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Burning bylaw extinguishes Esquimalt Lagoon beach fires

Canada Day quiet for firefighters used to busy holiday

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The only smoke at Esquimalt Lagoon during the Canada Day weekend was coming from barbecues as Colwood's new burning bylaw had its desired effect.

"We had zero callouts to Esquimalt Lagoon on Canada Day, [usually] our busiest day of the year," said Colwood Fire Chief Russ Cameron. "Our kudos to the public for being so accepting."

Past Canada Day weekends would result in 50 to 60 fire permits taken out for beach fires at the lagoon. That would mean firefighters would be out looking for people burning without permits, and several hours after Canada Day mopping up fires that weren't properly extinguished, Cameron said.

This year, while many families were at the beach taking advantage of the warm weather, there were no fires at all.

"We still had a huge crowd on Canada Day at the beach. Everybody still seemed to be having a good time but we didn't have a whole bunch of fires burning. We had none. Zero. It was a bit uncanny," he said.

"People were down there with their barbecues and their motor homes and their tables and still having a great time, but we didn't have smoke-filled air and we didn't have a bunch of fires left over this morning, and we didn't have a great big ashtray left to deal with."

The municipality's new burning bylaw came into effect the first week in May, officially snuffing out beach fires at the lagoon — one of the last areas in the capital region where beach fires were still allowed.

The new Colwood bylaw bans burning within the city limits, including in incinerators, yards, on beaches and in campfires. Burning of any material for land clearing is prohibited, as is burning demolition waste or construction materials.

Meanwhile, officials are keeping a wary eye on other capital region party hot spots as recent warm weather is rapidly drying out the bush.

"It's dry. It's very dry," said View Royal Fire Chief Paul Hurst.

"With the warm weather and the winds, things have dried out."

Thetis Lake Regional Park was jammed over the long weekend, and that caused some potential problems for View Royal firefighters.

"I think by 9:30 in the morning the beach was full and what happens is people get creative with where they are going to park," Hurst said.

"Part of the problem is with Highland Road up near the back of Thetis. There's literally hundreds of cars parked on Highland Road, and the problem that creates for us is people can't get out of the area and we can't get in because they're parked everywhere."

View Royal firefighters extinguished one fire at Thetis over the long weekend, but it wasn't crowd-related. Someone poured gasoline over the large "Welcome to Thetis Lake" log sign and set it on fire.

Coastal Fire Centre spokeswoman Breanna Carey says the forest fire rating for the Vancouver Island is officially at moderate, but that could move to high or extreme quickly.

"The risk is still there in terms of campfires and people going out and doing forest activities," she said.

