Chapter 12
Parks, Culture and Sport—Protecting Provincial Park Ecosystems

1.0 Main Points

Saskatchewan has 36 provincial parks covering 1.2 million hectares of parkland; 27 parks require ecosystem management by the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport.

Protecting park ecosystems mean managing unique ecosystems to sustain habitat for wildlife, plants, and people, while also supporting recreation and economic opportunities. The Ministry last assessed park ecosystem health in 2022; five of 27 parks were less healthy than the Ministry expects (e.g., unhealthy vegetation). The Ministry plans to reassess park ecosystem health in 2027 and has set targets to prioritize actions to improve ecosystem health in parks.

We audited the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport's processes to protect provincial park ecosystems. At May 31, 2025, we found it had effective processes, except the Ministry needs to:

- Prioritize creating ecosystem-based management plans aligned with good practice for all high-risk provincial parks. The Ministry had plans for nine parks; it did not plan to create management plans for two of six high-risk parks we identified (e.g., parks with critical habitat or ecosystems less healthy than Ministry target).

- Create detailed plans (e.g., fuel management plans) setting key activities to protect park ecosystems for all high-risk provincial parks.[1] The Ministry did not have fuel management plans for 13 of its 18 forested parks. Lack of sufficient actions to reduce wildfire risks in forested parks can increase the risk of greater severity of wildfires.

- Complete and centrally monitor ecosystem management activities (e.g., grazing, seeding native grasses, prescribed burns) consistent with planned actions and deadlines. We found the Ministry had not completed four planned activities in two parks within deadlines as outlined in its detailed action plans; delays can negatively impact park ecosystem health.

- Formalize factors considered when determining which Indigenous communities to consult with when planning ecosystem management activities in parks and retain sufficient evidence of those consultations. We found the Ministry did not retain evidence of the letters it sent to Indigenous communities or responses received for all consultations tested.

[1] Fuel management plans outline wildfire mitigation efforts, such as timber harvesting, prescribed burns (for grassland parks), and making fuel breaks (gaps in trees).

The Ministry also needs to enter provincial park ecosystem data and activities (used to assess ecosystem health) in its IT system timely as well as report to senior management and the public on key ecosystem management activities taken to protect provincial park ecosystems (e.g., park ecosystem health scores compared to targets).

Effective processes to protect provincial park ecosystems help to preserve provincial parks for future generations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Ministry's Responsibility for Protecting Provincial Park Ecosystems

Under *The Parks Act*, the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport is responsible for the administration, management, planning, development, and maintenance of all parkland in the province.[2] This includes managing parks and natural resources (e.g., forests, wildlife) in a sustainable manner.[3] The Ministry manages the protection and conservation of over 1.2 million hectares of parkland.

Ecosystems are groups of plants, animals, vegetation, and their non-living environment interacting together.[4] Protecting park ecosystems mean managing unique and representative ecosystems to sustain habitat for fish, wildlife, plants, and people while supporting recreation and economic opportunities.[5,6]

The Parks Act describes three types of provincial parks where the Ministry must protect park ecosystems:[7,8]

- Wilderness parks primarily focus on the preservation of large, remote, and undisturbed natural landscapes. These parks may allow the pursuit of low-intensity and non-mechanized wilderness recreational activities.
- Natural environment parks are used for protection of unique landscapes, in balance with the pursuit of outdoor recreational activities that are consistent with the protection of natural landscapes.
- Recreation parks are used primarily for the pursuit of outdoor recreational activities in a natural setting.

Figure 1 depicts the amount of provincial parkland the Ministry manages in 36 parks. See **Section 5.0** for a list of provincial parks. About 69% of Saskatchewan's parkland is forested land.[9]

[2] *The Parks Act*, section 13.
[3] *The Natural Resources Act,* section 4(1)(h).
[4] www.cbd.int/convention/articles/default.shtml?a=cbd-02 (3 September 2025).
[5] Does not solely refer to legally protecting land use such as registering parcels of land under *The Wildlife Habitat Protection Act*.
[6] Government of Saskatchewan, *State of the Environment Report 2025*, p 32.
[7] *The Parks Act*, section 4.
[8] Government of Saskatchewan, *Protected and Conserved Areas Roadmap*, pp. 28–30.
[9] Adapted from the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport records.

Figure 1—Provincial Parkland Area Managed by the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport as of December 2020

Park Type	Land Area in Hectares	Land Area Percentage	Parks
Natural Environment Park (e.g., Saskatchewan Landing, Douglas)	704,753	58%	12
Wilderness Park (e.g., Athabasca Sand Dunes)	483,000	40%	4
Recreation Park (e.g., Danielson, Buffalo Pound, Crooked Lake)	27,876	2%	11
Historic Park (e.g., Cannington Manor Provincial Park, Fort Pitt Provincial Park)[A]	352	Negligible	9
Total	**1,215,981**	**100%**	**36**

Source: Government of Saskatchewan, *2025 State of the Environment Report,* p. 23 and *The Parks Act,* Schedule I.
[A] We did not assess historic parks in this audit since they primarily preserve historic resources (rather than protecting ecosystems).

The Park Management Services Branch is primarily responsible for protecting provincial park ecosystems, in addition to operational and recreational activities (e.g., park facilities and services). The Landscape Protection Unit, within the Branch, has six permanent staff members who conduct ecosystem assessments and protect and conserve park ecosystems with the assistance of park staff.[10,11]

In 2024–25, the Ministry spent $1.8 million for provincial park conservation management (2023–24: $1.5 million), including activities related to protecting provincial park ecosystems (e.g., prescribed burns).[12]

2.2 Saskatchewan Provincial Park Ecosystems

Saskatchewan provincial parks contain some unique features and represent three major ecozones as shown in **Figure 2**.[13] The Ministry must consider these differences when protecting provincial park ecosystems.

Figure 2—Provincial Park Ecosystems Managed by the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport

Ecozone	Provincial Park Examples	Features
Boreal Shield	Athabasca Sand Dunes, Lac La Ronge	Dense forests, rocky terrain, lakes, wetlands, and species like woodland caribou
Boreal Plain	Narrow Hills, Meadow Lake	Dense coniferous forests, wetlands, lakes, and species like moose and lynx
Prairie Grasslands	Buffalo Pound, Douglas	Rolling grasslands, sand dunes, and rare species like burrowing owls

Source: Adapted from the Government of Saskatchewan, *2025 State of the Environment Report*, p. 31; canadianbiodiversity.mcgill.ca/english/ecozones/borealshield/borealshield.htm#flo (4 September 2025); and *The Parks Act*, Schedule I.

Conservation efforts are crucial to preserving and protecting park ecosystems, ensuring they remain healthy for future generations.[14]

[10] Information provided by management at May 31, 2025.
[11] This Unit employs environmental specialists (e.g., doctorate or masters degree in areas of study related to ecology).
[12] Adapted from information obtained from the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport.
[13] An ecozone is a large ecological area differentiated by its distinct climate, land features, plants, wildlife, and human activities.
[14] www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/parks-culture-heritage-and-sport/provincial-park-management/conservation-programs-in-provincial-parks (4 September 2025).

2.3 The Dual Role of Conservation and Recreation

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport has a dual role in protecting and promoting provincial parks in Saskatchewan. The Ministry helps with provincial park recreation by providing opportunities for outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, fishing, and boating, which support tourism, community wellbeing, and a connection to nature. The Ministry also plays a vital conservation role by protecting native ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and culturally significant landscapes from overdevelopment and ecological deterioration. All provincial parkland is a protected area and contributes to the Provincial Government's goal to conserve and protect 12% of Saskatchewan's land and water.[15]

Provincial parks are a popular destination for Saskatchewan residents and tourists. The Ministry reported 932,000 visitor entry-permit days annually between 2020 and 2024.[16] Given Saskatchewan's population of approximately 1.25 million as of April 2025, the extent of visitors to parks demonstrates the significant role parks play in tourism.[17]

Creating a balance between recreation and conservation allows the public to enjoy the beauty and recreational opportunities of provincial parks without compromising ecosystems and their biodiversity.

2.4 Risk of Ineffective Protection of Park Ecosystems

Protecting Saskatchewan's provincial park ecosystems help to sustain biological diversity and result in increased resilience to wildfires and insect infestations.

Effective park-ecosystem management contributes to biodiversity, soil and wildlife habitat conservation, maintenance of ecosystem health, and helps to mitigate the impacts of changing climate conditions and human use. Healthy ecosystems also provide additional benefits such as plant pollination, clean air and water, waste decomposition, and flood control.[18]

Poor ecosystem management can lead to deterioration, increasing the risk of wildfires, insect damage, and vegetation diseases, resulting in biodiversity loss and compromised ecosystem functions. Without monitoring trends in an ecosystem's health and use of parkland over time, the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport may be unable to evaluate whether it is keeping ecosystems healthy.[19]

Since a significant part of Saskatchewan parkland is forested, the Ministry must also manage specific risks related to forested ecosystems. Proactively taking wildfire-risk reduction measures in provincial parks may help to reduce the intensity of wildfires, such as the large wildfire that recently occurred in Jasper National Park. In 2024, Saskatchewan recorded the second largest number of wildfire incidents and the second largest burn area in a decade.[20] As of September 3, 2025, 481 wildfires affected the province in 2025,

[15] Government of Saskatchewan, *Protected and Conserved Areas Roadmap*, p. 14. Legally protected and conserved areas are managed to retain, improve, and restore the ecological, natural, and cultural values for which they were established.
[16] Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport, *Annual Report 2024–25*, p. 16. Visitor entry-permit days reflect the number of days visitors use their permit to enter a provincial park.
[17] dashboard.saskatchewan.ca/people-community/people/population (4 September 2025).
[18] www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/document.356.aspx.pdf (30 March 2025).
[19] Government of Saskatchewan, *State of the Environment Report 2025*, p. 12.
[20] leaderpost.com/news/saskatchewan/saskatchewan-public-safety-agency-predicting-average-2025-wildfire-season (24 April 2025).

compared to the five-year average of 417 wildfires each year.[21] Some risk-reduction measures may include removal of old and damaged trees (e.g., infested with mountain pine beetles), and establishing fireguards (cleared strips of land to prevent wildfire spread).

Effective processes to protect provincial park ecosystems help to preserve provincial parks for future use.

3.0 Audit Conclusion

We concluded, for the period ending May 31, 2025, the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport had, other than the following areas, effective processes to protect provincial park ecosystems.

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport needs to:

- **Prioritize creating ecosystem-based management plans aligned with good practice for all high-risk provincial parks**
- **Create detailed plans (e.g., fuel management plans) for all high-risk provincial parks**
- **Complete and centrally monitor ecosystem management activities to protect provincial park ecosystems consistent with planned actions and deadlines**
- **Enter provincial park ecosystem data and activities in its IT system timely**
- **Report on key ecosystem management activities taken to protect provincial park ecosystems**
- **Formalize factors it considers when determining which Indigenous communities to consult and retain sufficient evidence of consultations**

Figure 3—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach

Audit Objective: Assess the effectiveness of the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport's processes, for the period ending May 31, 2025, to protect provincial park ecosystems.

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

1. **Plan to sustainably protect provincial park ecosystems**
   - Maintain inventory of provincial park ecosystems (e.g., type of ecosystem, habitat, current ecosystem condition, whether land is designated as a protected area)
   - Work with key partners (e.g., federal and provincial government agencies, Indigenous communities) to sustainably protect ecosystems
   - Establish park plans to sustainably protect ecosystems (e.g., park management plans, ecosystem-based management plans, forest conservation management plans)
2. **Implement action plans to protect provincial park ecosystems**
   - Complete periodic ecosystem health assessments (e.g., park ecosystem health index)
   - Carry out activities consistent with plans (e.g., prescribed fires, targeted grazing, tree planting, mountain pine beetle detection, preserve existing habitat)

[21] www.saskpublicsafety.ca/emergencies-and-response/active-incidents (3 September 2025).

3. Monitor protection of provincial park ecosystems

- Evaluate the effectiveness of plans to protect park ecosystems (using measures and data)
- Adjust plans and/or management activities as required
- Report to senior management, the public, and other agencies (e.g., Federal Government) on significant findings (e.g., progress on protecting park ecosystems)

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, review of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management and independent consultants. Ministry management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined the Ministry's policies and procedures relating to protecting provincial park ecosystems. We assessed samples of various plans and actions taken to protect park ecosystems. We also interviewed relevant Ministry staff and used an external consultant with subject matter expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and to assess the Ministry's processes.

4.0 Key Findings and Recommendations

4.1 Key Ecosystem Data Collected But Not Entered Timely

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport developed an inventory of ecosystem data to monitor park ecosystem health (see **Section 4.2** for description of its park ecosystem health index). However, the Ministry did not enter data timely in its IT system.[22]

The Ministry's IT system has ecosystem data (e.g., types of vegetation, number and age of trees, species at risk) to calculate its park ecosystem health index but it does not monitor whether staff enter the data timely. Data includes satellite imaging of parks (e.g., size of landscape patches) and field data collected by the Landscape Protection Unit (e.g., wildlife surveys, grazing capacity, soil moisture). It also includes data obtained in collaboration with partners (e.g., Ministry of Environment, Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre) about critical habitats and species at risk.

Staff collect park ecosystem health data and perform activities to protect park ecosystems in the spring and summer. The Ministry does not have a formal timeline or deadline for staff to enter data, although staff indicated it should be entered in the fall and winter. We consider this timeframe (e.g., within six to 12 months) reasonable, as staff generally need warmer weather to conduct activities in parks.

One way the Ministry collects ecosystem information is through ecological surveys, which are onsite observations and data assessments focused on specific species (e.g., plants, animals), or environmental impacts of new developments. See **Figure 4** for an example of an ecological survey—we found the Ministry's survey contained the detailed information expected.

[22] Park ecosystem data is stored and managed using a Geospatial Information System (GIS) database (IT system).

Figure 4—Example of an Ecological Survey

> Ecological surveys are an important tool for park ecologists and specialists. Staff survey parks for different reasons, from assessing the occurrence of rare or endangered species to evaluating environmental impacts of new trails and campgrounds. They also use surveys to assess whether management activities, such as tree harvesting and prescribed fires improve ecosystem health.
>
> Ministry staff conducted a survey showing forest harvesting in Duck Mountain Provincial Park in 2024 worked effectively. The team surveyed harvested and non-harvested areas and noted in the harvested ones, aspen trees regenerating as expected. In the non-harvested areas, comprised of old trees, the number of species was low, and the floor predominantly covered in moss with no new trees growing.

Source: Prepared by the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan.

Another way the Ministry collects ecosystem information is through range health assessments that check the health of grasslands (e.g., assessing plant types, soil stability and absorption, wildlife suitability).[23] We tested one range health assessment conducted in August 2022 and found staff had not entered data (e.g., area size, grasslands health) in the IT system as of May 2025. We also found, as of May 2025, the IT system did not include some information from 2015 (e.g., number of trees planted).

Without the timely entry of data (i.e., within six to 12 months) into its IT system, the Ministry's ecosystem inventory may not be complete. The Ministry relies on this data to conduct its periodic ecosystem health assessments (it plans to update its health index for provincial parks in 2027), so staff must enter all data prior to this for the health index for each park to be accurate. We found missing data (i.e., forest data) impacted one park health index in the 2022 calculation and resulted in Good Spirit Provincial Park scoring below the 2027 minimum target. See **Section 5.0** for the 2022 health index scores for each provincial park.

Without complete data, the Ministry's future ecosystem health assessments (health index) could be inaccurate and may result in a lack of action to protect parks' ecosystems.

1. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport enter provincial park ecosystem data and management activities in its IT system timely.**

4.2 Provincial Park Ecosystems' Health Assessment Tool Implemented

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport developed a sufficient tool to assess the health of park ecosystems using a park ecosystem health index (health index).

The Ministry's health index considers various factors in provincial parks such as land composition and structure, presence of unique or invasive species (e.g., plants such as Canada thistle), percentage of native and non-native grass cover, and landscape connectivity (i.e., wildlife habitat). This calculation provides an index or score for each provincial park.

A healthy ecosystem is resilient, balanced, and able to recover from stresses like pollution, fires, or changing climate conditions. It can support a large variety of species and provide benefits such as clean air, water, and food.[24]

[23] We found good practice is to complete range health assessments at least every 10 years.
[24] www.mdpi.com/2072-4292/13/16/3262 (8 September 2025).

In 2022, the Ministry developed its park ecosystem health index in collaboration with University of Saskatchewan researchers. The index provides an understanding of the overall baseline health of provincial park ecosystems. The index classifies ecosystem health conditions based on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) as shown in **Figure 5**. The Ministry calculated an index for all natural environment, wilderness, and recreational parks in 2022 and plans to recalculate the health index of parks every five years with the next assessment expected in 2027.

Figure 5—Park Ecosystem Health Index Scale and Classification

Park Ecosystem Health Index Scale	Classification
Less than 1.5	Very Poor
1.5 – 2.4	Poor
2.5 – 3.4	Fair
3.5 – 4.4	Good
Equal to or greater than 4.5	Very Good

Source: Adapted from the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport records.

We found the Ministry's health index uses globally accepted, quantifiable indicators evaluated by other experts and academics and consistent with good practice. A peer-reviewed journal published the index rationale and modelling structure.[25] Given the nature of the ecological indicators, which take time to change, the frequency of five years to assess the health of ecosystems aligns with good practice.

We found Saskatchewan is the only Canadian province to adopt such an ecosystem health assessment with a health index. Other jurisdictions (e.g., Parks Canada, United States National Park Services) conduct regular ecosystem health assessments, but none produce a health index like the Ministry.[26] We suggest the Ministry could further improve its ecological management by considering biodiversity and species-related indicators (e.g., number of species in the area, presence of rare or endangered species, abundance of invasive species) in its processes.

The Ministry uses the health index as a risk-based assessment tool to prioritize actions to improve the ecosystem health in parks that have not met the Ministry's minimum targets as outlined in **Figure 6**. For example, the Ministry's health index target for all natural environment parks in 2027 is 3.0, or a fair classification.

Figure 6—Park Ecosystem Health Index 2027 Minimum Targets

Park Type	Park Ecosystem Health Index 2027 Minimum Targets
Natural Environment	3.0
Recreation	2.5

Source: Adapted from the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport records. The Ministry did not set a minimum target for wilderness parks. Management indicated this was because wilderness parks have an overall average health index of 3.7 (good).

[25] *Remote Sensing Journal*, published 18 August 2021. www.mdpi.com/2072-4292/13/16/3262 (8 September 2025).
[26] The Canadian Parks Council, a non-profit organization of park leaders, awarded the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport with an Agency Award of Excellence in 2024 for its park ecosystem health index. parks-parcs.ca/home/awards-of-excellence (8 September 2025).

See **Section 5.0** for the 2022 health index scores for each provincial park; five parks in 2022 were below the 2027 minimum targets.

Having a science-based tool to assess provincial park ecosystem health allows the Ministry to understand the condition of parks and to plan actions to improve ecosystem health where necessary (e.g., take action where a park's health index falls below the target).

4.3 Ecosystem-Based Management Plans Incomplete

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport developed various types of plans to sustainably protect park ecosystems. The Ministry has not created ecosystem-based management plans for all high-risk provincial parks, and the existing plans do not include all components expected by good practice.

The Ministry uses several tools to manage provincial park ecosystems as outlined in **Figure 7**. There is a lack of integration between the Park Management Services Branch and the Park Operations Branch regarding plans to protect ecosystems. We also found a lack of integration between the various plans outlined below. For example, the annual park operating plan does not have activities related to protecting park ecosystems, which increases the risk of planning activities that do not protect ecosystems.

- **Ecosystem-based Management Plans** (20-year management plans): provide a detailed overview of the park's ecosystem and direction for maintenance, protection, and restoration of the specific provincial park, including recommended actions to improve ecosystem health (e.g., increase area of young trees and harvest old trees).

- **Forestry Operating Plans**: set the details for forest management activities (e.g., harvesting and tree planting) in parkland conducted over one to five years, including recommended actions.

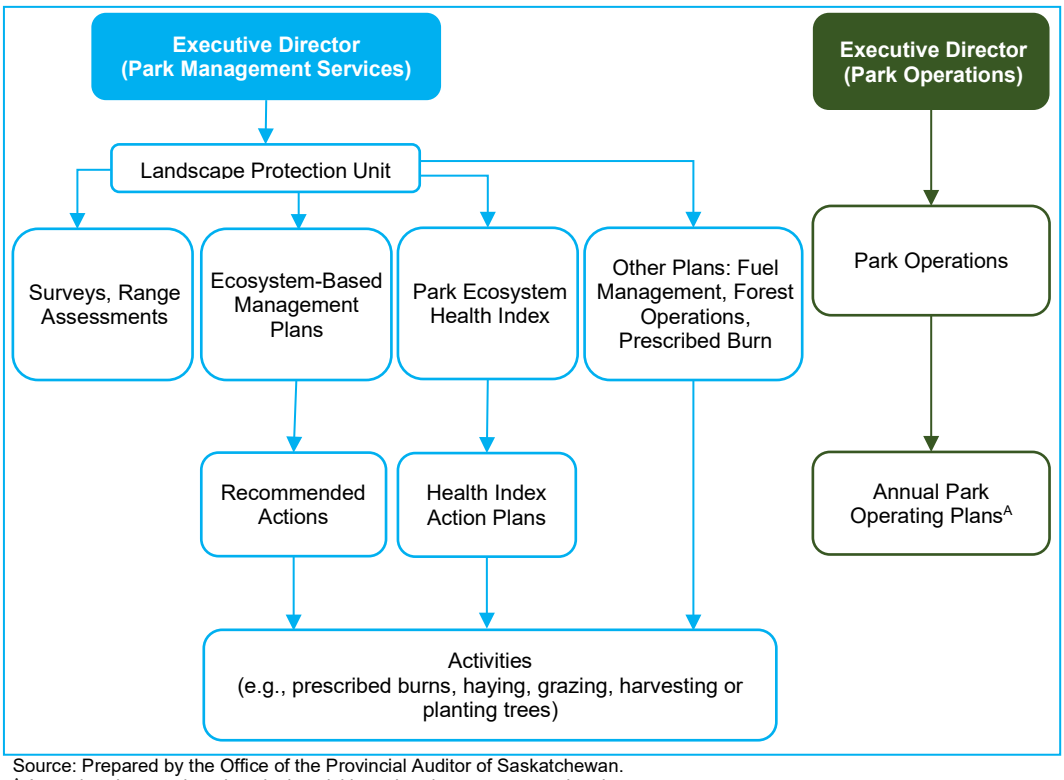
- **Fuel Management Plans**: identify wildfire threats and provide long-term direction (5 to 10 years) to undertake wildfire mitigation efforts, such as reducing fuel source (grass, dead trees) through harvesting and prescribed burns.

- **Prescribed Burn Plans**: plans to intentionally set fires under carefully controlled conditions by trained professionals to achieve specific ecological or land management objectives (plan for each individual fire).

- **Health Index Action Plans**: five-year targeted actions designed to improve health index scores of provincial parks below a minimum target (see **Figure 6**).

- **Park Operating Plans**: annual operating plan for each provincial park that includes operational activities (e.g., service centre replacement, upgrade day use area).

Figure 7—Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport Planning Tools



Source: Prepared by the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan.
[A] Annual park operating plans lack activities related to ecosystem planning.

The Ministry uses management plans to outline its objectives, strategies, and recommendations for managing a park's ecosystem health, while monitoring the protection of natural resources and promoting visitor experiences. We found qualified staff (see **Section 4.9**) or specialized consulting firms prepared these plans.

4.3.1 Lack of Ecosystem-Based Management Plans

The Ministry does not have plans on how to prioritize developing ecosystem-based management plans for all high-risk parks and communicate those plans to the public. We consider high-risk parks to be parks with critical habitat or low health indices.[27]

We found the Ministry:

- Drafted ecosystem-based management plans for nine natural environment and recreational parks (one plan was incomplete).[28] **Section 5.0** lists the parks with these management plans.

- Plans to have all 12 natural environment parks managed by ecosystem-based management plans by March 31, 2028; four were not done as of May 2025.[29] The Ministry has no plans to create management plans for other parks beyond its 2028 goal.

[27] The Federal Government protects species by listing them in the *Species at Risk Act*. Critical habitat is habitat that species at risk need for survival. The Federal Government legally protects critical habitat use from things like industrial development.
[28] One ecosystem-based management plan covers two parks (Douglas Provincial Park and Danielson Provincial Park) because of proximity and similar ecosystems.
[29] Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport, *Annual Report 2024–25*, p. 13.

- Made two of those eight plans publicly available (i.e., Cypress Hills, Meadow Lake) as of May 31, 2025.[30] See **Section 4.7** where we note the Ministry has limited public reporting on its protection of park ecosystems.

As of May 2025, the Ministry does not have ecosystem-based management plans for four natural environment parks where it has an expectation to create these plans.

We identified six high-risk parks out of the 27 provincial parks. We found the Ministry does not have management plans for two of these high-risk parks. It has one recreation park with critical habitat that does not have a management plan (i.e., Pike Lake Provincial Park).[31] It also has one recreation park with a health index lower than its minimum target for 2027 that does not have a management plan (i.e., Buffalo Pound Provincial Park).

Since the two high-risk parks above without ecosystem-based management plans are recreation parks, the Ministry had no plans to create management plans for them, rather is focusing on natural environment parks. We expected the Ministry to complete ecosystem-based management plans for all high-risk provincial parks (see **Recommendation 2**).

4.3.2 Ecosystem-Based Management Plans Do Not Fully Align with Good Practice

We found the Ministry also does not have clear guidance for staff to use when creating ecosystem-based management plans. The Ministry had a management plan template from 2011, but staff indicated they had not used it. As a result, we found that the plans lack consistency in format and content, and do not include some key elements of good practice.

We tested seven management plans and found they included some components of good practice, such as the plan purpose, land descriptions (e.g., grassland, forests), ecosystem management issues (e.g., temperature, drought, rangeland health), and recommendations (e.g., reduce grazing, conduct prescribed fires). However, these management plans lack certain components required by good practice.[32] For example:

- None of the seven plans the Ministry completed, and we tested, include topics such as fire behaviour, human-use levels, and impact of human-use. The Ministry does not have a process to monitor the impact of visitation on park ecosystems.
- One plan is more than 20 years old.
- Three plans created without public consultation.[33]
- Three plans did not discuss collaboration with Indigenous communities (see **Section 4.8**).
- Only five plans were complete (contained all information the Ministry intended; the Ministry was still developing the other two).

[30] www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/parks-culture-heritage-and-sport/provincial-park-management/conservation-programs-in-provincial-parks (4 September 2025).
[31] There are only two other parks (i.e., Douglas Provincial Park and Saskatchewan Landing Provincial Park) with critical habitat in the province and each has an ecosystem-based management plan.
[32] We considered Parks Canada to have good practice for management plans.
[33] Public consultation should provide opportunities for the public to provide input on management direction.

- Only two plans were properly approved (the other five were missing some of the required approval signatures).[34]

We also found the Ministry expects these ecosystem-based management plans to be 20-year plans. Good practice is to update these plans every 10 years.

The absence of complete updated ecosystem-based management plans aligned with good practice for all high-risk provincial parks increase the risk of inconsistent decision-making, inefficient use of resources in prioritizing park conservation activities, and unaddressed threats to ecosystem health.

2. We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport prioritize creating ecosystem-based management plans aligned with good practice for all high-risk provincial parks (e.g., those parks with critical habitat or low park ecosystem health index scores).

4.4 Detailed Plans Not Created for All Applicable Parks

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport has detailed plans (e.g., health index action plans, forest operating plans) to set out key activities (e.g., grazing, forest harvesting) to protect provincial park ecosystems in some parks, but not others.

We expected the Ministry to create ecosystem-based management plans for each high-risk park and then set detailed plans outlining key activities to protect park ecosystems. We expected the Ministry's detailed plans to include key ecosystem management activities including expected deadlines for completion of those activities.

We found the Ministry's detailed plans included:

- Health Index Action Plans: targeted action plans focused on improving ecosystems in parks.

  In 2022, the Ministry identified ecosystem health in five provincial parks (Douglas, Good Spirit, Saskatchewan Landing, Buffalo Pound, and Danielson) as being below the minimum thresholds (see **Section 5.0**).[35]

  The Ministry developed targeted action plans for four of these parks (Douglas, Saskatchewan Landing, Buffalo Pound, and Danielson). We found these action plans included appropriate activities to improve the ecosystem health index score (e.g., grazing, prescribed burns) and deadlines for completion.

  The Ministry had no documented action plans for ecosystem management activities in other parks to help sustain their health (i.e., prevent those parks' health index scores from declining). The Ministry indicated it informally planned to continue completing activities that it previously conducted at parks when it assessed the 2022 health index scores (e.g., continue grazing).

[34] Some of the missing approvals included the Park Manager, Landscape Protection Unit Director, and Park Management Services Executive Director.
[35] The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport did not include forest data in the Good Spirit Provincial Park 2022 health index calculations. Management indicated including this data would increase the park's health index above its minimum thresholds.

- Fuel Management Plans: plans outlining wildfire mitigation efforts, such as harvesting in grassland and forested parks, and prescribed burns in grassland parks.

  We found the Ministry's expectations for the contents of these plans were appropriate (e.g., who is responsible, when and how to complete activities to address risks identified). The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (SPSA) generally leads the completion of these plans. The Ministry reviews and comments on the plans, and approves them. It can also request SPSA create fuel management plans for parks with identified wildfire risks.

  For two fuel management plans tested, we found they both contained appropriate information (e.g., adequate deadlines to complete planned activities), but all expected senior management staff did not approve the plans.[36]

  The Ministry has fuel management plans for six provincial parks (five forested parks and one grassland park). We found the Ministry only plans prescribed burns at parks with grasslands (not forested parks), consistent with good practice. In forested parks, the Ministry uses other activities to manage wildfire risk such as forest harvesting and fuel breaks (gap in trees).

  The Ministry does not have fuel management plans for 13 of its 18 forested parks. We could not tell whether the Ministry sufficiently planned actions to reduce wildfire risk in forested parks. This increases the risk of greater severity of wildfires should they occur.

- Prescribed Burn Plans: plan for setting fires to achieve specific ecological or land management objectives.

  We tested three prescribed burn plans and found each followed Ministry guidelines (e.g., approved by the Ministry and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, established roles and responsibilities).

- Forestry Operating Plans: forest management activities such as harvesting and tree planting.

  We tested one forest operating plan (e.g., volume of trees to harvest, roads to construct) and found the plan consistent with Ministry guidelines and good practice and included deadlines to complete planned activities.

- Unit Annual Plan: the Landscape Protection Unit's 2024–25 annual plan outlined planned actions (e.g., monitor park ecosystem health, develop ecosystem-based management plans). This plan did not include deadlines (as included in other detailed plans).

Overall, the Ministry does not have fuel management plans for 13 forested parks as of May 2025.

[36] The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport's Park Management Services Executive Director and Landscape Protection Unit Director did not sign two fuel management plans tested.

Not having detailed plans for all high-risk parks increase the risk of inconsistent ecosystem management activities or not completing the right activities at the right time. Without sufficient fuel management plans for all forested parks, the Ministry may not appropriately reduce fuel sources, and forested parks may be at higher risk for wildfires.

3. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport create detailed plans (e.g., fuel management plans) for all high-risk provincial parks.**

4.5 Planned Ecosystem Management Activities Not Completed Timely

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport has numerous planned ecosystem management activities in provincial parks but does not always complete these activities when expected.

The Ministry uses key ecosystem management activities such as:

- Grazing: using livestock (e.g., sheep, cows) or wildlife (e.g., bison) to eat specific vegetation in a controlled way to achieve ecological, agricultural, or conservation goals (e.g., control of invasive species, restore native vegetation, reduce fire fuel sources).
- Haying: strategically cutting and bailing hay from natural grasslands to support wildlife, improve plant diversity, and manage ecosystems.
- Prescribed burn: intentionally set fire to reduce the fuel source (e.g., dead wood, leaf litter), promote biodiversity (by allowing some plants to germinate), control invasive species, and maintain ecosystem health. See **Figure 8** and **Figure 9** for our observation of a prescribed fire at a provincial park.
- Forestry management: harvesting and tree planting.

We found the Ministry used the appropriate type of activities to protect park ecosystems consistent with good practice. Since the Ministry did not track completed activities centrally, it cannot readily produce information showing activities completed (see **Section 4.6**).

Figure 8—Observation of a Prescribed Burn

In spring 2025, we observed a prescribed burn at Rowan's Ravine Provincial Park, burning an area of 4.9 hectares (see **Figure 9**). The Ministry's goal was to reduce wildfire risks by removing accumulated dry vegetation. This technique also helps control invasive plants and shrubs, as well as rejuvenate native grasslands, which serve as food for numerous wildlife species, such as deer and elk.

An experienced team of 15 people from different agencies (e.g., Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport; Canadian Wildlife Service; Silton Volunteer Fire Department) conducted the burn. An incident commander led the team, working in collaboration with a safety officer, and several specialists, such as an igniter and pumper (responsible to extinguish the fire along the burn edges).

We observed a detailed safety meeting prior to the burn, discussing safety items such as evacuation routes, team roles, and weather conditions. We also observed the team using proper equipment, such as safety gear, radios, all terrain vehicles, and a fire truck. They thoroughly monitored the weather conditions (e.g., temperature, wind direction and speed) before and during the fire. The Ministry conducted the burn as expected, with no rogue fires and no smoke headed toward the nearest village two kilometres away.

Ministry specialists returned to the area approximately 45 days later to inspect results. They reported the burn consumed 80% of potential wildfire fuel sources (e.g., dry grass, litter) and noted a reduction in invasive species litter (e.g., certain leaves, stems, seeds) as well as the resprouting of native plants, such as chokecherry, and grasses, like little bluestem and wild flax.

Source: Prepared by the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan.

Figure 9—Prescribed Burn in Progress

Source: Photo taken by the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan at Rowan's Ravine Provincial Park.

In 2022, the Ministry developed four targeted action plans to improve the parks ecosystem health index in some of the provincial parks below the Ministry's minimum threshold (i.e., Douglas, Saskatchewan Landing, Buffalo Pound, and Danielson). The action plans had 10 planned activities from 2022 to fall 2024. We tested all four action plans and found staff had not entered the results of six completed activities into the IT system by May 2025. See **Section 4.1** where we recommend the Ministry enter activities in its IT system timely.

At May 2025, we found the Ministry had not completed four planned activities (e.g., grazing, seeding native grasses, and a prescribed burn) in two provincial parks as outlined in the action plans. The Ministry noted it did not complete these due to a lack of resources or prioritizing other activities. It plans to adjust its action plans after reassessing provincial parks' health index scores in 2027. Without completing ecosystem management activities in accordance with planned deadlines, Ministry staff delay plans to protect park ecosystems, which could negatively impact ecosystem health.

4. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport complete ecosystem management activities to protect provincial park ecosystems consistent with planned actions and deadlines.**

4.6 Need to Centrally Monitor Ecosystem Management Activities Completed

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport does not centrally track or monitor the completion of ecosystem management activities to protect provincial park ecosystems. This limits its ability to efficiently evaluate the effectiveness of its planned actions and whether staff completed activities as expected.

The Ministry issues recommendations in several of its plans and assessments (e.g., ecosystem-based management plans, range health assessments). Some recommendations include the Ministry conducting specific activities such as implementing or reducing grazing, planting trees, or using prescribed burns. For example, the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park 2021 ecosystem-based management plan contained over seven pages of recommendations.

The Ministry does not centrally track or monitor these recommendations including who is responsible for taking action and when, and the status of implementation of the recommendations. We found staff were not aware of which recommendations had been started, were in progress, or completed.

Although the Ministry has a lot of ecosystem management activity data (e.g., number of hectares grazed, number of trees planted), it does not have a centralized tracking process for each activity conducted. As described in **Section 4.1**, the Ministry's IT system does not currently contain all data for completed activities. Landscape Protection Unit staff individually track data regarding those activities. Currently, the Ministry is unable to run complete reports from its IT system regarding various activities conducted (e.g., for monitoring). Rather, management must ask each staff for a list of completed activities.

The Landscape Protection Unit tracks progress against planned actions in the Unit's annual plan quarterly by manually gathering information. We found the Unit completed this tracking quarterly for 2024–25 and reported results to senior management. For example, the Ministry had 135 hectares of targeted grazing in five parks and had herbicide application service agreements to control weeds in three parks. However, these reports provide limited reporting as they only report activities completed, and not in comparison to the planned activities or explanations for any activities planned but not completed.

Without a centralized process to monitor ecosystem management activities, the Ministry risks not completing required activities, which can result in further deterioration of park ecosystem health. In addition, lack of readily available information for monitoring limits the Ministry's ability to make timely, evidence-based decisions efficiently, and to adjust plans as required. Not centrally tracking data (e.g., in IT system) also risks that information is lost when there is staff turnover.

5. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport centrally monitor completion of planned ecosystem management activities to protect provincial park ecosystems.**

4.7 Insufficient Reporting on Protection of Park Ecosystems

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport has limited internal and public reporting on the outcomes of planned activities to protect provincial park ecosystems.

As described in **Section 4.6**, the Ministry has limited internal reporting and only reports on the results of activities completed by the Landscape Protection Unit quarterly to the Executive Director of Park Management Services.

The Ministry reports to the public through its annual report. It reports publicly on actions taken to increase a park's health index above the minimum threshold (e.g., haying and grazing activities, prescribed fires, seeding native grasses). Its reporting on these activities provides limited information (e.g., "significant ecological management actions completed with more than 43,000 hectares treated across five different parks").[37] It does not report which activities were undertaken (e.g., number of hectares grazed, number of trees planted).

Overall, the Ministry's targets are for each provincial park's health index to score above its minimum threshold (see **Figure 6**), and to have ecosystem-based management plans completed for all 12 natural environment parks by March 31, 2028 (see **Section 4.3**).

The Ministry does not report publicly on the targets to have each provincial park's health index above its minimum threshold and the actual results by individual park.

The Ministry reports the number of natural environment parks managed by park management plans in its annual report. As of March 31, 2025, the Ministry noted it had eight natural environment parks managed by ecosystem-based management plans.[38] However, as described in **Section 4.3**, based on our testing of these management plans, we found five complete plans, two draft plans, and one incomplete plan missing at least 100 pages.

Reporting is important not only to enhance accountability but also to educate the public about conservation initiatives and how they can help to protect park ecosystems. **Figure 10** provides some examples of potential performance measures the Ministry should consider reporting based on good practice.

Figure 10—Examples of Potential Performance Measures for Reporting

Performance Measure	Reporting Frequency
Area burned with prescribed fires	Annually
Species-at-risk indicators (e.g., number of each type of species, occupancy in critical habitats)	10 years
Number and description of critical habitats identified in parks	10 years
Hectares managed by each activity (e.g., grazing, prescribed fires)	Annually
Partnerships with local and Indigenous communities	Annually
Consultations with Indigenous communities performed	Annually
Park Ecosystem Health Index for each provincial park compared to minimum target	5 years

Source: Developed by the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan.

The Ministry also reports quarterly to the Federal Government on a project to plant trees in provincial parks. We observed it reported the data (e.g., locations, number of trees planted, size of planting sites) as expected to the Federal Government for the quarter-ended June 30, 2024.

[37] Ministry of Parks, Culture, and Sport, *Annual Report 2024–25*, p. 10.
[38] Ibid.

Without adequate internal reporting on ecosystem health and conservation activities in provincial parks, the Ministry may not have sufficient information to make informed decisions (e.g., allocation of resources). Without adequate public reporting on ecosystem health and conservation activities in provincial parks, the Ministry may not sufficiently build conservation awareness among visitors.

6. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport report to senior management and the public on key ecosystem management activities taken to protect provincial parks.**

4.8 Need to Formalize Factors Considered and Retain Evidence of Indigenous Consultations

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport needs to formalize the factors (e.g., methods to identify Indigenous communities that might be affected by management decisions) it considers when determining which Indigenous communities it consults with before planning and implementing activities to protect provincial park ecosystems. It also needs to retain evidence of its consultations.

The Ministry of Government Relations requires ministries to follow the Government of Saskatchewan's *First Nation and Métis Consultation Policy Framework* (Framework) when determining which activities impact Indigenous communities and require consultation.[39,40]

When assessing ecosystem-based management plans, we found the Ministry consulted with Indigenous communities for four of seven plans tested. The Ministry did not document the processes used to conduct the consultations (i.e., who it consulted with and why).

The Ministry also consults Indigenous communities when implementing forestry activities but does not maintain documentation on how it chose those communities and how it conducted the consultations. For example, the Ministry consulted Indigenous communities in 2024 for its forest operating plans in Meadow Lake and Duck Mountain Provincial Parks. The Ministry told us it used a radius of at least 100 kilometres surrounding these parks to identify which Indigenous communities to consult. We found the Ministry used this radius for one of the consultations but did not have documented rationale for using a 100-kilometre radius. The Provincial Government's Framework does not prescribe any radius. Management indicated it consulted with Government Relations to determine this distance, but it did not have documented support for the radius used or for these consultations.

Transparent consultation is important because the Ministry's decisions regarding activities to protect provincial park ecosystems may lead to Indigenous communities' inability to exercise their Treaty rights to conduct traditional uses, such as hunt, fish, and trap for food.

Formalizing consultation processes with Indigenous communities who may be significantly affected by activities to protect provincial park ecosystems can help to promote understanding, transparency, and credibility of the Ministry's processes.

[39] The 2024 *First Nation and Métis Consultation Policy Framework* was in place at the time of our audit.
[40] According to *The Constitution Act*, the Provincial Government has a legal duty to consult with, and accommodate, as appropriate, First Nation and rights-bearing Métis communities before making a decision that has the potential to impact Aboriginal or treaty rights adversely.

7. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport formalize factors it considers when determining which Indigenous communities to consult with when planning activities to protect provincial park ecosystems.**

For consultations it undertakes, the Ministry sends letters to Indigenous communities and invites them to respond with concerns. The Ministry then assesses responses and communicates the Ministry's decisions about planned activities to these Indigenous communities.

For the consultations tested where the Ministry had evidence of letters it sent, we found the Ministry:

- Sent adequate information to Indigenous communities (outlined planned activities and dates, possible disturbances to the area, response date)
- Received and assessed responses but did not formally track these (e.g., in a spreadsheet)
- Sufficiently communicated the Ministry's decision to Indigenous communities about its planned activities

We found the Ministry did not retain evidence of the letters sent and received from Indigenous communities for consultations for three of four ecosystem-based management plans. For the consultations for the two forest operating plans tested, the Ministry also did not keep evidence of the letters sent and received from Indigenous communities for one of the plans.

We were unable to evaluate the Ministry's assessment of responses for the consultation process where the Ministry did not retain evidence of the letters sent and received from Indigenous communities.

Without retaining sufficient evidence of consultations with Indigenous communities, the Ministry cannot demonstrate it followed transparent processes consistent with the Government of Saskatchewan's Framework.

8. **We recommend the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport retain sufficient evidence of consultations with Indigenous communities related to protecting provincial park ecosystems.**

4.9 Qualified Staff Conserve and Protect Provincial Parks

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport uses qualified staff to protect provincial park ecosystems and provides adequate training (e.g., on prescribed burns).

At May 31, 2025, the Landscape Protection Unit had six permanent staff members (five staff and one director) who conduct ecosystem assessments and lead the protection and conservation of park ecosystems. The Ministry requires these staff to have at least a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences, ecology, natural resources management, forestry, or similar areas, or equivalent experience.[41]

We reviewed the qualifications of five staff and found they all possess relevant education and experience in conservation and natural resource management. We found one staff has a related certificate, one has a bachelor's degree, one has a master's degree, and two have doctorates in areas relevant to conservation.

We found the Landscape Protection Unit supports staff with training opportunities, including training on prescribed burns in collaboration with other agencies, such as the Canadian Prairies Prescribed Fires Exchange.

We found the Ministry does not have up-to-date job descriptions for two of the six staff members; however, we did not find any indication that staff were not aware of their current roles and activities the Ministry expected them to perform.

Using qualified staff for key ecosystem protection and conservation activities (e.g., conducting ecosystem health assessments, forest management activities) allows the Ministry to appropriately identify risks related to the management of park ecosystem health and take action.

5.0 Provincial Parks As of May 2025

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport protects ecosystems in 12 natural environment parks, 11 recreation parks, four wilderness parks, and nine historic parks as of May 2025.

Park Type and Name	Established	Health Index Score (2022)[A]	Ecosystem-Based Management Plan Created as of May 31, 2025
Natural Environment Parks			
Cypress Hills Provincial Park	1931	3.3	**Yes**
Douglas Provincial Park	1973	**2.6**	**Yes**[B]
Duck Mountain Provincial Park	1931	3.6	–
Good Spirit Lake Provincial Park	1931	**2.9**	**Yes**
Greenwater Lake Provincial Park	1932	3.7	–
Lac La Ronge Provincial Park	1939	3.8	**Yes**[C]
Makwa Lake Provincial Park	1986	4.0	**Yes**
Meadow Lake Provincial Park	1959	3.8	–
Moose Mountain Provincial Park	1931	3.5	**Yes**[D]
Narrow Hills Provincial Park	1934	3.5	**Yes**[D]
Porcupine Hills Provincial Park	2018	3.9	–
Saskatchewan Landing Provincial Park	1973	**2.3**	**Yes**

[41] The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport requires one staff position to have a technical diploma in forestry and requires other staff to have professional designations in either forestry or agrology.

Park Type and Name	Established	Health Index Score (2022)[A]	Ecosystem-Based Management Plan Created as of May 31, 2025
Recreation Parks			
Blackstrap Provincial Park	1986	2.5	–
Buffalo Pound Provincial Park	1963	**2.4**	–
Candle Lake Provincial Park	1986	3.8	–
Crooked Lake Provincial Park	1986	2.5	–
Danielson Provincial Park	1971	**2.3**	**Yes**[B]
Echo Valley Provincial Park	1960	2.6	–
Great Blue Heron Provincial Park	2013	3.6	–
Katepwa Point Provincial Park	1931	2.6	–
Pike Lake Provincial Park	1960	2.6	–
Rowan's Ravine Provincial Park	1960	2.6	–
The Battlefords Provincial Park	1960	3.3	–
Wilderness Parks			
Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Park	1992	3.3	–
Clarence-Steepbank Lakes Provincial Park	1994	3.7	–
Clearwater River Provincial Park	1986	3.8	–
Wildcat Hill Provincial Park	1992	4.0	–
Historic Parks			
Cannington Manor Provincial Park	1986	Not Applicable (N/A)	–
Cumberland House Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Fort Carlton Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Fort Pitt Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Last Mountain House Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
St. Victor Petroglyphs Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Steele Narrows Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Touchwood Hills Post Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–
Wood Mountain Post Provincial Park	1986	N/A	–

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport.
[A] Park ecosystem health index (health index). Shaded cells show parks scoring below the Ministry's 2027 minimum target (**Figure 6**).
[B] The Ministry has a combined ecosystem-based management plan for Douglas and Danielson Provincial Parks and surrounding area.
[C] Incomplete plan
[D] Draft plan

6.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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