

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

ISSUE

The disposal fee for elm wood at the Saskatoon Regional Waste Management Centre (landfill) was waived for residents from April 25, 2024, to December 31, 2024. This initiative expanded on the measures taken in 2023 to reduce barriers of proper elm disposal and to help address the rising risk of Dutch elm disease (DED) and was combined with an education campaign to help bring attention to DED and the importance of proper disposal of elm wood.

This report summarizes the outcomes of the 2024 strategy, provides a plan for elm wood disposal, increased DED monitoring, and elm wood sweeps for 2025, and provides an update on longer-term actions that will be brought forward in coordination with the City of Saskatoon's (City) Solid Waste Reduction and Diversion Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services recommend to City Council that:

1. The 2025 proper elm wood disposal plan be approved as outlined in this report;
2. The Administration prepare the 2026/2027 business plan and budget without revenues for entrance and tipping fees for all loads of elmwood, along with any other operating or capital requirements to support DED prevention, for City Council's consideration; and
3. The establishment of capital project DED Response, in the amount of \$100,000, be funded from the Urban Forestry and Pest Management Capital Reserve.

BACKGROUND

With the rise of DED in Saskatoon, initiatives to support proper disposal of elm wood were expanded in 2021. Landfill rates, education, and community outreach have been explored as part of a strategy to reduce the burden of proper elm disposal and limit the spread of DED. Further information can be found in Appendix 1 (Background on Proper Elm Disposal).

City Council, at its Regular Business Meeting held on April 24, 2024, considered the [Update on Elm Wood Disposal Initiative and Next Steps](#) report and resolved that the 2024 elm wood disposal plan be approved as outlined in the report. City Council also resolved that:

1. The Administration investigate options to advance best practices and regulatory updating with respect to composting chipped elm in advance of the establishment of a long-term organics processing solution; and
2. As part of the 2024 DED Strategy, Administration convene a stakeholder group to further discuss the elm disposal process, ensure clear and consistent understanding of current processes, and further discuss any additional initiatives to help support effective disposal of elm material.

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

Sustained enhanced communications and education was approved through the 2024/25 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget, through the advertising budgets for Material Recovery Centre and Green Cart combined with existing advertising for DED awareness. The funding plan for ongoing enhanced elm disposal education leverages all three of these advertising budgets to raise awareness that proper disposal of elm wood is at the landfill, that the Green Cart program does not accept elm wood, and to continue to raise awareness of other behaviours to mitigate the spread of DED.

In the 2024/25 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget, City Council approved funding from the Waste Minimization Reserve to Project P.10086 Proper Disposal of Elm Wood. The approved budget for this project is \$75,000 (2024 and 2025), which allows for \$150,000 over a two-year span.

CURRENT STATUS

The 2024 elm wood disposal plan has been implemented as outlined in the report of April 24, 2024, which included waiving fees for residential loads of elm wood under 1000kg and an enhanced education program. Waiving the elm wood disposal fees at the landfill has continued in early 2025, as the 2024 capital funding has not been fully exhausted. At this time, a plan for 2025 and direction on whether to make this an ongoing level of service is required.

DED poses a significant risk to Saskatoon's urban forest, which is approximately one quarter elm trees. It is spread by several species of elm bark beetle that are attracted to decaying and freshly cut elm. Prohibiting pruning at times when the beetle is active, as well as restricting the storage, transportation and use of elm wood are the primary methods to reduce the spread of DED.

A City-owned organics processing facility is being constructed and is scheduled to open in 2026. As part of regulatory approvals, the City will make a request to the Ministry of Environment to process chipped elm wood during the months that the elm pruning ban is lifted (September 1 to March 31).

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

2024 DED Cases Summary

In 2024, the Parks Department confirmed 11 positive cases of DED in Saskatoon and continued to carry out the DED Response Plan. Parks staff have been conducting elm wood sweeps and increased surveillance for symptomatic trees around impacted areas. Elm wood sweeps include checking every property for elm firewood or brush and removing it if found. If residents are not home, staff remove the elm wood and leave an Elm Infraction Notice with a note indicating the wood was removed and the reason for removal.

Provincial regulations prohibit the storage or use of elm wood and require that it be transported to the nearest designated disposal site, for the municipality in which the tree is located, no later than the next operating hours of the disposal site following pruning or removal of the tree. Despite these regulations, the Parks Department staff retrieved 12,724kg of elm wood in 2024. Proper and timely elm disposal and the prohibition of transporting elm firewood is key to mitigating the spread of DED. More information on the recent cases of DED and the results of elm wood stored on private property are available in Appendix 2.

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

Preventing the transport and storage of elm material is a critical step in preventing DED from entering the city. Saskatoon is currently not within the endemic range for DED (see Appendix 3 - Map) and is located just outside the native range for elm. This means that DED cases in Saskatoon are most likely due to transmission from firewood illegally transported into the city from infected areas of the province.

2024 Elm Wood Disposal Plan Summary

In 2024, the goals of the elm wood disposal plan were to:

- Eliminate the cost barrier for the proper disposal of elm wood;
- Increase awareness of DED and the importance of proper elm wood disposal; and
- Reduce the amount of elm wood stored in backyards.

In 2024, the City waived elm disposal fees for residents (no entry fee or tipping fee) from April 25, 2024, to December 31, 2024. A cap of 1000 kg per visit and a self-declaration process were used to help ensure only residential loads were utilizing the waived tipping fee.

The waived elm disposal fees for residents (and enhanced communication) resulted in close to 400 tonnes of residential elm wood being properly disposed of during 2024, over a four-fold increase compared to the previous two years when elm disposal was tracked. This was brought to the landfill in nearly 2,500 residential visits, compared to 700 visits the previous year and under 600 the year before. The average size of residential loads also increased. These results indicate that the waived disposal fee combined with the enhanced education in 2024, had a positive impact on the targeted resident behaviour of improper storage or disposal of elm wood.

Stakeholder Feedback

A small group of industry stakeholders, including arborists and SOS Trees Coalition provided feedback through discussions in 2024. Key feedback includes:

- Urgent and immediate action is required;
- Confusion is created by only waiving the elm wood disposal fee at the landfill for residents but not for arborists hauling residential loads; and
- Excluding commercial customers from the waived fees makes it difficult for those customers that need to hire someone to prune or dispose of elm wood.

Further details on the 2024 pilot and stakeholder feedback can be found in Appendix 4.

Elm Wood Disposal Plan for 2025

The proposed 2025 plan expands on the 2024 initiative by waiving all disposal fees on elm wood for loads received at the landfill for the remainder of this year, including commercial and residential customers. All internal City loads will continue to pay the regular entrance fee and tipping fee to ensure proper internal funding allocations are in place.

Waiving entrance and tipping fees for elm wood will result in an estimated revenue reduction of \$130,000 to \$200,000 of landfill fees that will not be collected on elm wood loads. This estimate is based on 2024 landfill tonnage data, and accounts for potential fluctuations in commercial use and Dutch Elm Disease (DED) cases.

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

Enhanced DED monitoring and Elm Wood Sweeps for 2025

Saskatoon has an escalated response plan for DED which includes increased surveillance of the neighbourhoods where any trees have tested positive. Any elm wood that is found during a search is disposed of at the landfill. With the number of positive cases in 2024, Parks is requesting access to funding from the Urban Forestry and Pest Management Capital Reserve to resource enhanced monitoring, testing, and elm wood sweeps for Dutch Elm Disease (DED) in 2025. The Reserve was created to support the capital cost of urgent urban forest priorities, strategic plan development and implementation, and to control pests and disease affecting the urban forest. Currently, Urban Biological Services laborers perform DED monitoring under the supervision of technical staff.

The additional funding for 2025 will allow for more technician support for DED inspections, better sampling of suspected DED-infected trees, and quicker mobilization of the DED response plan if there is a rise in positive cases. The funds will also support increased capacity to remove improperly stored elm wood in high-risk mature canopy areas of Saskatoon.

Elm Wood Disposal Plan for 2026+

The proposed plan for 2026 and onward is to remove all disposal fees for loads of elm wood received at the landfill. Pending Ministry of Environment Approval, this could also be extended to the City's new compost facility. This initiative will include commercial and residential customers. All internal City loads will continue to pay the regular entrance fee and tipping fee to ensure adequate internal funding allocations are in place.

In 2026, the costs to cover the uncollected fees from elm disposal will be included as part of the indicative budget process through the Waste Handling Service Line which includes operations of the Landfill and Material Recovery Centre. The final approval of this change will be part of City Council's deliberations of the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget in Q4 of 2025. If approved by City Council, Schedule F in Bylaw No. 9844, The Waste Bylaw, 2022, would be amended to remove all entrance and tipping fees for loads of elm wood.

Risk Mitigation

While the pilots to date have demonstrated positive changes to resident behaviour, there are several risks that have been identified for the elm disposal plan for 2025:

- Disposal of healthy trees
- Elm wood disposal coming from outside of Saskatoon
- Lost landfill revenue exceeds estimates

Plans to monitor and mitigate these risks are provided in Appendix 5.

Future Composting Options

Composting elm wood may be a viable option available with the new City-owned organics processing facility. The City will continue to work with the Ministry of Environment to explore composting options as part of the design and commissioning of the organics processing facility that is underway. Composting chipped elm wood waste

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

when the pruning ban is lifted has been approved by the Ministry of Environment at other composting sites.

DED Communication Plan Update

The annual Communication Plan for 2024 included various tactics to address the rising threat of DED. Renderings of potential devastations were added to social media campaigns to highlight the severity of what can happen from DED. Additional tactics were initiated as part of the DED response plan that resulted from positive cases, including news releases and distribution of door hangers to targeted areas.

The 2025 DED Communication Plan will highlight the following:

- Importance and value of trees
- Risk of not taking DED serious and experiences of other municipalities
- Role of proper elm wood disposal and not storing firewood

Further details on communication and education can be found in Appendix 6 (DED Education and Communication).

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Landfill

During 2024, tonnages of elm received at the landfill translated to approximately \$131,200 in potential revenue. Elm disposal costs for loads under 1,000 kg (i.e. included in the pilot program) amounted to \$61,800, funded through capital project P.10086 Proper Disposal of Elm Wood. 2024 revenues generated for elm disposal that were not included in the pilot were \$69,400.

It is projected that proper disposal of elm may increase when the cost of disposal is eliminated. In 2025, the costs of expanding the current program to include both residential and commercial customers is projected to result in unrealized landfill revenues of \$130,000 - \$200,000. To ensure the approved landfill operating budget is not impacted by this change, interim funding will be provided via existing capital projects. Capital funding to cover the change in fee structure supporting the proper disposal of elm wood in 2025 is proposed as follows:

| Funding Source | Low Projection Funding | High Projection Funding |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| P.10086 - Proper Disposal of Elm Wood | \$88,200 | \$88,200 |
| P.01964 – Waste Reduction Initiatives | \$41,800 | \$111,800 |
| Total | \$130,000 | \$200,000 |

No new funding is requested for this initiative in 2025. There is \$88,200 remaining in the Proper Disposal of Elm Wood project, which will be applied to this initiative first. The remaining funding is available through the Waste Reduction Initiatives – Waste Strategy Implementation project, which is for the development and implementation of Solid Waste Reduction and Diversion Plan initiatives. The two projects have sufficient funding available in 2025 to cover the amounts outlined in the table above.

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

The impact of the uncollected fees on landfill revenue will be included as part of the Waste Handling service line in the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget for Council's consideration.

Enhanced DED monitoring and Elm Wood Sweeps

This report recommends a capital budget adjustment of \$100,000 to be funded from the Urban Forestry and Pest Management Capital Reserve to increase DED monitoring and elm wood sweeps in 2025. The Urban Forestry and Pest Management Capital Reserve has a projected unallocated balance at the end of 2025 of \$1,383,000.

Any future operating impacts or capital funding requests will be addressed during the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget, to ensure adequate resourcing for DED monitoring and mitigation.

Natural Asset Value

Financial barriers to the proper disposal of elm wood may have a negative impact on the City's urban canopy, which is part of the City's natural assets. The City's tree canopy is made up of almost 25% elm trees. Unlike other infrastructure, trees increase in value over time. In 2019, the value of public trees (excluding shelterbelts and afforestation areas) was estimated at more than \$530 million. Proactive approaches to limiting the spread of DED are low compared to costs associated with accelerated spread of the disease and resulting tree removal and replacement costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Non-compliance with legislated elm disposal requirements has been identified during intensive neighbourhood DED response investigations. Given the extent of elm trees in Saskatoon's urban forest, there is an ongoing risk of additional disease spread through improperly disposed or stored elm wood that over time could result in the decimation of a significant portion of the urban forest. Transportation of elm firewood into Saskatoon is believed to be a significant threat for DED spread and storage of elmwood in backyards further increases the risk of spreading DED.

The City's Parks Department manages approximately 110,000 trees on boulevards, centre medians, in parks and at civic facilities, with 25% of these trees being elms. The Urban Forest Management Plan (2021) estimates that 682,000 tonnes CO₂ is sequestered by Saskatoon's urban forest.

NEXT STEPS

If approved, the Administration will implement the waived fee for all loads of residential and commercial elm wood as outlined in this report.

Through the preparation of the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget, the cost of the uncollected fees will be included in the indicative budget, for Council's consideration during budget deliberations. As well, additional operating or capital funding requests may be brought forward in the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget to ensure adequate resourcing for DED monitoring and mitigation.

Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps

Administration will carry out an education campaign in 2025. The DED Communications Plan will be updated to reflect the current situation of DED in Saskatoon.

The Solid Waste Reduction and Diversion Plan funded bulky/special waste program development project will be initiated in 2025 to address the barrier of transporting loads of elm wood to the landfill. A key consideration is that elm wood cannot be stockpiled, so that will need to be prioritized over other materials for collection, especially in the higher generation periods.

APPENDICES

1. Background on Proper Elm Disposal
2. 2024 DED Summary
3. 2023 Known Extent of DED in Saskatchewan – Map
4. 2024 Elm Disposal Pilot Summary
5. Elm Disposal Risk Mitigation (2025)
6. Education and Communications (2024)

Report Approval

Written by: Daniel Mireault, Project Manager, Sustainability

Reviewed by: Katie Burns, Manager, Education & Environmental Performance Manager
Brock Storey, Environmental Operations Manager
Konrad Andre, Operations Manager, Parks
Jeanna South, Director of Sustainability
Brendan Lemke, Director of Water and Waste Operations
Thai Hoang, Director of Parks
Celene Anger, General Manager, Community Services

Approved by: Angela Gardiner, General Manager, Utilities and Environment

Admin Report - Elm Wood Disposal Initiative Next Steps.docx