Wildfire Timber Salvage Planning and Administration:

Key information for First Nations communities - before, during, and after wildfire

A summary prepared by the BC First Nations Forestry Council



Source: BC Ministry of Forests . (2025, February 18).
Wildfire timber salvage planning and administration guidance.

OVERVIEW

Key information for First Nations communities before, during, and after wildfire

What is wildfire timber salvage?

Wildfire timber salvage is the process of assessing and, where appropriate, harvesting timber damaged by wildfire. Salvage can begin during post-fire recovery, but it is not automatic and is not suitable in every burned area.

Wildfire salvage is time-sensitive because burned timber can lose value as time passes. At the same time, speed must be balanced with safety, First Nations rights and interests, cultural values, water, wildlife, terrain stability, biodiversity, retention, reforestation, access, community priorities, and long-term forest recovery.

Well under five percent of British Columbia's total wildfire-damaged areas are harvested. Many areas are unsuitable for salvage because of access, terrain, hydrology, ecological or cultural values, regeneration needs, or limited economic feasibility.

The strongest approach plans ahead, shares information early, involves First Nations throughout the process, and considers salvage, retention, access, cultural heritage, reforestation, and recovery together at a landscape level.

The five phases of wildfire timber salvage

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Phase 1: BEFORE WILDFIRE **- Annual Readiness and Early Planning**

Phase 2: DURING WILDFIRE **- Safety, Information Sharing, and Early Action**

Phase 3: FIRST 6 MONTHS AFTER WILDFIRE **- Early Timber Salvage**

Phase 4: 6 to 12 MONTHS AFTER WILDFIRE **- Coordinated Timber Salvage and Stewardship**

Phase 5: 24 to 36+ MONTHS AFTER WILDFIRE **- Fibre Recovery and Forest Renewal**

FIRST NATIONS ENGAGEMENT, CULTURAL VALUES, AND DECISION-MAKING

First Nations involvement is not one step in the process; it needs to be built into every phase.



Context

First Nations should be involved early and throughout all five phases so Nation values and interests can inform salvage, retention, reforestation, cutting permit, and road permit planning. Collaboration can support reciprocal knowledge sharing and a stronger understanding of the land base before decisions are finalized.

Wildfire salvage decisions can affect treaty rights, asserted and established Aboriginal Rights and Title, cultural heritage, traditional use, access, water, wildlife, economic interests, and long-term stewardship responsibilities.

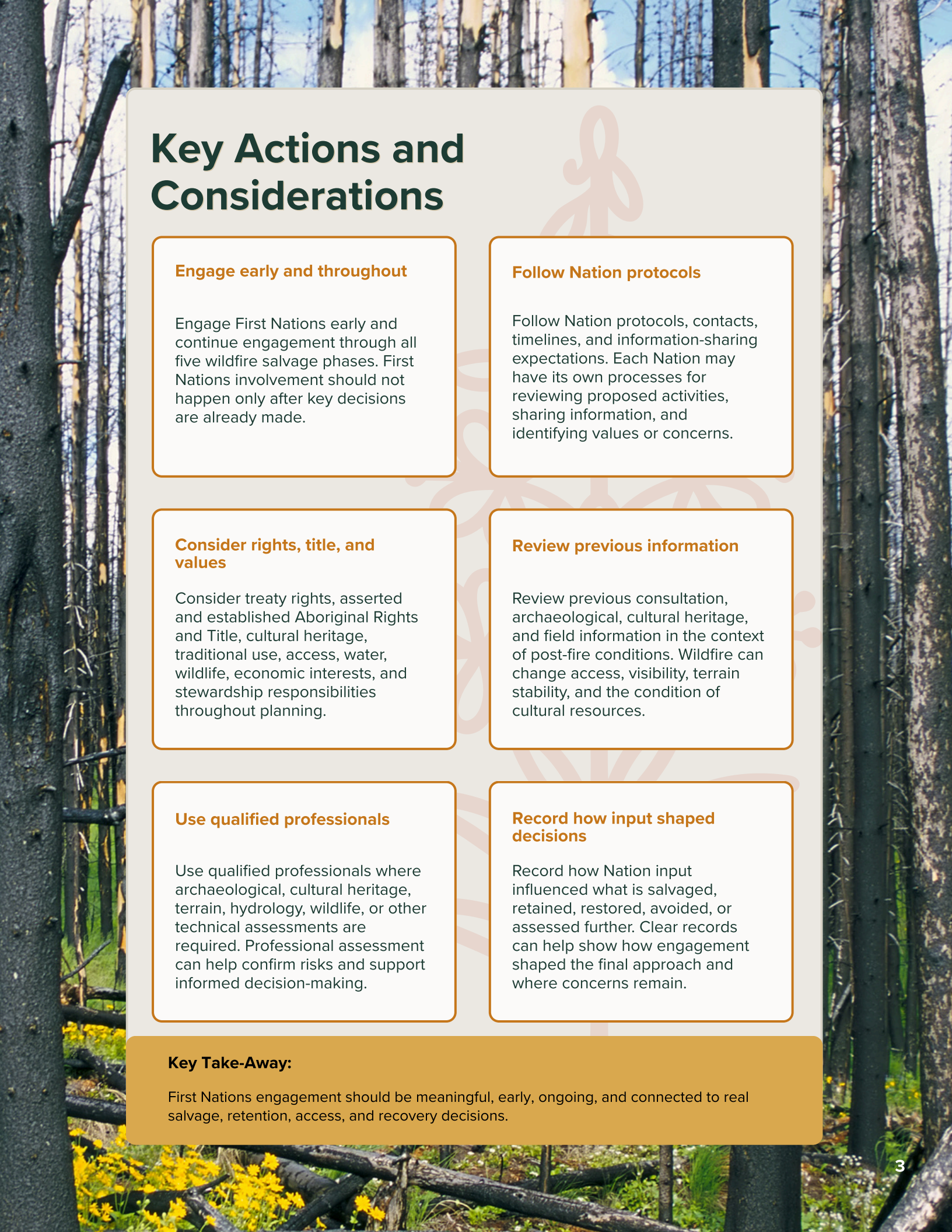
The Province has a legal duty to consult and, where required, accommodate First Nations when a proposed decision or activity may adversely affect treaty rights or asserted or established Aboriginal Rights and Title. Consultation should be meaningful, timely, reasonable, transparent, and proactive. This quick reference does not replace legal advice or Nation-specific consultation processes.

Cultural heritage and archaeology require careful attention after wildfire. Archaeological sites dating before 1846 are protected under the Heritage Conservation Act, whether recorded or not, and professional archaeological assessment may be required. Post-1846 cultural heritage resources are considered under the Forest and Range Practices Act. Wildfire can change visibility, access, terrain, and the condition of cultural resources, so previous consultation and assessment records may need to be reviewed again before work begins.

Why It's Important to First Nations

First Nations rights, interests, cultural values, and decision-making should be at the centre of every salvage phase. Consistent Nation involvement helps ensure that salvage, retention, access, reforestation, and recovery decisions reflect Nation priorities and stewardship responsibilities.

It also supports more meaningful consultation and creates a clearer record of how Nation input influenced what is harvested, protected, restored, or assessed further.



Key Actions and Considerations

Engage early and throughout

Engage First Nations early and continue engagement through all five wildfire salvage phases. First Nations involvement should not happen only after key decisions are already made.

Follow Nation protocols

Follow Nation protocols, contacts, timelines, and information-sharing expectations. Each Nation may have its own processes for reviewing proposed activities, sharing information, and identifying values or concerns.

Consider rights, title, and values

Consider treaty rights, asserted and established Aboriginal Rights and Title, cultural heritage, traditional use, access, water, wildlife, economic interests, and stewardship responsibilities throughout planning.

Review previous information

Review previous consultation, archaeological, cultural heritage, and field information in the context of post-fire conditions. Wildfire can change access, visibility, terrain stability, and the condition of cultural resources.

Use qualified professionals

Use qualified professionals where archaeological, cultural heritage, terrain, hydrology, wildlife, or other technical assessments are required. Professional assessment can help confirm risks and support informed decision-making.

Record how input shaped decisions

Record how Nation input influenced what is salvaged, retained, restored, avoided, or assessed further. Clear records can help show how engagement shaped the final approach and where concerns remain.

Key Take-Away:

First Nations engagement should be meaningful, early, ongoing, and connected to real salvage, retention, access, and recovery decisions.

PHASE 1: ANNUAL READINESS AND EARLY PLANNING

The strongest wildfire salvage planning begins before a wildfire happens.



Context

Annual readiness should take place before fire season, generally from January to April, with communication continuing throughout the year. First Nations, Forest District staff, BC Wildfire Service, BC Timber Sales, agreement holders, other agencies, and local partners can use this period to build a shared local approach before decisions become urgent.

A local wildfire timber salvage strategy can identify values that need protection, areas that are constrained, areas that may be considered for salvage or reforestation, and areas that need further assessment. It should also clarify roles, responsibilities, communication pathways, partner contributions, and decision-making expectations.

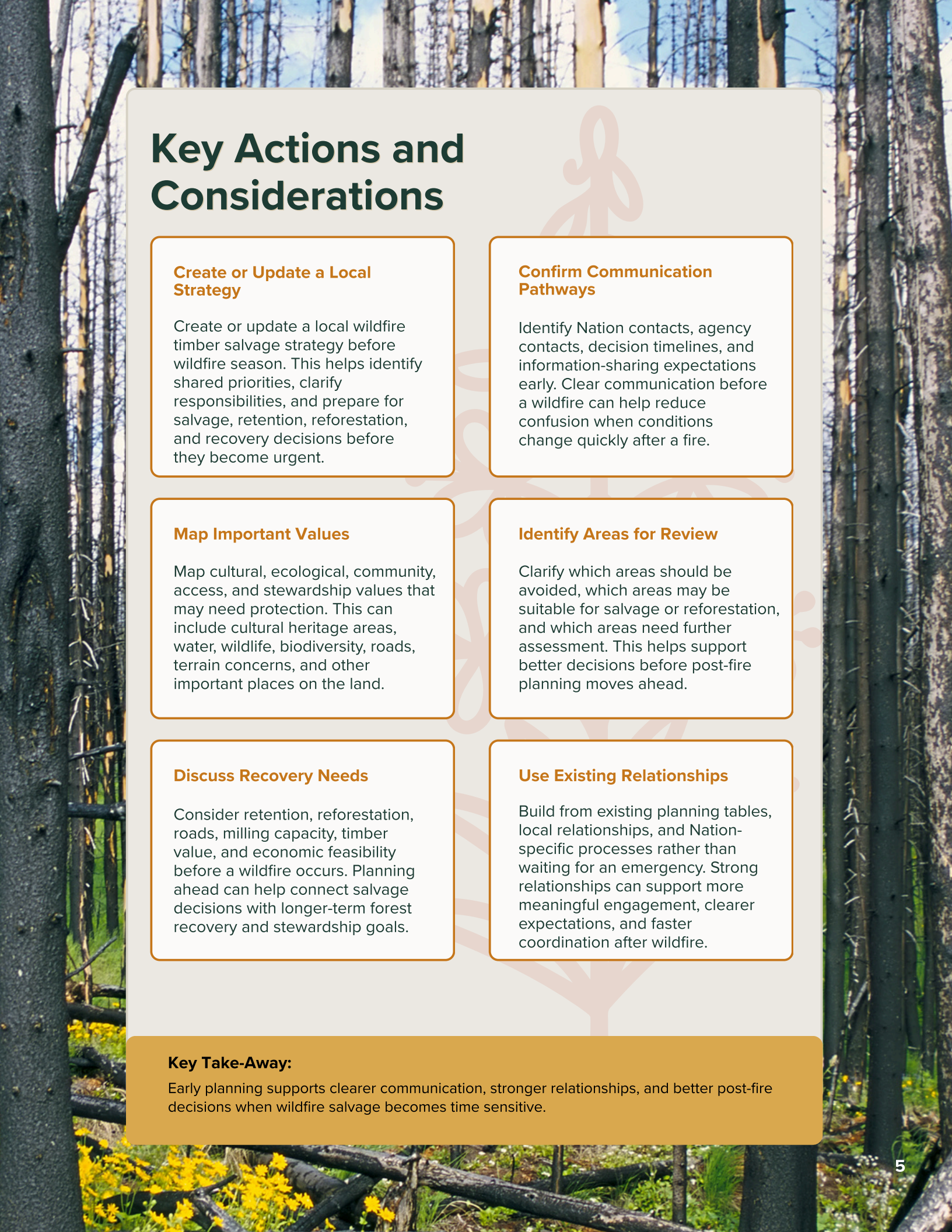
Planning ahead reduces the risk of rushed post-fire decisions. It creates time to consider cultural heritage, water, wildlife, biodiversity, terrain stability, roads and access, retention, reforestation, land-use objectives, timber value, milling capacity, and economic feasibility together.

Existing planning tables and relationships can support this work, including local First Nations tables, Resource Stewardship Technical Committees, Operational Issues Forums, Timber Supply Area meetings, Forest Landscape Planning tables, and Forest Stewardship Plan or Woodlot Licence Plan discussions.

Why It's Important to First Nations

Annual readiness gives First Nations the greatest opportunity to identify priorities and concerns before wildfire salvage becomes time-sensitive. It helps ensure cultural values, stewardship responsibilities, access concerns, community priorities, and possible economic opportunities are understood before operational planning begins.

Early preparation can also make later engagement and consultation more meaningful by establishing trusted contacts, shared information, and clear expectations before the landscape and timelines change.



Key Actions and Considerations

Create or Update a Local Strategy

Create or update a local wildfire timber salvage strategy before wildfire season. This helps identify shared priorities, clarify responsibilities, and prepare for salvage, retention, reforestation, and recovery decisions before they become urgent.

Confirm Communication Pathways

Identify Nation contacts, agency contacts, decision timelines, and information-sharing expectations early. Clear communication before a wildfire can help reduce confusion when conditions change quickly after a fire.

Map Important Values

Map cultural, ecological, community, access, and stewardship values that may need protection. This can include cultural heritage areas, water, wildlife, biodiversity, roads, terrain concerns, and other important places on the land.

Identify Areas for Review

Clarify which areas should be avoided, which areas may be suitable for salvage or reforestation, and which areas need further assessment. This helps support better decisions before post-fire planning moves ahead.

Discuss Recovery Needs

Consider retention, reforestation, roads, milling capacity, timber value, and economic feasibility before a wildfire occurs. Planning ahead can help connect salvage decisions with longer-term forest recovery and stewardship goals.

Use Existing Relationships

Build from existing planning tables, local relationships, and Nation-specific processes rather than waiting for an emergency. Strong relationships can support more meaningful engagement, clearer expectations, and faster coordination after wildfire.

Key Take-Away:

Early planning supports clearer communication, stronger relationships, and better post-fire decisions when wildfire salvage becomes time sensitive.

PHASE 2: DURING WILDFIRE: SAFETY, INFORMATION SHARING, AND EARLY ACTION

While a wildfire is active, safety comes first, but early information sharing can prepare communities for recovery decisions



Context

BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) controls access during an active wildfire. No salvage-related access or work should occur inside the wildfire perimeter unless BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) confirms it is safe and approves access.

Salvage operations generally cannot proceed during an active wildfire, but early preparation can still begin. Partners can track wildfire status, review perimeter maps, identify possible impacts to existing roads or cutting permits, consider how fireguards may affect future access, and prepare questions for post-fire planning.

Wildfire maps, photos, burn severity information, actionable salvage mapping, and First Nations Emergency Services Society (FNESS) decision-support tools can help communities understand what has changed on the land. Clear visual information can support early identification of values at risk, access constraints, and areas that may need assessment after the fire.

Regular communication during this stage helps reduce confusion and delays once the fire is extinguished and recovery decisions begin.

Why It's Important to First Nations

Timely information helps First Nations understand what areas and values may be affected and gives communities more time to prepare for post-fire decisions. Delayed information can limit meaningful participation once permit and salvage timelines begin moving.

Wildfire may affect culturally important places, traditional use, archaeological resources, roads and trails, water, wildlife, and community access. Early awareness supports safer and more informed assessment once the land can be entered.

Key Actions and Considerations

Follow BCWS Safety Directions

Follow direction from the BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) on safety and access at all times. Salvage-related planning may begin during a wildfire, but field access and operational work should only happen when BCWS confirms it is safe.

Confirm Who Shares Updates

Identify who will share wildfire updates, maps, photos, and operational information with the Nation. Clear information-sharing helps communities understand what is happening and prepare for recovery discussions.

Track Possible Impacts

Track possible impacts to cultural areas, access routes, roads, permits, water, wildlife habitat, and community use areas. Early awareness can help identify which places may need review once access is safe.

Use Current Mapping Tools

Use wildfire perimeter maps, photos, burn severity information, and decision-support tools to understand what has changed on the land. These tools can help prepare for post-fire assessment, but should not be treated as final decisions.

Identify Questions Early

Prepare questions about access, values, possible salvage areas, assessment needs, and community concerns while information is still being gathered. Early questions can help guide later field review and planning conversations.

Wait For Safe Field Review

Plan for field review only when access is confirmed safe. Once conditions allow, field visits can help verify maps, assess values, understand damage, and identify areas that may need protection, salvage, or further study.

Key Take-Away:

During an active wildfire, safety comes first. Early information-sharing helps Nations prepare for recovery decisions without rushing into unsupported salvage plans.

PHASE 3: EARLY TIMBER SALVAGE

The first six months after wildfire can shape which areas are harvested first, retained, or assessed further.



Context

Early timber salvage generally covers the first 0 to 6 months after BC Wildfire Service declares a wildfire extinguished. The focus is usually on the highest-priority burned timber that can be accessed and assessed safely before its value declines.

Priority may be given to areas already covered by an issued cutting permit, already submitted for approval, or already in the cutting permit development process. Existing roads, completed planning, prior engagement, and available assessment information can make these areas easier to review quickly.

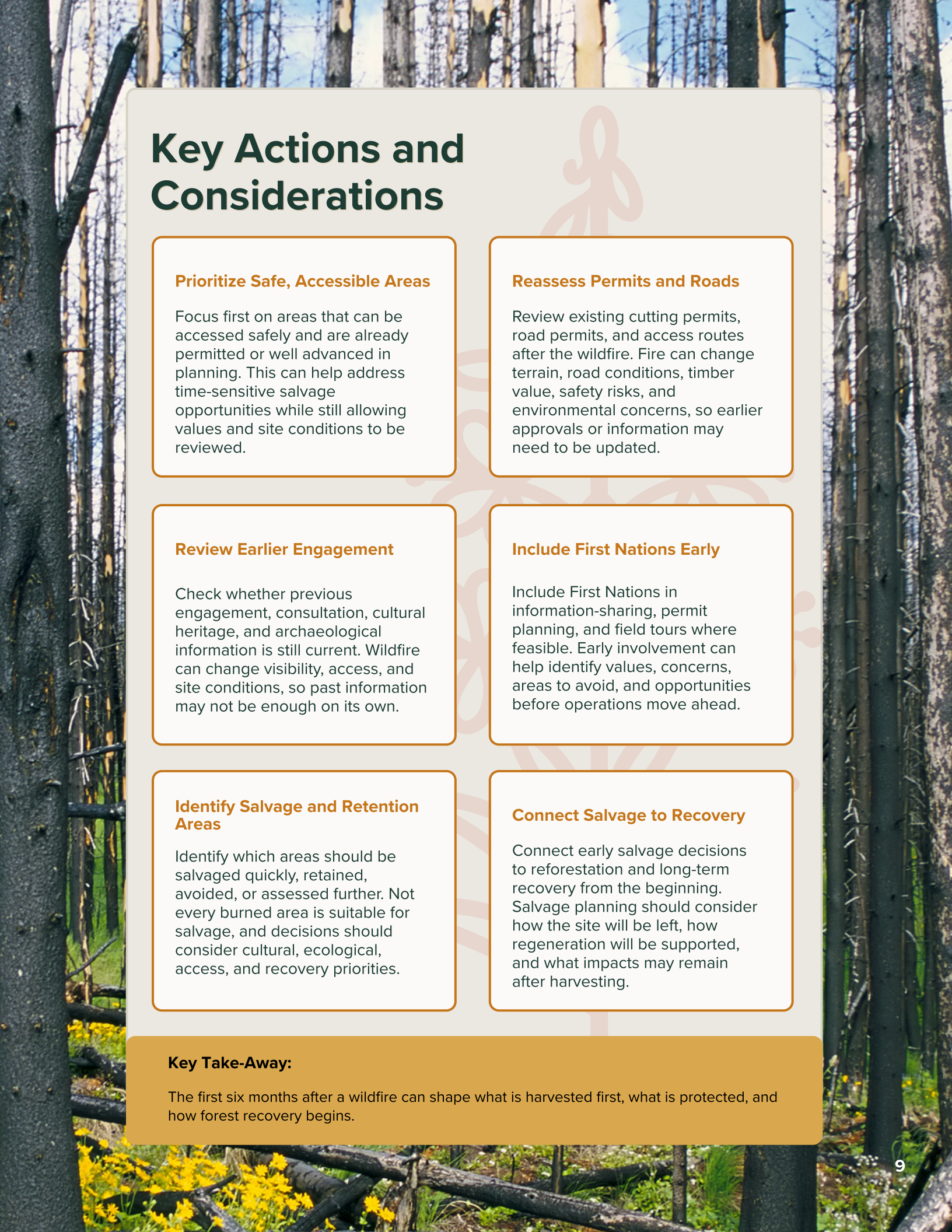
A key objective is to shift harvesting pressure from green stands to wildfire-impacted stands where salvage is appropriate. This does not mean every burned area should be harvested. Retention, cultural heritage, water, wildlife, terrain, access, reforestation potential, and Nation priorities still need to guide decisions.

Wildfire can change site conditions, so earlier information may no longer be enough. Cutting permit amendments, road permit review, field assessment, updated timber cruising, and renewed review of consultation, archaeological, and cultural heritage information may be needed before operations proceed.

Why It's Important to First Nations

Early salvage is a high-importance phase because decisions can move quickly. Without early Nation involvement, cultural values, archaeological resources, traditional use areas, ecological concerns, and stewardship priorities may be missed or addressed too late.

Wildfire can change visibility, access, terrain, hydrology, habitat, and the condition of cultural resources. Areas that were assessed before the fire may need to be revisited under new conditions.



Key Actions and Considerations

Prioritize Safe, Accessible Areas

Focus first on areas that can be accessed safely and are already permitted or well advanced in planning. This can help address time-sensitive salvage opportunities while still allowing values and site conditions to be reviewed.

Reassess Permits and Roads

Review existing cutting permits, road permits, and access routes after the wildfire. Fire can change terrain, road conditions, timber value, safety risks, and environmental concerns, so earlier approvals or information may need to be updated.

Review Earlier Engagement

Check whether previous engagement, consultation, cultural heritage, and archaeological information is still current. Wildfire can change visibility, access, and site conditions, so past information may not be enough on its own.

Include First Nations Early

Include First Nations in information-sharing, permit planning, and field tours where feasible. Early involvement can help identify values, concerns, areas to avoid, and opportunities before operations move ahead.

Identify Salvage and Retention Areas

Identify which areas should be salvaged quickly, retained, avoided, or assessed further. Not every burned area is suitable for salvage, and decisions should consider cultural, ecological, access, and recovery priorities.

Connect Salvage to Recovery

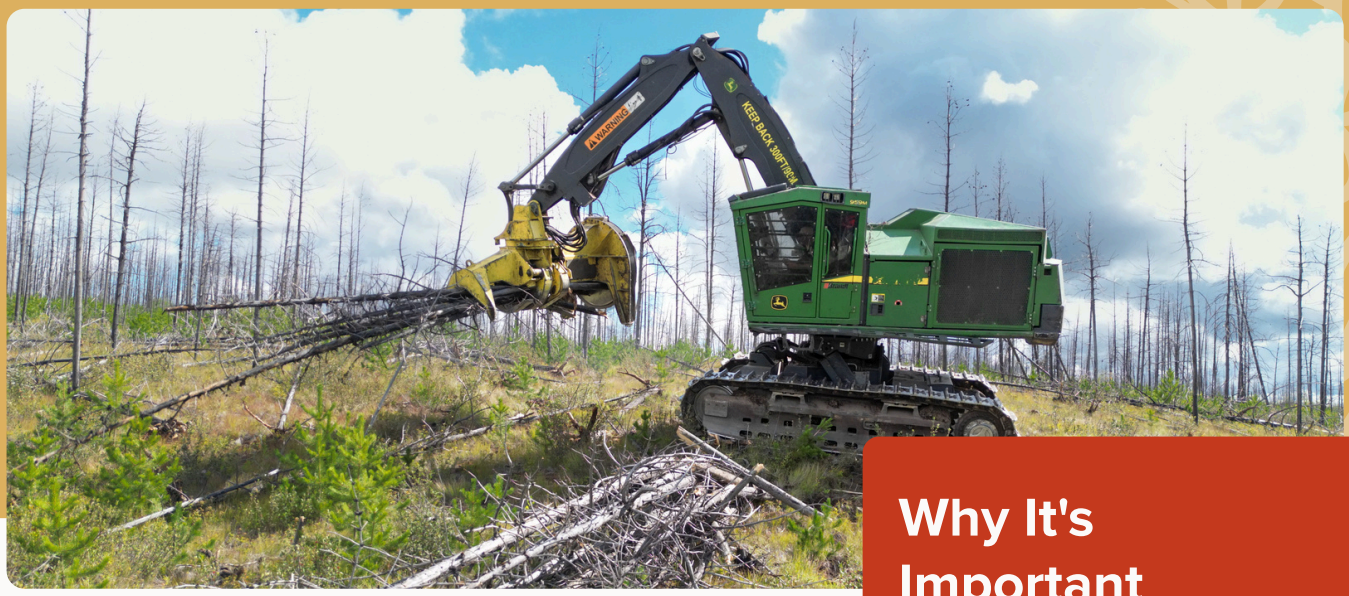
Connect early salvage decisions to reforestation and long-term recovery from the beginning. Salvage planning should consider how the site will be left, how regeneration will be supported, and what impacts may remain after harvesting.

Key Take-Away:

The first six months after a wildfire can shape what is harvested first, what is protected, and how forest recovery begins.

PHASE 4: COORDINATED TIMBER SALVAGE AND STEWARDSHIP

Broader landscape-level planning is needed to balance timber recovery with stewardship and long-term forest recovery.



Context

Coordinated salvage generally takes place 6 to 24 months after a wildfire and may overlap with early salvage. It includes broader planning for sawlog salvage, fibre utilization, new cutting permits, retention, regeneration, access, and future timber supply.

More information is usually available at this stage, including burn severity mapping, updated forest inventory, field observations, road and access information, and reforestation needs. Burned timber shelf life varies by species, topography, burn severity, and site conditions, but sawlog recovery is often treated as a two- to three-year opportunity.

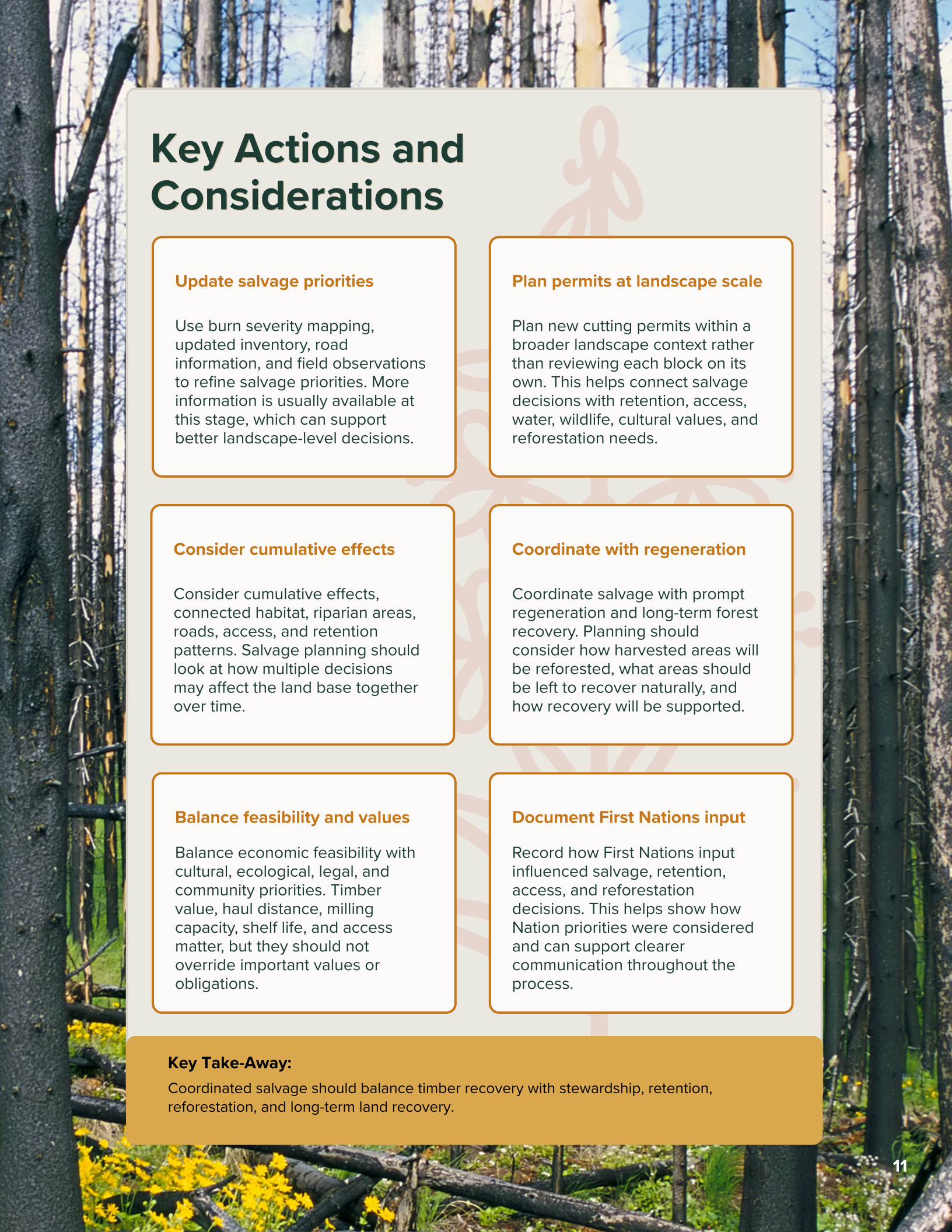
Decisions should consider the full landscape rather than reviewing each block in isolation. Cultural values, First Nations priorities, water, wildlife, biodiversity, connected habitat, terrain stability, forest health, roads, retention patterns, land-use objectives, haul distance, milling capacity, timber value, and reforestation potential all need to be considered together.

Landscape-level coordination can reduce fragmented decisions, help identify cumulative effects, and improve how salvage, retention, riparian protection, access, and regeneration fit together.

Why It's Important to First Nations

This phase may provide more time for meaningful First Nations involvement than the immediate post-fire period. Nations can help identify which values should guide the broader pattern of harvesting and retention, which areas need more assessment, and what recovery priorities should be built into planning.

Landscape-level decisions can affect water, wildlife, access, cultural values, future harvesting, reforestation, and the condition of the territory for decades. Reviewing permits one at a time may miss cumulative effects that are important to the Nation.



Key Actions and Considerations

Update salvage priorities

Use burn severity mapping, updated inventory, road information, and field observations to refine salvage priorities. More information is usually available at this stage, which can support better landscape-level decisions.

Plan permits at landscape scale

Plan new cutting permits within a broader landscape context rather than reviewing each block on its own. This helps connect salvage decisions with retention, access, water, wildlife, cultural values, and reforestation needs.

Consider cumulative effects

Consider cumulative effects, connected habitat, riparian areas, roads, access, and retention patterns. Salvage planning should look at how multiple decisions may affect the land base together over time.

Coordinate with regeneration

Coordinate salvage with prompt regeneration and long-term forest recovery. Planning should consider how harvested areas will be reforested, what areas should be left to recover naturally, and how recovery will be supported.

Balance feasibility and values

Balance economic feasibility with cultural, ecological, legal, and community priorities. Timber value, haul distance, milling capacity, shelf life, and access matter, but they should not override important values or obligations.

Document First Nations input

Record how First Nations input influenced salvage, retention, access, and reforestation decisions. This helps show how Nation priorities were considered and can support clearer communication throughout the process.

Key Take-Away:

Coordinated salvage should balance timber recovery with stewardship, retention, reforestation, and long-term land recovery.

Phase 5: Fibre Recovery and Forest Renewal

Later fibre recovery should support stewardship, reforestation, and meaningful local benefits.



Context

Fibre recovery generally occurs 24 to 36 months or more after a wildfire. By this stage, the highest-value sawlog salvage may be complete or no longer economically viable, and attention may shift to lower-quality pulp logs or other usable wildfire-impacted fibre.

Fibre recovery should be connected to land recovery rather than treated only as cleanup. Where appropriate, it may support reforestation, reduce waste or slash burning, and create local economic activity. Feasibility depends on species, burn severity, shelf life, access, markets, haul distance, funding, and regeneration needs.

Funding, partnerships, and direct-award pathways may help make some projects possible, including opportunities involving First Nations. Any proposed recovery should have a clear purpose and should remain focused on wildfire-impacted material.

Fibre recovery should not be used to justify harvesting green timber, delaying site recovery, or creating additional impacts to cultural or ecological values.

Why It's Important to First Nations

Fibre recovery may create employment, partnership, direct-award, or business opportunities for First Nations, particularly where usable material would otherwise remain on site. Nations may also identify community uses or local benefits that are not captured by conventional market assessments.

The long-term condition of the land matters more than short-term fibre value. Decisions should support reforestation, soil and water protection, forest resilience, cultural values, and the Nation's broader stewardship priorities.

Key Actions and Considerations

Focus on wildfire-impacted fibre

Focus fibre recovery on wildfire-impacted material after higher-value sawlog opportunities have been addressed. This stage should not be used as a reason to harvest green timber or expand beyond the wildfire recovery purpose.

Link recovery to forest health

Connect fibre recovery decisions to reforestation, soil protection, water protection, and future forest health. Recovery should support the land rather than create additional impacts or delay regeneration.

Assess feasibility early

Assess whether markets, access, haul distance, funding, equipment, and partnerships make fibre recovery feasible. Some areas may have usable fibre but still be difficult or uneconomic to recover.

Consider local opportunities

Consider local employment, business, direct-award, and partnership opportunities for First Nations where appropriate. Fibre recovery may support community benefit when projects are realistic, well planned, and aligned with Nation priorities.

Avoid new impacts

Avoid activities that interfere with natural recovery, cultural values, ecological priorities, or important areas identified by First Nations. Recovery work should have a clear purpose and should not create more disturbance than benefit.

Confirm site recovery plans

Confirm how the site will be left and how regeneration will be supported after fibre recovery. Planning should consider whether the area will be replanted, monitored, left to regenerate naturally, or require additional treatment.

Key Take-Away:

Fibre recovery should support stewardship, reforestation, and local benefit — not just cleanup or short-term fibre use.