripped down through the community.

[Music begins<sup>22</sup>]

**[00:30:11]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

It’s hard to predict where it will happen. My philosophy is reduce the fuels where there’s likelihood of starts. Where’s that fire behaviour going, and what’s the typical weather going to move it towards – and that’s where we need to do it.

**[00:30:35]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

I wonder if you could just introduce the FESBC [Forest Enhancement Society of BC] for folks who might not know what that is, and talk about your role in this work now. And maybe we could talk about some of the projects in the Okanagan too.

**[00:30:45]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

or sure. The Forest Enhancement Society was formed by government back in 2016. It’s really about a good opportunity to invest back in the province good stewardship projects going forward. Those stewardship projects are governed by our five primary purposes

...

**[00:31:07]**

**Narration, Judee Burr:**

The Forest Enhancement Society of BC has been a major funder of fuel management projects.<sup>23</sup> I spoke with the foresters I interviewed extensively about fuel management practices. This refers to work to remove combustible layers of woody debris and brush and other material that is accumulating in forested areas where fire has been suppressed and excluded. Sometimes these projects involve removing material from the forest floor, sometimes they involve cutting down some trees to open up a forested canopy to reduce the likelihood of a wildfire spreading from tree to tree, and sometimes they include prescribed burns. We’ll hear a lot more about fuel treatments in the next episode.

I asked Gord about some of these projects in the Okanagan.

**[00:31:49]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

I think hats off to the Okanagan-Shuswap District, who applied for funding through us to do a lot of work, primarily in the Southeast Kelowna area. And it’s fit into the Ministry’s Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, which is their own internal program that started after

FESBC initiated these projects to continue that good work. Because there's a lot of work that needs to happen throughout the Okanagan.

**[00:32:21]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

Have you noticed a change in the way people perceive these projects?

[Music ends]

Are people able to see a thinning project as “this is actually making my home a lot safer” – from your time in Kelowna, even, through now?

**[00:32:39]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

We have. I think people are pretty sensitive and, I hate to say it, but sometimes an event like 2003 makes it easier. The events of '17, '18, and '21 make it easier for people to believe us. But that being said, there's definitely a need for that balance. We fund a project in the Joe Rich area. That's an area, I guess it would be southeast of Kelowna on the highway towards Rock Creek. Gee, what year was that? 2017, 2018 – Joe Rich had a significant fire of note. I think it was four to six hundred hectares. That scared everybody there. The need for a treatment in there probably changed the perception of the people. That project came as an application to us in '17, '18, somewhere in there. But I was involved with the high-risk concern of the Joe Rich area when I was in wildfire from 2009 to 2014. Difficult, you know – what do you do there? There's so much work to do that you kind of need the partnership of industry to do it. And then, you know, maybe that's too much.

[Music begins<sup>24</sup>]

**[00:34:02]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

None of these things can happen overnight, Judee. And, I guess that's the other thing, is it takes time to get these things done, to plan it right, get it all done. I always encourage our industry partners to be part of our project because you and me and everybody in BC – we can't afford to do all this. Well, it's expensive for us all to do. We can't afford *not* to do it, but it's expensive for us to do, I guess is probably a better way to put it. We need the assistance of our forest industry.

**[00:34:35]**

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

One of the balancing acts of some of the projects that we have funded is the importance of the irrigation districts and the watershed groups in and around the Okanagan. We've funded some planning and some treatments that either we have done or have been picked up by the wildfire risk reduction program by the Province, to recognize how important the watersheds are – not only for the public but your agricultural industry in the Okanagan.

[00:35:07]

**Gord Pratt, Interview Recording from 31 January 2022:**

I think it really is that I'm so excited and happy to see that the importance of wildfire risk reduction is getting out in the public eye. Because it can be forgotten so quickly. I saw that in my career as a fuels management specialist – if we didn't have a fire last year, nobody cared. All I care about is I'm going to go canoeing and camping have a campfire. And, all of a sudden, we get smoked out. It's a really lousy summer. You know, in Kamloops, I think in Kelowna it was the same there: we got robbed of a summer. In so many different ways. Either we knew somebody who was impacted from an evacuation, or, in my household, people had trouble breathing. It was just one of those things.

So, you know what, I think this is critical that we're getting this out to the public eye, and I think it's important to all of us who live near, in, around the wildfire-urban interface, those who recreate in BC's forests: we all have a role in reducing the starts and supporting the activities that our leaders actually want to get done to reduce the likelihood of fire in your neighbourhood. That's the key thing for me.

[Music changes<sup>25</sup>]

[00:36:23]

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Nice. Did you ever work on any fires in the Okanagan?

[00:36:26]

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Yes. [Laughs] Of course. As a firefighter in British Columbia, that's like a rite of passage. There's fires in the Okanagan season, right? It's just an eventuality, right?

[00:36:41]

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

My name is Kelsey Winter. I work for the BC Wildfire Service in the Province of British Columbia in Canada. And I'm also the chair of the BC FireSmart Committee.

[00:36:53]

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Do you have any stories from some of the first fires that you worked on?

[00:36:57]

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Yeah, I have quite a few stories. I'm trying to think of a good one. We got a report of a fire way, way up a Forest Service Road. No helicopters. It's the middle of the fire season. There's more important targets elsewhere. We're probably on day twelve of working, so people are pretty tired. We drove up there regardless. It took us quite a while. This was not a very well-maintained FS, Forest Service, road. So, there's

potholes that could sink your entire vehicle if you weren't careful. Got up to where it was, thankfully not a big hike from the forest service road – no water anywhere. And we're talking anywhere. A helicopter that was bucketing on another fire was able to come by and say, yeah, the best place to get water is way back down the road you just drove up on. And so we went all the way back down, filled up our tank and then on the way up, got a flat tire. Got a flat tire. So, we're perched on a super steep section of the road, obviously can't change the tire without emptying the tank. So, all of the water we just went and got, we dumped all over the road so that we could change the tire. Drove all the way back down. Thank goodness the fire was like in some pretty gnarly slash and some bigger growth. So, it hadn't taken off – because it we were not very quick on our initial attack. But yeah, we did it, went back down, got more water, drove all the way back. It was challenging. But that was one of my very first ones too – I was like, are they all going to be like this? Holy ...

**[00:38:35]**

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

The one I think of the most, Smith Creek, fire in the Okanagan, I was there with an incident management team. We were pretty sure we're going to lose neighbourhoods. It's scary. It's a scary place to fight fire because it's so populated, right? And the fuel type there is not an easy one to stop when it's hot and dry and windy, right?

**[00:39:04]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Is there anything that stands out to you from working in this valley?

**[00:39:08]**

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

I think for me, in my job now too as the FireSmart Program Lead, the Okanagan for me is always like – if we're succeeding in the Okanagan, that's a really good indicator that we're succeeding. [Music changes<sup>26</sup>] Because it's somewhere that's always going to be impacted by fire. Somewhere that historically has had some of the worst fires that have really heavily impacted the populations. It's a tourist center. It's economically a super important area of British Columbia. I think it's kind of where all of those things converge. One of the things with FireSmart that I say all the time – that everybody that lives and breathes FireSmart does – is that it's not a disaster unless homes are involved. And in the Okanagan homes are involved. You know, it's populated, there's people, everybody lives in the wildland-urban interface.

**[00:40:01]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Yeah. Can you think of any particular stories or projects that are happening in the Okanagan with FireSmart? I don't know if there's any like specific, place-based stories that you have of doing this work in this area.

**[00:40:21]**

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

Yeah, so in BC our primary funding program for FireSmart is the Community Resiliency Investment program, and it's run through UBCM, which is the Union of BC Municipalities. But basically it provides up to \$150,000 per community to do FireSmart work or fuel management work, which is amazing. And the eligible activities within that program, you know, you can do assessments, you can replace the cedar shake on your roof, you can make those small changes that – you can change bylaws, you know. Create a position that's dedicated to FireSmart. Cross-train, so you get your fire department staff out with your wildfire staff and make sure that they know how to handle each other's equipment, that kind of thing.

And the Okanagan has quite a few areas that have been involved in that that grant funding for a long time. Penticton has probably one of the best FireSmart programs in British Columbia. They have a van that's a FireSmart van, they have community events, they have year-round positions. They have by-laws that are in place that enforce FireSmart principles if you live in Penticton. So, they've really gone above and beyond.

Kelowna is really involved in the program. They have the Home Partners program there, which is detailed mitigation assessment of individual homes. The homeowners are provided a report, and then they are able to go do those mitigation recommendations on their property, and then they get a certificate at the end that says you're a FireSmart property that they can then use for their insurance. So, Kelowna is really involved.

I can't list all of them. But there's a ton of great areas in the Okanagan that have really adopted the program, and I think that's, like you were saying earlier, that's because of living in the Okanagan. They understand it's something that's always going to be there, right?

[Music ends]

**[00:42:21]**

**Kelsey Winter, Interview Recording from 17 January 2022:**

There's a project that we started last year through the BC FireSmart committee and it's doing research in the wildland-urban interface on structure ignition. So, basically, getting more data on why some structures ignite and why some don't. So, when a wildfire moves through a community, why are there those – you see the pictures, especially more out of the US, but even in Lytton – of that one house on that row that's still standing, and the others that are gone. And I went to a couple fires this summer in the Okanagan with the research team, and it was crazy to see the little things. Like – maintained green grass. So, someone who just mowed their grass, you know, might make a huge difference, might be the reason why that house was still there and the one beside it was gone. Or things like, all their lawn furniture was pulled away off their deck, or their deck was sheathed in. And so, to me, being there and actually seeing those structures – the one that's just ash and all you can see is bricks that were there on the chimney stack and everything else is gone – next to the one that is still there. That's some pretty powerful stuff. I was saying to the researchers, you're coming home and



you're walking down your driveway, and you have this idea of what's going to be at the end of your driveway. It would be so I think reassuring to a member of the public – and we talked to a few of them – that were like, “I did everything I could like. When I left that house, when I was told to evacuate, it was FireSmart to the best of my abilities.” Like, “I was confident leaving that house that I had given it the best chance I had of coming back to it.” Versus someone who is thinking, “Oh man, the propane tank was right up against the house” or, you know, those little changes. Or “The windows were open.” I think that was pretty powerful for me this summer, just seeing what people were going to end up coming home to, right?

[Music begins<sup>27</sup>]

And what we can do as a program to encourage them to make those changes ahead of time, right? When they still have time to do it.

**[00:44:46]**

**Recording of Sharon Thesen reading the final sections of her poem “The Fire,” from Amy Thiessen’s digital edition of the poem. Find the full poem at this website<sup>28</sup>:**

...

And now once more  
the wind is blowing

[Music ends]

and the fire surges  
upon the town  
and the countryside

the dear historic

what was lovely

the firs and the pines, etc.

the brown rabbit hopping

the canyon road to the railway trestles  
where we took our brother and our mother  
on a Sunday or a Wednesday  
with its tall ears standing up

I would comfort if I could  
but would have to wrestle it down

and feel its sacred heart pounding

A stubble of blackened shards  
where magpies fly, try  
to settle—in autumn light

pine sap looks blue  
against bark's carbonic crust

and a spray of brown needles  
on the forest floor we pretend

are a carpet of grass  
and not a scorch of tears

upon the miles of roots that smoulder  
still in molten maze

where a bluish haze appears to mark

the transit of ghosts and giants  
who left an arsonist's hoard heaped

extinct to matchsticks leaning  
tip to tip

**[00:46:14]**

**Short Music Interlude Begins: a clip of John Lent singing a cover of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" from the Lent Fraser Wall Trio's album "Shadow Moon"<sup>29</sup>**

**[00:47:07]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

[Music ends]

I'm curious to hear more about this homemaking in a fire-prone place. Can you say more about actually writing "The Fire," and about how home and making a home in the Okanagan came through in the poem?

**[00:47:25]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

I think my sense of being at home in the Okanagan at the time that I wrote that poem was still really new and fresh, because we had more or less just moved there. We didn't know that many people, except for June and David. And there's another little section of my little piece that I call "My Friend June" that I can read – because for me, home is

people too. It isn't just my house. My memory of that time is as much about June as it is about the fire, and the two events coincide so deeply in my memory of the time.

**[00:48:16]**

**Judee Burr, Narration:**

Sharon read from her essay "My Friend June," which is published in a collection called *Locations of Grief*.<sup>30</sup> June got sick with cancer and passed away two and a half years after she and Sharon lived through the Okanagan Mountain Park Fire together. Sharon and I talked about the importance of her friendship with June, and Sharon told me about an event that she and June organized to bring people together after the fire.

**[00:48:43]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

So, after the fire, June and I decided we should get some people together. Because everybody, this entire city, had been traumatized and then we're just all kind of sitting there. So, why don't we get some people together to talk about their experiences, share their experiences of the fire? I don't know why. So, we organized this and made posters and sold tickets. I got on the phone to the local helicopter company and asked if somebody be willing to speak about being a helicopter pilot, putting out fires. Indeed, this one fellow did come, and it was fascinating. We got Patrick Lane, who used to live in the Okanagan. Wonderful poet who was living on Vancouver Island, but he came up and read. John Lent's trio came and played afterwards – and the place was packed. It was just a relief. It was a relief, to be with other people and talk about this. Cry, and everything.

**[00:49:50]**

**Judee Burr, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

I keep thinking about what is powerful about poetry and art and literary work that has to do with fire, and why it's important to have a space for these kind of fire humanities reflections. This gathering that you organized seems to embody a lot of what feels powerful about it. Like, this ability to use language to notice together, and also the way that poetry can bring people together, and literature and music. Do you have other reflections on what the humanities have to offer and what poetry has to offer in communities that are fire-adapted and live with fire?

**[00:50:36]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

I think what writing does and maybe poetry even more so is –

[Music begins<sup>31</sup>]

it brings to life the particulars of an experience. Not just the generalities about it or some aspect of it, but actual, real particular things. From particular feelings, to particular objects, to particular relationships. Where there isn't this sense that okay, if it's a poem about the fire, it has to be about "the fire." When the fire is just part of what's happening. So, I think what poetry does is restore us to the real. Restore us to who we are as

feeling, perceiving, spiritual beings – and reminds us of the value of that. And that’s not a trivial thing. Like I was saying earlier, what we care about is tremendously significant. And we have to keep remembering what we care about. Because we’re often misled by things that are impossible to care about. Who can care about an abstraction? Who can care about some general office language about this, that, and the other? Maybe the people working there need it to do whatever they have to do. But it’s just an aspect. It isn’t the fullness of the real. What we share are these particularities in our experience. And that’s what holds us together.

I don’t know. It just seems that sometimes these terrible things happen. When we were together at the Rotary Centre afterwards, we were together again, as human beings who’d experienced a calamity. Some of us had lost a lot.

**[00:53:12]**

**Sharon Thesen, Interview Recording from 25 January 2022:**

But I think what is at risk now is precisely that separation of home and people. And I think when that happens it’s very hard to restore.

[Music changes<sup>32</sup>]

**[00:53:47]**

**Judee Burr, Narration:**

The Okanagan based Lent Fraser Wall Trio played music at the gathering that Sharon and June organized in 2003. You’ve been hearing parts of their cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” in this episode, used here with permission of John Lent. The rest of the music in this episode is from Blue Dot Sessions. You also heard a selection from Sharon Thesen’s poem The Fire in this episode, recorded for the digital edition of the poem created by UBC Honours English graduate, Amy Thiessen. You can view the digital edition of the poem and hear Amy’s interview with Sharon at [sharonthesenthefire.omeka.net](http://sharonthesenthefire.omeka.net).

In this episode, you been listening to my conversations with Sharon Thesen, Mathieu Bourbonnais, Daryl Spencer, Dave Gill, Jeff Eustache, Gord Pratt, and Kelsey Winter. We spoke about living through severe wildfire events and about how to protect communities from wildfire danger. You can get going today to prepare yourself and your home for wildfire events, and there is great information on the FireSmart Canada website about this, at [firesmartcanada.ca](http://firesmartcanada.ca).

You can listen to many of my full interviews on my thesis project website, [listeningtofirepodcast.ca](http://listeningtofirepodcast.ca). You can also find the transcripts of those interviews there, and transcripts of each of these episodes. The episode transcripts include citations for my research. This research was supported in part by the Government of Canada’s New Frontiers in Research Fund through UBC Okanagan’s Living with Wildfire project. I’m Judee Burr, and thanks for listening.

## Show Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> “Paving Stones” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109837>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Four Count” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/122474>.
- <sup>3</sup> “Marble Transit” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109828>.
- <sup>4</sup> Catherine Owens, *Locations of Grief: An Emotional Geography* (Hamilton, ON: Wolsack & Wynn, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> “Gilly Wash” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109830>.
- <sup>6</sup> “Four Count” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/122474>.
- <sup>7</sup> A clip of a cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” from the Lent Fraser Wall Trio’s album “Shadow Moon,” used throughout this episode with permission from John Lent.
- <sup>8</sup> G. Filmon, *Firestorm 2003: Provincial Review* (Victoria: Government of British Columbia, 2004).
- <sup>9</sup> “It is clear that a successful record of fire suppression has led to a fuel buildup in the forests of British Columbia. The fuel buildup means that there will be more significant and severe wildfires, and there will be more interface fires, unless action is taken.” G. Filmon, *Firestorm 2003: Provincial Review*; “Master Plan for Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park” (Kamloops, BC: BC Parks, Southern Interior Region, 1990).
- <sup>10</sup> G. Filmon, *Firestorm 2003: Provincial Review*.
- <sup>11</sup> G. Filmon, *Firestorm 2003: Provincial Review*.
- <sup>12</sup> My analysis of B.C. Wildfire Service data using QGIS. Okanagan watershed defined by watershed atlas polygons and shared by fellow Living with Wildfire researcher Renée Larsen. Area burned data from: “Fire Perimeters – Historical.” Statistics and Geospatial Data. BC Wildfire Service. Available at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-statistics>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Flatlands 3rd” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110884>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Pencil Marks” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/102138>.
- <sup>15</sup> “Frank and Poet” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109832>.
- <sup>16</sup> “Paving Stones” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109837>.
- <sup>17</sup> “Frank and Poet” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109832>.
- <sup>18</sup> “St. Augustine Red” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109583>.
- <sup>19</sup> Xwisten et al., “Xwisten Report Executive Summary,” Revitalizing Traditional Burning: Integrating Indigenous Cultural Values into Wildfire Management and Climate Change Adaptation Planning (Department of Indigenous Services Canada [DISC] First Nations Adapt Program, 2019), accessed April 2022 at <https://www.fness.bc.ca/core-programs/forest-fuel-management/first-nations-adapt-program>; Eli Hirtle, *Xwisten (Bridge River Indian Band)* (Masinipayiwin Films, 2019), accessed April 2022 at <https://vimeo.com/383104228>; Shackan Indian Band et al., “Shackan Indian Band Report Executive Summary,” Revitalizing Traditional Burning: Integrating Indigenous Cultural Values into Wildfire Management and Climate Change Adaptation Planning (Department of Indigenous Services Canada [DISC] First Nations Adapt Program, 2019), <https://www.fness.bc.ca/core-programs/forest-fuel-management/first-nations-adapt-program>; Eli Hirtle, *Shackan Indian Band* (Masinipayiwin Films, 2019), <https://vimeo.com/383108850>.
- <sup>20</sup> “Marble Transit” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109828>.
- <sup>21</sup> “Paving Stones” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109837>.
- <sup>22</sup> “Four Count” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/122474>.
- <sup>23</sup> Forest Enhancement Society of BC, “Projects,” accessed May 2022, <https://www.fesbc.ca/projects>.
- <sup>24</sup> “Charcoal Lines” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110684>.
- <sup>25</sup> “Frank and Poet” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109832>.
- <sup>26</sup> “Di Breun” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/111055>.
- <sup>27</sup> “Paving Stones” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/109837>.
- <sup>28</sup> Amy Thiessen, “Sharon Thesen’s ‘The Fire’” (bachelor honours thesis, University of British Columbia Okanagan, 2020), <https://sharonthesenthfire.omeka.net/about>.
- <sup>29</sup> A clip of a cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” from the Lent Fraser Wall Trio’s album “Shadow Moon,” used throughout this episode with permission from John Lent.
- <sup>30</sup> Catherine Owens, *Locations of Grief: An Emotional Geography* (Hamilton, ON: Wolsack & Wynn, 2020).
- <sup>31</sup> “Algea Tender” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110710>.
- <sup>32</sup> A clip of a cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” from the Lent Fraser Wall Trio’s album “Shadow Moon,” used throughout this episode with permission from John Lent.