



REGIONAL DISTRICT  
of Fraser-Fort George

Public Safety  
30 June 2015

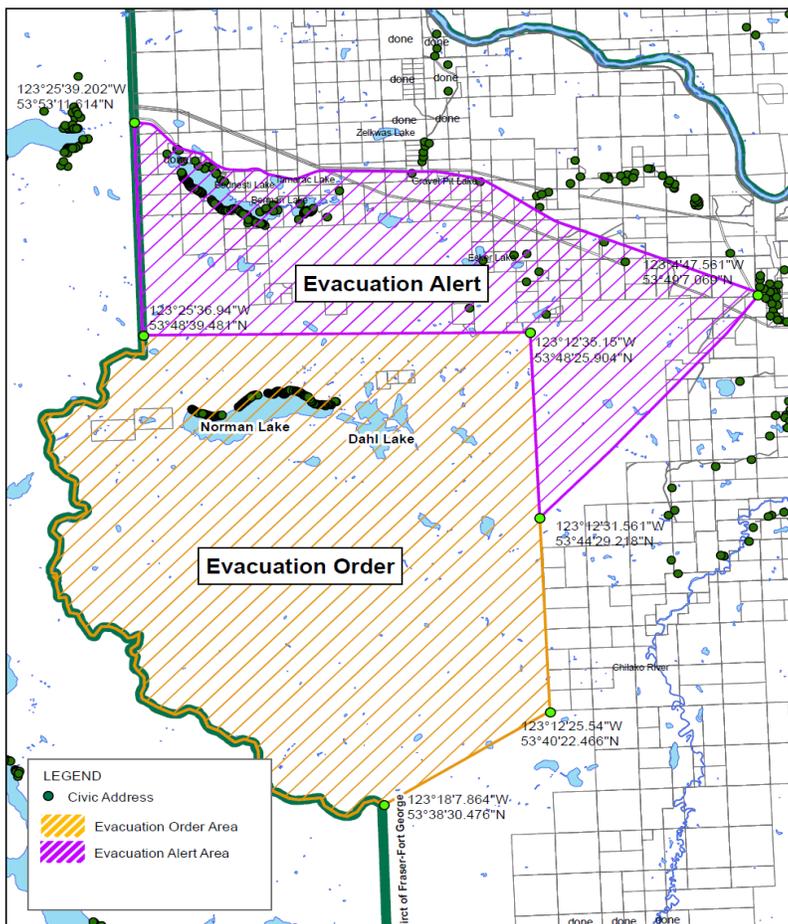
# Executive Summary - Lessons Learned in Managing the State of Local Emergency Declared for the Little Bobtail Lake Interface Fire

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## Purpose of this Summary Report

This summary report has been prepared to inform Regional District of Fraser-Fort George (RDFFG) constituents, local governments, Emergency Management British Columbia (EMBC) and other stakeholders of the RDFFG lessons learned in responding to the Little Bobtail Lake Interface Fire.

## Situation



The Little Bobtail Lake fire was first reported on the evening of Friday, 08 May 2015. Wildfire Management Branch (WMB) personnel responded to this fire early Saturday morning, 09 May. During the Sunday evening of 10 May the WMB determined it necessary to recommend to the RDFFG that, due to the risk to life and property, an evacuation of Norman Lake residents be carried out. In response to this recommendation, the RDFFG activated an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) and implemented an Evacuation Order for Norman Lake with the residents being notified by the RCMP in the early hours of 11 May. Further, on the recommendation of WMB, the RDFFG implemented an Evacuation Alert for Berman Lake, Bednesti Lake and Dahl Lake Road residents effective 0800 on 11 May. See the map at Figure 1.

The RDFFG EOC continued to provide public information, Emergency Social Services support to evacuees, livestock relocation support and, finally, coordinated the resident re-entry process when the risk had passed. The EOC was closed on 03 June.



## **RDFFG Review Process**

On 10/11 June 2015, the RDFFG conducted a review of the regional district's handling of the emergency event. The review was conducted in four sessions over the two days and involved the RDFFG Board of Directors, RDFFG senior management, EOC operations and a sampling of constituents impacted by the fire. The value of this review method - as observed, is considered to be a best practice noted in this report.

## **The Role of the RDFFG Board of Directors**

The authority to declare the state of local emergency rested with the RDFFG Board Chair and the Board Directors. Implementing the Declaration of a State of Local Emergency went smoothly. The Directors were kept well informed throughout the event.

Directors have a duty to their constituents to ensure a declaration is imposed appropriately. And, as seen in this event, a process must be in place to make the declaration quickly and efficiently. A high level of trust between the Board and the Chief Administrative Officer is required to achieve those goals. Involving Directors in EOC exercises, conducting annual risk assessment briefings and declaration tutorials at a board meeting would build on the high level of trust already present and further enhance Board Directors' preparedness to deal with emergencies in their electoral areas.

The Board recognized the importance of maintaining a positive working relationship with adjoining local authorities facing a common emergency event. The RDFFG and the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN) worked cooperatively to deal with many issues related to the Little Bobtail Lake fire.

## **The Role of RDFFG Senior Management**

RDFFG senior management approached the emergency response and consequence management as an RDFFG team responsibility. They recognized the RDFFG EOC to be a management resource used to strengthen regular capacity versus a separate identity siphoning staff from their regular duties.

Staff at all levels felt connected to the response being managed by the EOC. They wanted to understand the support the RDFFG was providing to those impacted by the event. Regular RDFFG staff wide updates were an effective method to strengthen the team approach.

EOC activations do put a strain on day-to-day activity, particularly on departments with a small staff. Senior management worked together to assess and manage the workload across all departments while providing qualified staff to satisfy EOC staffing requirements.

## **The EOC**

The RDFFG EOC operated effectively in managing the consequences of the interface fire.

Fortunately, activation of an EOC is rare and an after-hours activation even more so. Not surprising, EOC activations typically uncover issues and this activation was no exception. The RDFFG has documented a number of technical, procedural and preparedness issues that, when rectified, will make activations go more smoothly. An active EOC exercise program is an important tool in making continuous improvements in EOC operation.

Communication is central to an EOC's ability to gather information, develop an in-depth understanding of the risks associated with the event, make appropriate plans and provide information and warnings to the public. Information flow with the Wildfire Management Branch (WMB) Fire Centre and Incident Commander was timely and informative. Community association leaders were instrumental in keeping information flowing to evacuees and those in the Evacuation Alert area. Communication with the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako and other stakeholders worked well.

The EOC Information Officer had an excellent rapport with the WMB information staff at all levels as they worked together to ensure coordinated messaging was available to the public. Traditional media and social media were used to keep constituents informed. It was noted that social media was considered more effective than traditional media in providing updated information and in reported constituent uptake.

Implementation of the Evacuation Order, Evacuation Alert and, finally, the re-entry of evacuees into the Norman Lake residential area required the EOC to coordinate the activities of a number of agencies. This EOC responsibility was carried out efficiently and effectively.

Reception Center functions for Emergency Social Services were provided using the RD Service Centre facilities. This was an effective and cost efficient way of assisting evacuees.

The possibility of group lodging loomed as larger evacuations of residents was considered probable. Planning focused on evacuated residents being provided services in Prince George. It was noted that additional region-wide planning would enhance the ability to transition from hotels to group lodging if required in the future.

While the evacuation order was delivered by the RCMP, executing the alert notification was done through media/social media and community association emails. This was chosen to minimize the impact on available staff and utilize existing community networks. Distributing alert notifications door-to-door has a number of benefits to consider. It is an opportunity to conduct an area reconnaissance so if/when an evacuation order is issued, the EOC knows how long it will take to go door-to-door, how many staff resources should be assigned, have determined any issues navigating the area (particularly since house numbers though assigned are not routinely posted) and can be an opportunity to educate residents with respect to the threat and advise on actions necessary should an evacuation order be issued. Having both options documented and available to the EOC would contribute to operational flexibility.

## **The Impacted Community**

Those impacted by the Little Bobtail Lake fire praised the support provided by the RDFFG EOC.

A resident who evacuated immediately when notified at 0300 on 11 May second guessed their actions when some neighbours chose not to go until the morning, if at all, as the fire appeared to be distant. In the end, EOC staff carried the burden of not knowing if all residents had evacuated.

Understanding the current threat is shown to be an important factor in resident's decision to comply immediately with an evacuation order. Some factors in this event were:

- Aggressive fire behavior;
- The fire spotting well ahead of the main wildfire;
- Difficulty in determining rate of advance at night;
- Single access winding road with the possibility of smoke obscuring visibility; and
- Ensuring residents know that responders will unlikely be able to come back to rescue them.

This level of fire information is not normally known by the evacuees or in detail by those executing the evacuation. Community preparedness education is essential to developing resident trust that an immediate evacuation will always be in their best interest. Threat messaging and a means to confirm resident compliance will be reviewed by the RDFFG.

Commercial Livestock owners are not necessarily aware of the support available to assist in livestock relocation. Preparedness planning with owners and livestock associations outlining owner responsibilities is something the RDFFG could undertake to ensure the process continues to work well, particularly if larger numbers are threatened.

A number of additional comments highlighted constituent concerns:

- Lack of cellular coverage in the area under threat;
- Concern for security of property;
- Personnel manning road blocks not having current information;
- Community association discussing standardized house numbers;
- Media broadcasting out of date information;
- Public desensitized to the alert – accessing the alert area without regard to the risk posed by their actions/activities; and,
- The fire not being real to those on alert - not visible, no smoke or red sky - may impact the sense of urgency which may play against the EOC's ability to gain community cooperation in a subsequent event.

## **The Next Step**

Every emergency response review provides the opportunity to learn what can be done to improve preparedness and response. Through the course of the RDFFG review, a number of technical, procedural and preparedness issues were identified. The next step is for the staff to review each issue, develop improvements and revise the RDFFG emergency plan accordingly.

### **Technical**

1. Rationalize and update all Information Technology requirements for the EOC.
2. Establish all-hours access procedures to the dedicated EOC.
3. Review and rationalize the suitability of the EOC facilities with respect to workspace requirements.
4. Develop an EOC facility guide and relocation checklist.
5. Optimize methods for displaying information to ensure the EOC is maintaining an up-to-date common operating picture.

### **Procedural**

1. Develop the four level emergency event review process as policy.
2. In the emergency plan, develop the use of the dedicated EOC reception desk to screen and direct incoming calls to the appropriate EOC staffer.
3. Daily emergency response activity updates be provided to the RDFFG staff.
4. Review options for executing alert and order notifications.
5. Develop communication methods ensuring EOC teams deployed to an incident area have continuous contact with the EOC.
6. Develop a regular contact list update procedure.
7. Review methods to enhance evacuation order compliance and tracking.

### **Preparedness**

1. Review EOC essential staff requirements.
2. Plan to have elected officials participate in EOC exercises.
3. Provide Board presentations on upcoming risks, elected official roles and responsibilities in emergency events.
4. Encourage and assist livestock owner/association preparedness planning.

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