

British Columbia  
2003 Firestorm  
Provincial Review



A submission by:

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and  
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On behalf of the Regional Emergency Response

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**On behalf of the citizens of Kelowna we would like to thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the Okanagan Mountain Park wildfire. We are grateful for the efforts of all those involved. Given the nature of this fire, although we suffered incredible loss, we are fortunate not to have suffered a single loss of life.**

***Roles and responsibilities of all levels of government to plan for and respond to interface fires - to determine if the roles and responsibilities are clearly set out and understood by all levels of government.***

### **Regional Roles and Responsibilities**

Local response was excellent because of a strong, well planned and practiced Regional Emergency Plan, operated under the BC Emergency Management System (BCERMS) with a full time Emergency Coordinator. In addition staff from the City of Kelowna, the Regional District of the Central Okanagan, all local governments and their respective Fire Departments worked together very well. This was in large part due to strong local ties and an up-to-date mutual aid agreement. Very little would be changed from the local perspective, if such an event were to happen again.

### **Provincial Roles and Responsibilities.**

*(These comments relate to the operation of the E.O.C., as Chief Zimmerman is addressing suppression issues separately.)*

It was very evident that the various provincial agencies involved with forest fires had never run into a situation where a larger city/region had been threatened in this manner before. The provincial agencies involved were faced with a well-organized regional response team (E.O.C. and Fire Departments) who would not abdicate responsibility for their community, nor did they need the type of support normally provided to smaller communities. This created problems early on in the emergency. There were situations where “consultants” sent to help were of little or no use, while vital information on the fire situation was not forthcoming in a timely manner. It is fair to say that when it was realized that the situation was different in Kelowna, the provincial agencies quickly changed their approach and began to work more closely with the regional response. By Saturday August 23<sup>rd</sup> our approach to media relations was accepted and most of our requests for assistance were being met, and support from PREOC and Forestry had improved.

*Recommendation: Provincial Emergency response procedures must be revised to allow for a true partnership role with local government in responding to emergencies.*

***Risk assessment processes for determining the potential for interface fires - to assess the methods used in determining what the risks might be from interface fires and how local governments and the province determine the response to fires threatening communities.***

Risk assessment is a costly undertaking for local governments. The City of Kelowna, through its Official Community Plan, has taken steps to identify Wildfire Hazard Areas. The RDCO (one of the first regional districts to do so) and the City of Kelowna both have policies ensuring that, upon subdivision or re-zoning of property within interface areas, a Wildfire Hazard Assessment must be done by a qualified professional experienced in fire abatement. A notice on property title advising that such an assessment has been done is also required.

Once more detailed analysis of the fire is undertaken existing policies may need to be amended. What is more critical however, is determining what risk assessment processes are in place at a provincial level to deal with Crown lands or provincial parks. For example were any of the recommendations in the 1997 Wildfire Report for Okanagan Provincial Park implemented? As was evident in this case, the Okanagan Mountain Fire was out of control long before it moved into the Regional District.

*Recommendation: The B.C. Government immediately begin to undertake a wildfire risk assessment of Parks and Crown holdings with adjacent or near communities. The Local Government Act should be amended to include wildfire hazard assessment as required content in Official Community Plans.*

*Mitigation strategies used for reducing the potential for interface fires, including the development of prevention strategies and hazard, risk and vulnerability assessments.*

While new developments can and are being designed to mitigate against wildfire, large tracts of land either previously developed or currently untouched as holding properties remain in private hands. There is limited ability under current legislation for the local government to force the wildfire assessment and mitigation of private land. In addition there is little incentive for private lands owners to undertake costly wildfire mitigation prior to development.

*Suggestion: Explore incentives or legislation to ensure mitigation of wildfire within the urban –rural interface areas. Wildfire does not respect boundaries and mitigation is costly. Without some form of incentive and changes to legislation very little will happen.(see Compensation for more suggestions related to mitigation)*

*Planning capabilities at the local, provincial and federal level to mitigate the impacts of interface fires (i.e. evacuation planning) - to assess the level of planning and the ability of communities to activate those plans.*

## **Mapping**

Geographic Information Systems proved to be vital to the E.O.C.'s planning and response. Unfortunately a seamless mapping base of the region, city and provincial lands was not in place for all of the agencies to share on day one. This proved particularly

problematic in pre-planning and ultimately in having Evacuations Orders approved. Precious minutes were wasted checking and amending orders due to mapping errors caused by the use of different bases.

*Recommendation: The various agencies involved should have the capability of sharing geographic information. The Region and the City of Kelowna will be taking steps to ensure a single seamless base exists for the Kelowna/RDCO interface. The capability for data sharing between Forestry and Regional District is a must and protocols should be in place **before** an event takes place.*

## **Boundaries**

There is no consideration of emergency planning in the delineation of boundaries for the various emergency agencies and the Regional Districts within which they operate. In particular this means confusion can arise when fire-impacted areas cross Regional District boundaries and first responder boundaries (which do not necessarily match), and when the relationship between PEP boundaries and the boundaries of the various E.O.C.'s and P.R.E.O.C.'s is not crystal clear.

*Recommendation: A review of the various agencies and their boundaries should be undertaken with emergency preparedness as a consideration.*

*Command structure for responding to provincial emergencies and disasters – to assess the method of response used by the province in support of local government and the response by local government, including deployment of equipment and personnel; and to assess wild land-urban strategies and tactics for responding to interface fires.*

## **Evacuation**

The process of enacting evacuation orders was slow and cumbersome. Although, at least three or four people in Kelowna were assigned senior positions by the Fire Commissioner and these same people decided on areas to be evacuated, all orders had to go from Kelowna to Kamloops to Victoria and back again. It is our understanding that in other areas this could take up to eight hours. The matter was made worse when critical time was wasted due to the fact that different mapping bases were used. In most cases the actual evacuation plan was formulated and implementation proceeded long before the ground checked and amended Final Order was issued.

*Recommendation: In large scale emergencies Evacuation Orders must be issued within the E.O.C. This point cannot be emphasized enough. Local knowledge is critical to effective implementation of the evacuation; representatives of the Fire Commissioner's Office empowered to make those decisions must therefore be in the E.O.C..*

## **Rescinding Evacuation Orders and Re-entry**

Decisions on the lifting of evacuations orders were poorly coordinated. Despite protests from the E.O.C., evacuation orders were lifted with little consultation as soon as the provincial agencies deemed that the “wildfire threat” was over. This occurred despite the fact that the neighbourhoods contained potentially life threatening hazards. It was only through intervention by the local representative of the Fire Commissioner’s Office, who put a “Public Safety Order” in place (through the Director, Provincial Emergency Coordination Centre) after the wildfire orders were lifted, that an orderly re-entry occurred. The actual implementation of the re-entry also required the RCMP to use their powers of restricting access to areas to allow local residents a few hours to return home in an orderly manner.

*Recommendation: Better coordination of the rescinding of evacuation orders and re-entry must be implemented to ensure lives are not lost in the aftermath of an emergency.*

## **Coordination of Resources**

Much of the major equipment in the Okanagan Valley was taken over by Forestry, leaving very little for local use. At times much of the Forestry-commandeered equipment sat idle and would not be released for City use. The opposite may have also been true.

*Recommendation: More work needed by everyone to develop roles, responsibilities and strategies allowing for the efficient use of equipment between local government and provincial agencies*

***Training and exercising programs for emergency response to all-hazard emergencies and disasters at the community and provincial level.***

Currently municipalities are required to have emergency plans, however Regional Districts are not. This will create problems as disasters do not respect municipal boundaries. P.E.P. should provide a provincial template and training to all Regional Districts so that these plans are easier to create. In this region, the responsibility for formulating the plan is regional, however the coordination and staffing is provided by the City of Kelowna Fire Department. This arrangement works well in the Central Okanagan.

*Suggestions: All Regional Districts be required to have Regional Emergency Plans.*

*Role of **volunteers** in responding to fires - to assess how mechanisms for involving volunteers can be supported and enhanced.*

## **Volunteers**

Volunteers played a vital role in many aspects of the emergency. Clearly Emergency Social Services and Search and Rescue, to name two, could not function without volunteers. In fact it is fair to say that if it wasn't for the outpouring of help from the community in a wide variety of areas the people evacuated in Kelowna could not have been dealt in a timely manner.

While volunteers are vital, it is important they are properly trained for the roles they are to fill. It is often difficult to keep volunteers involved and interested in the absence of situations which allow them to use the training. This year of course was an exception.

It was noted in the media that trained wildfire firefighters were not being hired by Forestry to fight this summer's fires. Assuming this is true (which may be a big assumption), many of these issues should be sorted out prior to any emergency. In the middle of a firestorm, when lives are at risk, it is not time to train recruits or to find out that someone overstated their qualifications on a resume. During an emergency no one has the time or resources to deal with these claims. Trained personnel and professional firefighters were needed who could operate in a coordinated manner.

*Suggestions: A centralized roster and screening system for qualified forest firefighters, if not in existence now, could be available prior to the fire season.*

***Compensation and assistance for the province - to assess the framework for assistance from the federal government for abnormal expenditures by the province***

## **Disaster Financial Assistance**

The Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) program is outdated and should be renegotiated with the Federal Government. An example is the difficulty experienced by people who recently suffered from the flash flood and debris flow in Kelowna. The debris flow occurred in a one in 200 year storm event, which was exacerbated by the wildfire leaving the slopes hydrophobic and void of grasses, bushes and trees to absorb the rainfall. Forest fires do not fall within the DFA guidelines for individuals, and flooding is a separate response despite the fact that it is often exacerbated by a fire. DFA does not, but should, cover costs for mitigation works. It is also felt that the \$100,000 limit per household is too low and should be reviewed.

## **Private Forestland Rehabilitation**

The Okanagan Mountain Park fire decimated a large area (7500 hectares) of private forested land, which has a huge impact not only on the landowners but also potentially on surrounding public and other private lands. The inability of private property owners to

rehabilitate their properties due to lack of capacity to do so leads to the following potential effects:

- 1) Continuance of fire hazard potential due to dead debris accumulation.
- 2) Increased potential for erosive conditions and property damage caused by mudslides.
- 3) Water quality impacts due to silt and mud.
- 4) No restorative planting or ground cover leading to prolonged timeframe for normal hydrological conditions to return (potential for flooding).
- 5) Loss of habitat without doing restoration and rehabilitation of the land.
- 6) Social and economic loss to individuals and community (no ability to use or develop the lands).
- 7) Increased pine beetle infestation and further hazard potential to adjacent lands with future losses to forested lands in public and private ownership.

There is a strong link between mountain pine beetle epidemics and wildfire. We urge this Enquiry to recommend to the Federal Government (Natural Resources Canada) that they expand the Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative (80% funding to private lands) to areas in BC that have experienced extensive wildfire or to create a new program with similar funding to private landowners for rehabilitation of their forested lands.

*Recommendation: The Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) program should be renegotiated with the Federal Government.*

*Provincial structure required to deal with **communications and public information** during emergencies and disasters - to determine the timeliness and effectiveness of communications.*

## **Communications**

Good communications with the media and the resulting up-to date flow of information to the public were the key factors in the success of the local response. Detailed, factual and frequent communication with the public is paramount in any emergency. It builds trust with staff and elected officials when the public feel they are fully aware of all that is happening. Each EOC should be responsible for handling its own public information program as the directors deem best suits their community and the unique circumstances at the time.

All media should be treated equally (no “scoops”) and any new information should be disseminated as soon as confirmed and approved. Locally that often meant four or five news releases a day, plus a news briefing. At the height of the fire six and seven news releases were issued daily. The availability of staff and elected officials (EOC Director, Fire Chief and other officials, firefighters and the Mayor) to conduct frequent interviews is also a key element of open communications. The public wants to hear from those directly involved and in charge.

Media tours, when safe to do so, are also an important element in communicating with the public. Emergency situations and the response to same are stories of public interest. People want to see the images for themselves. Pictures are not only key to telling the story, they also play a significant role in helping the public feel assured they are getting “the whole story”.

Since criticism of media access can arise, it is helpful to have a ready explanation as to why the media may be allowed in prior to residents. (Journalism is an inherently dangerous business. Members of the media were entering an active fire scene and knew the risks. They were also escorted by RCMP, Fire Department personnel and an Information Officer who explained the rules and restrictions. (ie. Don't show street signs, don't show house numbers, don't trespass on private property.)

If media access is not provided the media will try to get their story regardless, potentially causing problems for themselves and others. If they do gain unapproved access there are no restrictions on their activities.

In terms of provincial structure - some further discussion should occur regarding what communications role the Provincial Emergency Program plays in a local emergency. (How do the PI roles at PEP and at local E.O.C.'s inter-relate? What does PEP expect from local PI staff? Can PEP offer guidance in terms of relationships with national and international media?) Locally PEP was of assistance in setting up the initial large scale news briefings; then of further assistance by phone when the briefings continued with local staff in terms of the set up required, the technological links for out of town media, etc. One difficulty - Public Information staff at PEP kept changing and therefore continuity was somewhat difficult.

*Suggestions: It would be beneficial for PEP to consider offer training for those in smaller communities who may need assistance in terms of how best to handle swarms of regional and national media.*

*Suggestions: Methods of incorporating the media into the process is important in large scale emergencies and should become part of the PEP template.*

### **Inter-regional Communication/Public Information**

For two days (Aug. 19-20), before Penticton/Naramata EOC Information personnel were in place, the Kelowna EOC received dozens if not hundreds of calls from residents in the South Okanagan. Kelowna EOC did not have the information they were seeking. (i.e. Do I live in an evacuation area? Where should we go if we're evacuated? etc.) It was frustrating for the Kelowna E.O.C. because we didn't want to give them the wrong information or tell them to call someone else, particularly when we didn't know who to direct them to. (Kelowna EOC eventually got the information, but only after making many phone calls to Penticton and Kamloops.) Certainly those residents who were looking for information were even more frustrated. There were also many queries from the media about the South Okanagan, as they too wanted to provide useful information



for viewers and listeners throughout their broadcast areas. The same situation occurred in later weeks with residents of Idabel Lake.

*Recommendation: PEP should proactively provide pertinent information to each E.O.C.'s Public Information staff regarding adjacent regions' contact numbers.*

The scale of the fire and the need for information quickly overwhelmed the resources assigned (three experienced Public Information Officers). A fourth could have been utilized in an emergency of this scope. Other communities need to be aware of the staffing requirements necessary to ensure the job is handled properly. In particular, a Public Information Officer needs to be on deck early (5:00 a.m. if no one is required overnight) to check on overnight activity with the appropriate personnel, issue a brief news release and contact each local radio station to provide tape prior to the 6:00 a.m. news. This satisfies the media's immediate needs and provides residents with the latest information as soon as they wake.

All Public Information Officers (local/regional/Forestry/RCMP/Armed Forces) should be working in close proximity early in the process. (Locally RCMP and Forestry Info Officers worked directly out of the EOC.) This ensures a co-ordinated approach with the media. This also ensures media tours are organized properly and sanctioned by all appropriate agencies.

While each agency may choose to issue its own news releases, consideration could be given to issuing joint news releases.

Joint news briefings are essential to bring all players together for the media. This also reduces the number of media calls the PI Officers need to handle every morning.

*Recommendation: Better coordination of communication resources is necessary early in the process. This by no means is meant to suggest that any one agency should control content, but rather share information and methods of information delivery.*

Media demands can dominate communications resources very quickly. This created a second problem as the ability of the E.O.C. to answer direct inquiries was constantly overwhelmed. The growing need for information impacted all communications as residents used any telephone number available to try and get information.

The Regional Emergency Plan calls for the establishment of a call centre to address this issue. We initially set our call centre in the EOC but it quickly became apparent we needed further assistance, as well as a separate location for this function. Shaw Cable generously volunteered their staff of professional telephone operators and their Call Centre facility, which turned out to be a wonderful asset. During the height of the fire it was staffed round the clock. It is imperative that all communities make the effort to have a Call Centre plan organized in advance; there are too many other demands at the height of an emergency. While PEP can offer assistance here, we found our residents

appreciated being able to dial a local number. Again, providing residents with timely information is critical to keeping a community informed and calm.

*Suggestion: Recommendation that co-ordination of the Call Centre shift from Public Info to Logistics and Personnel. Public Info Officers are too busy preparing news releases, handling media inquiries and arranging interviews to handle the actual set up of the call centre. Once the logistics are taken care of, Personnel can handle staffing. Public Info will ensure the call centre personnel have all news releases, fact sheets and messaging information as soon as physically possible.*

The use of the internet proved an invaluable tool for public information. The internet became the most immediate means of communication during the Okanagan Mountain Park fire other than news briefings carried live. One local site registered up to one million hits per day. News releases were posted almost the moment they were sent by e-mail. The internet is a world-wide source of information available at the click of a button, and it offers an important archive feature.

We in no way wish to diminish the 24/7 commitment of all local media. All media (local, regional, national) did an extraordinary job of keeping the public informed and instructed.

However in our view the excellent detailed information available on a local private website met a huge community need in three main ways:

- Information was available at all times of the day and night from anywhere in the world
- New information was available instantly
- Members of the community found it to be a new “town hall” and used it as an interactive tool posting their own fire photos.

*Suggestion: That the Provincial Government take the necessary steps to include the internet as a dynamic Public Information tool. Plans should be prepared which would allow community websites to be up and running in every major emergency.*

*Suggestion: Communities should consider the role of their Information Services technologists in an emergency. These specialists play a critical role in ensuring websites are operating properly and postings can be done round the clock.*