

## **EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: ENHANCING PREPAREDNESS & PREVENTION**

### **Opening Statement**

British Columbia's framework for disaster management has been severely tested in recent years. The effects of climate change and extreme weather events have had profound impact on our province, and it has become apparent that we collectively must adjust to a new normal of prevention and preparedness to mitigate impacts to the safety, health, and livelihoods of our people and communities.

### **Background**

The wildfires and flood events of 2017 through 2021 were absolutely devastating, and impacted communities like rarely seen before. Spring flooding in 2017 resulted in the evacuation of 2,500 people, mostly in the Okanagan, followed by a damaging flood event in 2018 that forced over 5,000 individuals from their homes in Grand Forks and other small, rural communities. The impact of the wildfire seasons in these same years will be felt for many years to come. Over the course of Summer 2017, over 65,000 people were evacuated from communities, mostly in the Cariboo as a record 1.2 million hectares of our forests were burned. This record of total hectares burned would be surpassed in 2018 with 1.3 million hectares burned. The City of Prince George hosted more evacuees than any other community in British Columbia during this time. The cost of wildfire suppression alone in these years was \$568 million and \$350 million respectively and resulted in provincial states of emergency to be called. These catastrophic events have disproportionately impacted small, rural and Indigenous communities through traumatic evacuation experiences and longer-term impact to their forest and resource sector economies. Further to this, British Columbians have dealt with the health consequences of severely negative air quality, and the wellbeing of family, friends, and loved ones.

The wildfire events of 2021 were absolutely devastating, and impacted communities like rarely seen before. The Summer wildfires in 2021 resulted in 1600 fires burning nearly 8700 square kilometres, and was the third worst on record in terms of area burned. One of the most notable and devastating fires was the Lytton Creek wildfire. Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth declared a state of emergency, which came weeks after municipal leaders asked for one. There was \$565 million spent on fighting the wildfires. There were 181 evacuation orders and 304 evacuation alerts. Although this was a devastating incident, it did not surpass the 2017 fire season.

The 2021 floods were even more unprecedented with the closures of all major highways in and out of the lower mainland (highways 1, 3, 5 and 7), closure of a significant number of arterial roads along with parts of highways 8 and 13. Rebuilding of this infrastructure is still taking place and is expected to take years to completely rebuild to a higher standard. The flooding caused catastrophic damage to the Cities of Abbotsford and Chilliwack and in particular the Sumas Prairie and to the Towns of Merritt and Princeton. The cost of the damages for these floods is still unknown.

Managing such disasters is understandably an incredibly complex operation. Emergency Management British Columbia (EMBC) provides leadership in emergency management on behalf of the Province, and aims to work directly with local governments, Indigenous communities, provincial ministries, other jurisdictions and volunteers in a coordinated effort to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. Disaster events are incredibly challenging to plan for between all of these parties, but the response and recovery efforts rely on this preparation. It is important that the lessons learned in 2017, 2018 and 2021 be incorporated into the emergency management framework for the province.

As a response to the 2017 disaster events, the Province commissioned an independent review lead by George Abbott and Chief Maureen Chapman, resulting in the May 2018 report, *Addressing the New Normal: 21st Century Disaster Management in British Columbia*. The report contains 108 recommendations with key themes of partnerships & participation, knowledge & tools, communication & awareness, and investment. An overarching theme of collaboration, planning, and prevention is also prevalent as a strategic shift from the often-reactionary response within emergency management. As referenced in the report:

“It is imperative that we move to a multi-year, multi-pronged approach to community safety — one that involves concerted, proactive investment before emergencies happen.”

Such planning and prevention involve many stakeholders, most notably First Nations communities, local governments, Federal departments, and Provincial ministries. It also includes private sector expertise, forest licensees, tenure holders, and private landowners.

Many recommendations of the Abbot/Chapman report were implemented, however, it is clear that the response to disasters still requires enhancements in certain areas. The business community needs to understand what recommendations were implemented, what worked, and what didn't work and why. A full audit is required to assess the failures and successes of the implementation of the Abbot/Chapman recommendations.

The provincial government has a role in relieving supply chain pressures by supporting the private sector. Through industry engagement, the provincial government can learn where supply chains became vulnerable during disasters, and how to strengthen them.

The business community plays a vital role in the response and recovery efforts through on-demand and expert support to execute operations including feeding and supporting firefighters, volunteers, and evacuees alike. The same businesses may also employ and could potentially be run by community members affected in areas where wildfires, floods, and other disasters may occur. Local businesses could also play an expanded role in providing food and beverage, lodging and other needed support streams to evacuees. Forest licensees and forest professionals are often the placed to support the planning and execution of interface fire protection and overall fuel management objectives. The Province could also create efficiencies by opening up processes to new innovative tools from BC businesses. For example, the Emergency Social Services (ESS) registration process for evacuees is paper-based and inefficient

and would benefit from technological solutions. By bringing the BC private sector, including tenure holders, professionals, and the businesses community into the preparation and prevention process, it will not only build British Columbia's capacity to prepare for, or even prevent disasters, but the following benefits can be achieved:

- Better awareness, coordination, and formal linkages to technical expertise and operational capabilities;
- Coordinated area-based planning and land use objectives, including fuel management;
- Local knowledge, relationships, and experience from BC-based contractors, both from technical experts and employees, during emergency operations compared to contractors from other jurisdictions;
- An understanding of supply chain assets;
- Potential technological improvements compared to stale and inefficient practices and systems in place.

### **The Chamber Recommends**

That the Provincial Government:

1. Assess the success of the abbot/chapman report to determine its effectiveness;
2. Develop a long-term vision and action plan to move towards disaster prevention, including strategic flood mitigation, and interface wildfire prevention;
3. Develop partnerships with forest licensees, tenure holders, professionals and the business community to form operational agreements and new prevention initiatives;
4. Develop a priority policy for BC based companies, contractors, and consultants for emergency planning, and for emergency operations;
5. Seek technological solutions to support the Province's Emergency Management system, and particularly those that benefit front-line workers;
6. Recognize the critical support that local community-based businesses provide to emergency response efforts, and ensure that voucher programs, accommodations, and other support programs are opened up to the broader business community; and
7. Engage stakeholders, including logistics providers, to enhance the supply chain issues exposed through on-going emergencies and that this engagement result in a proposal on how BC can ensure secure supply chains to all corners of the province.
8. Encourage communities to develop business-based asset/suppliers lists of available equipment and resources that can be accessed during an emergency.

**Submitted by the Prince George Chamber of Commerce, Chilliwack Chamber of Commerce, and Surrey Board of Trade**