Canada FIRM Challenge

How Applications Are Scored

1 About the Challenge

The Canada Forest Innovation and Renewable Markets (FIRM) Challenge will fund 15 Canadian regions to receive a Biofuel Development Opportunity (BDO) Zone Rating: an investment-grade assessment, issued under CSA TS-005:25, of a region's readiness to host new forest bioeconomy projects. Each awardee region is then promoted to project developers and investors globally through the BDO Zone Markets Acceleration Centre (BDO-MAC).

Every eligible application is scored out of 100 points against four published criteria. Applications in contention for an award are interviewed, the Ratings Integrity Committee confirms the scoring, and the 15 highest-scoring regions are selected.

The terms in Table 1-1 are used throughout this guide and the application.

Table 1-1: Key terms

Term	Meaning
BDO Zone Rating	A BDO Zone Rating is an internationally recognized, standards-based technical risk assessment of a region's feedstock, supply chain, and infrastructure risk with respect to the development potential for new biofuel plants. Investment-grade ratings turn local forest resources into bankable opportunities and put regions in front of the world's largest network of active bio-project developers, driving investment and creating jobs.
BDO Zone	A Biofuel Development Opportunity Zone: a region assessed and rated under CSA TS-005:25 for its readiness to host new projects that use forest biomass.
Supply zone	The area within 120 km drive distance of the industrial site, from which a facility would draw its forest biomass.
Industrial site	A site that could host a new facility. Additional sites may be described in Section 3.5 of the application.
Surplus forest biomass	Forest biomass that is produced, or could be recovered, in the supply zone and is not committed to an existing user: sawmill residues, harvest and forest residues, salvage, or low-grade roundwood. Agricultural and municipal streams are not included.
Biomass supplier	An organization that produces, harvests or transports forest biomass in the supply zone: a sawmill, a pulp and paper mill, a forestry company, a forest licence or tenure holder, a woodlot owner, or a harvesting or trucking contractor.
Project developer	A company that builds and operates facilities that use forest biomass. An investor is an organization that finances such facilities.

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2 How selection works

Table 2-1: Stages of selection

Stage	Name	What happens
1	Eligibility check	The application is checked against the requirements in Section 3.
2	Scoring	The Canada FIRM assessment team scores the application out of 100 against the criteria in Section 4. If information is not known, a question may be left blank or answered “Not known”; applicants are not penalized for doing so.
3	Interviews	Applications in contention for an award must attend a video interview of 15 to 45 minutes to discuss the application in more detail and to gather any additional information. Following the interview, a score may be adjusted. Where the application names a project developer, the assessment team may also hold a separate, confidential 30-minute conversation with that developer, further contributing to the score.
4	Final selection	The 15 highest-scoring regions are selected (Section 7). The Ratings Integrity Committee reviews the scoring and the selection before awards are announced.

3 Eligibility requirements

An application must meet all of the requirements in Table 3-1 before it is scored.

Table 3-1: Eligibility requirements

Requirement	What is required
Eligible applicant	One of the following: • A Canadian municipal, county or regional government • A regional or provincial economic development body • An Indigenous government, Indigenous organization or Indigenous-owned economic development corporation • A biomass supply cooperative or producer association • A not-for-profit organization based in, or with a mandate in, the region • An owner or operator of a forest-sector facility or industrial asset, such as a sawmill, a pulp and paper mill, or a port or industrial site Owners and operators may apply on their own and are encouraged to apply together with their local economic development organization or municipality. Joint applications are accepted.
Forest biomass surplus	At least 50,000 tonnes per year of surplus forest biomass within the supply zone (Table 1-1).
Industrial site	At least one named site with an address or lot description and its approximate size in acres.

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Requirement	What is required
Letters of support	At least five letters, including at least two from biomass suppliers in the supply zone. Other letters may come from any organization that could provide material support for new plant development: • Project developers • Municipalities and local governments • Indigenous governments • Local businesses • Banks • Colleges • Community organizations Letters from individuals who do not represent an organization are not counted. Letter requirements are in Section 5.
Not already rated	Your industrial site must be at least 50 km drive distance from the centre point of any forest BDO Zone already rated in Canada (Table 3-2).

Table 3-2: Forest BDO Zones already rated in Canada

Centre point	BDO Zone
Quesnel, BC	Quesnel
Grande Prairie, AB	Municipal District of Greenview and County of Grande Prairie
Slave Lake, AB	Lesser Slave Region
Swan River, MB	Swan River
Pembroke, ON	Renfrew County
Trois-Rivières, QC	Trois-Rivières
Saint-Michel-des-Saints, QC	Matawinie
Liverpool, NS	Southwest Nova Scotia

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4 Scoring criteria

The Canada FIRM assessment team scores each application against the four criteria in Table 4-1. Each criterion is made up of two to four sub-criteria, listed in Sections 4.1 to 4.4 with the evidence reviewers look for.

Table 4-1: Criteria and weights

Criterion	Points	The question reviewers are answering
4.1 Biomass supply and supply chain	35	Is there an available, uncommitted surplus of forest biomass that can support a new facility?
4.2 Infrastructure and site readiness	25	Is there a development-ready site in the region that could support a new facility?
4.3 Project developer interest	15	Has a project developer expressed interest in the region, or is one already evaluating it?
4.4 Need and strategic impact	25	What impact would a new biomanufacturing plant have on the region?
Total	100	

4.1 Biomass supply and supply chain (35 points)

Table 4-2: Biomass supply and supply chain

Sub-criterion	Points	What reviewers look for
4.1.1 Available forest biomass surplus	15	The applicant's own estimate of the surplus, selected as a band in the application. Every estimate is verified against a high-level availability estimate prepared by the Canada FIRM assessment team, and the band that estimate supports is scored. At least 50,000 tonnes per year is required; larger confirmed surpluses score higher. Supporting evidence, such as a feedstock study, may be attached to the application but is not required. Applicants who are unsure may select "Not known" (Note: reviewers may not necessarily deduct points for quantities that are not known); if "Not known" is selected then the band is set by the assessment team's estimate.
4.1.2 Current use and competing demand	10	The current markets for forest biomass in your region, as described in the application. As with 4.1.1, the Canada FIRM assessment team confirms this information through its high-level availability assessment and estimates how much of the surplus has no market (left at roadside, burned or without a buyer) or has been made available by recent closures.

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Sub-criterion	Points	What reviewers look for
4.1.3 Supplier interest	10	Letters from biomass suppliers, ideally stating the annual tonnage or volume potentially available to a new project in the proposed BDO Zone. At least two supplier letters are required for eligibility (Table 3-1); three or more letters, each stating a tonnage or volume, earn the highest points. Letters that do not state a tonnage or volume earn fewer points.

4.2 Infrastructure and site readiness (25 points)

Reviewers score the industrial site as the preferred location for a new facility. Alternative sites may be listed to increase the score, and are assessed under sub-criterion 4.2.4.

Table 4-3: Infrastructure and site readiness

Sub-criterion	Points	What reviewers look for
4.2.1 Site ownership and status	8	A development-ready site: zoned for industry (or rezoning under way), with its size in acres stated, the owner's interest to sell or lease. A site with existing industrial infrastructure, such as a closed pulp and paper mill or sawmill, scores highest.
4.2.2 Utilities	7	Electricity, natural gas, water, wastewater and telecommunications available at the site or property line. A utility that is nearby, or is being extended or expanded to the site, can earn partial points. The application records each utility as at the site or property line, available nearby (within 5 km), extension or expansion planned or under way, or not available. If a utility's status is not known, select "Not known".
4.2.3 Transport access	6	A strong road network with highway access. Sites with rail access or port or barge access score higher, and sites with both score highest. The application asks for the nearest highway, rail and port or barge access, each with its distance from the site in kilometres.
4.2.4 Multiple site options	4	One or more alternative sites named, with their utilities and transport access described. Alternative sites named with little detail earn fewer points. Alternative sites with existing industrial infrastructure score highest.

4.3 Project developer interest (15 points)

A project developer is a company that builds and operates facilities that use forest biomass: biofuels, sustainable aviation fuel, renewable natural gas, renewable chemicals, biomass-to-power, biochar, wood pellets, bioproducts or biomaterials. A developer that is already interested in your region is a strong sign that a rating will lead to a project, but regions without a developer can still score well on the other criteria.

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Table 4-4: Project developer interest

Sub-criterion	Points	What reviewers look for
4.3.1 Project developer letters	10	A letter from a project developer or investor. A letter stating that the developer is actively evaluating your region, with the project type and approximate scale, scores higher than a letter expressing general interest. Letters from two or more developers score highest.
4.3.2 Developer conversation	5	With the permission of the applicant, the assessment team may hold a 30-minute conversation with the developer, in which the developer confirms that it is actively evaluating your region, the project type and scale, and what a BDO Zone Rating would contribute to its decision. These points are available only where you name a developer and the developer agrees to the conversation (Section 6).

4.4 Need and strategic impact (25 points)

This criterion reflects the Challenge's goal of supporting Canada's at-risk forest communities. It evaluates the need for, and the impact of, a new biomanufacturing plant in your region.

Table 4-5: Need and strategic impact

Sub-criterion	Points	What reviewers look for
4.4.1 Regional summary and economic need	15	The case for the region, as set out in the application: why the region is a strong candidate for a forest-based facility, the regional economy's dependence on forestry, and any closure or curtailment within the past five years of a major market for forest biomass, such as a pulp mill, named with dates and approximate volumes affected. At least one letter from a sawmill, pulp mill or other forest sector company confirming its need for new markets for forest biomass is required for full points.
4.4.2 Wildfire impact	5	Your community or the surrounding forest has been affected by wildfire, or faces a documented wildfire risk. Evidence may include fire-damaged timber in need of a market, fuel-reduction treatments that generate biomass, or a community wildfire protection plan that calls for fuel removal.
4.4.3 Indigenous leadership and participation	5	An Indigenous-led or Indigenous-owned applicant, or an Indigenous government or organization with territory in the proposed zone taking an active part in the application as a partner, landholder or biomass supplier, evidenced by a letter of support from that Indigenous government or leadership stating its role. Full points require that letter to be uploaded with the application.

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5 Letters of support

Letters of support are the most important attachment in the application. The Letters of Support: Guide and Sample, in English and French, has a checklist and a sample letter for each type of writer and is available in Section 6 of the application and on the Challenge page at ecostrat.com/canada-firm-challenge. Letters must be signed and on the writer's letterhead, and may be in English or French. Letters that add specific figures, facts and commitments in the writer's own words score highest; letters that read as identical copies carry less weight.

Table 5-1: What reviewers look for in each letter

Who writes the letter	What a strong letter states
Biomass suppliers: sawmills, pulp and paper mills, forestry companies, forest licence and tenure holders, woodlot owners, harvesting and trucking contractors	The types of material produced; the approximate tonnes per year the writer could make available to a new project, and for how many years; where that material goes today (sold, left at roadside, burned or shipped out of the region); any markets for the material lost in the past five years; and whether the writer would be willing to discuss a long-term supply agreement.
Project developers and investors	The writer's interest in the region and how far its evaluation has gone; the type of facility, its approximate size and how many tonnes of biomass per year it would need; how an independent BDO Zone Rating of the region would help its decision; and a contact willing to have a confidential 30-minute conversation with the Canada FIRM assessment team.
Municipalities, local governments and regional development agencies	How a new project would benefit the region; how the writer could support a new project (a site, servicing, permits and approvals, staff time, incentives or workforce training); how the writer could benefit from a new project in the region; and, if it can offer a site, the site's name, approximate size and services available.
Indigenous governments and organizations, including Indigenous-owned development corporations	The community or organization and its connection to the region; its role in the application (applicant, co-applicant, partner, landholder, biomass supplier or supporter); and what a new project would mean for the community. This letter is the evidence the assessment team uses for Indigenous participation.
Other organizations: businesses, banks, colleges, community organizations and other local organizations	Why the writer has an interest in a new project in the region; how a new project would benefit the region; how the writer could support a new project (training, logistics, services or local promotion); and how the writer could benefit.

6 Interviews

6.1 Applicant interview

Applications in contention for an award are invited to a video interview of 15 to 45 minutes with the Canada FIRM assessment team. The interview is used to discuss your application in more detail and to

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gather any additional information. Following the interview, a score may be adjusted. Expect to be asked about all details submitted in your application, and for additional information about your region.

6.2 Developer conversation

If your application names a project developer, you will be asked to introduce the assessment team to the developer. With the permission of the applicant, the team may then hold a separate 30-minute video conversation with the developer. The conversation is confidential; nothing the developer shares is passed to the applicant or to other applicants.

7 Final selection

The 15 highest-scoring regions are selected.

Every application is scored by the Canada FIRM assessment team. Before awards are announced, the Ratings Integrity Committee reviews the ranked list and confirms that the published criteria were applied consistently. Every applicant, awarded or not, receives its score on each of the four criteria and a short paragraph of feedback.

Selection decisions are final and are not subject to appeal. Applications are treated as confidential and are reviewed only by the assessment team and the Ratings Integrity Committee. Reviewers declare any conflict of interest and do not score applications from regions in which they have an interest.

8 How to apply and key dates

Applications are submitted through the application portal at ecostrat.com/canada-firm-challenge, in English or French. Applicants unable to use the portal may complete the Word application form, available on the Challenge page, and submit it by email to canadafirmchallenge@ecostrat.com. Late applications are not accepted. The account holder and the primary contact receive a confirmation of receipt within two business days of submitting. Questions about the criteria or the application, or requests for assistance with an application, may be directed to the Canada FIRM team at canadafirmchallenge@ecostrat.com.

Table 8-1: Key dates

Date	Milestone
November 3, 2026	Applications open.
November 9–20, 2026	Informational webinars. Register at ecostrat.com/canada-firm-challenge.
December 3, 2026	Applications close at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time.
December 2026	Eligibility checks, scoring, interviews and developer conversations.
January 2027	Awardees announced.

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