

# SUBMISSION TO THE FLOOD AND WILDFIRE REVIEW

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March 14, 2018

## Introduction

The BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) represents more than 75,000 workers in various sectors and occupations in more than 550 bargaining units throughout British Columbia. Our diverse membership includes direct government employees who protect children and families, provide income assistance to vulnerable individuals, fight forest fires, deliver care to people with mental health issues and addictions, administer B.C.'s public system of liquor control, licensing and distribution, staff correctional facilities and the courts, and provide technical, administrative and clerical services.

Our membership also comprises workers throughout the broader public and private sectors where members provide clinical care and home support services for seniors, a diverse range of community social services, highway and bridge maintenance, post-secondary instruction and administration, as well as other non-governmental industries, including financial services, hospitality, retail and gaming.

The events of last summer affected all parts of our membership. Our members in key agencies like the BC Wildfire Service and Emergency Management BC, were on the frontlines all summer. Indeed, BCGEU members from across the public service took on significant roles in management, coordination, administration, communications, volunteer coordination and emergency services.

As well, our members were evacuated from their homes and their worksites, volunteered in the response effort, supported their family, friends and neighbours, and are now involved in the recovery process. Throughout, BCGEU members demonstrated their tremendous skill, resilience and commitment to public service.

*"It was a privilege to help the Province in a time of need, and although the days were long and hard, as was the time away from family, I will gladly do it again in the future"*

*"Everyone worked to the best of their capacity and abilities. We saw the entire emergency management community dig in their heels and support regardless of whether their community was impacted or not."*

Many things worked well in the provincial response to last summer's disasters. Despite the worst wildfire season on record and the unprecedented evacuation of 45,000 British Columbians from their homes, no lives were lost. B.C. should be very proud of its emergency response systems and the people who deliver them. However, it is also true that our systems are far from perfect, and improvements can be made to ensure that we are better prepared and more effective in our response going forward.

Based on the stories and concerns brought forward by BCGEU members, the following submission provides a response to the review. It is organized according to the review's feedback guide to cover planning and preparedness, prevention and mitigation, response, and recovery. The voices of our members are included throughout the document.

## Planning and preparedness

The unprecedented scale of last summer's fires and floods overwhelmed the provincial agencies responsible for emergency management, and in the future, we can only expect more of the same. It is critical for the province to invest in planning and preparedness now, so that we are better equipped in the future.

## Emergency Management BC

First, there is a pressing need to build capacity within the key provincial emergency management agencies. Emergency Management BC (EMBC) is the lead agency coordinating B.C.'s emergency management activities, and its ongoing work on planning and preparedness contributed greatly to the success of the provincial response last summer. However, last year EMBC staff reported tremendous workloads, and their regular duties were seriously backlogged. Improving provincial emergency planning and

preparedness, as well as the capacity to respond to large scale disasters, requires investing in more capacity in the agency. To better support and expand its work, we recommend that the budget and staffing levels at EMBC be increased.

*“EMBC was well-prepared to work smoothly with regional districts and municipalities. The province went from the flooding events in the Interior into the wildfire season with no break in between – and people stepped up all across the province.”*

*“We need more emergency planning staff for EMBC, and all ministries.”*

*“In EMBC, we need more staff to adequately meet the needs of the province and its citizens in large scale events. And the province needs to assign EMBC the appropriate resources to plan and prepare for the recovery.”*

Similarly, more investment is needed in the BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) to advance planning and preparedness for wildfires. In an open letter to the premier last fall about the urgent need to improve our resilience to wildfire, a group of fire experts said B.C. needs “significant increases in human resources for all facets of wildland fire management.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the provincial budget for wildland fire management remains frozen at the same level it has been since 2011, and in recent years positions have been cut from the BC Wildfire Service. Going forward, more people are needed for wildfire crews, to train local people, and to do landscape and prescribed fire planning.

Beyond adding staff, our members also say broader organizational change is needed to strengthen the BC Wildfire Service. First, continuing to build a positive and inclusive work environment where all BCWS staff feel valued should be a priority. The organization is known for its strong sense of pride and esprit des corps, and BCWS leadership needs to take steps to maintain and foster that spirit — it is one of the agency’s strengths.

Second, about 1,200 seasonal workers — called “auxiliaries” — are the backbone of the B.C. Wildfire Service. They are the frontline wildfire fighters, fallers,

crew leaders, dispatchers, air attack officers, financial officers, helicopter operations technicians and forest protection assistants. Many of BCWS’s auxiliary staff have chosen wildfire fighting as their profession, and the organization benefits immensely from these highly trained and experienced workers. Long-term auxiliaries are safe and efficient workers, they provide training and mentorship for new staff, and in busy times they are able to immediately step into critical roles — including acting as crew leaders, division supervisors, section chiefs, helicopter coordinators, or zone duty officers, to name just a few.

However, in recent years the BCWS has experienced significant turnover among its seasonal staff, eroding the experience levels of our frontline fire crews and the staff that support them. According to the most recent BCGEU seniority report, 63 per cent of BCWS auxiliaries started in their current position in the last 2 seasons (2016 or 2017), and 90 per cent have been in their position for five years or less.

While the organization traditionally sees a lot of turnover among its auxiliaries, the recent trend of increased turnover combined with the growing size and complexity of wildfires indicate that a comprehensive strategy to improve retention and enhance staff development among these workers is warranted.

Better acknowledging their importance, both to the organization and the province will enhance preparedness will improve our wildfire response, and ultimately save costs. Practically, this includes actions like offering more developmental training and operational opportunities, implementing a stipend for fallers, providing assistance with housing, improving benefits, and allowing more flexibility so firefighters are able to meet their family responsibilities.

*“Retention is important. The most valuable trait in wildland fire fighting is experience. There’s no denying that some of our workforce will always be students who will only stay 1 to 4 seasons, but the constant turnover is a serious drain on knowledge, training and experience.”*

<sup>1</sup> The letter is available at: <http://treering.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2013/02/2017-Wildfires-and-Resilience.pdf>



*“Experienced chainsaw operators move into private industry because the pay discrepancy is enormous.”*

*“There were issues with bullying and sexism this summer.”*

*“We need to improve retention among firefighters, especially women and First Nations.”*

The BC Wildfire Service is a world-leading fire management agency, but applying its capacity in other contexts could also be explored as a way to enhance provincial emergency preparedness. Fire crews are a valuable resource during a flood response, and crews could engage in fire prevention activities on a much larger scale. The emergency response capabilities of the agency might even be leveraged to provide some search and rescue or emergency medical services.

*“We should train fire crews immediately for flood work, not wait for flooding to start.”*

*“We should hire more firefighters and be willing to use their skills for other tasks.”*

## **Temporary Emergency Management System (TEAMS)**

Called the Temporary Emergency Assignment Management System (TEAMS), the province maintains a province-wide pool of public servants from various ministries that are available on short notice to staff emergency operations centres, and fill other roles as needed during an emergency response. This program is critical for mobilizing qualified personnel in emergency situations.

However, last summer, some of our members said they stepped into roles they were not well prepared for. While some staff felt they were well-trained ahead of the fire season, some did not receive an orientation or training before they were deployed. Some employees were well-supported by their supervisors to participate in TEAMS, while other qualified and willing employees faced challenges

getting permission to be released from their regular position, or they were not released at all. In fact, in a 2014 investigation of our earthquake preparedness, B.C.’s Auditor General noted that there has been a decline in the availability of staff through TEAMS.<sup>2</sup> We submit that TEAMS should be reviewed to find ways to improve coordination, communication and fairness in the recruitment and deployment processes. As well, more resources should be allocated to provide training for public servants, and to conduct simulation exercises.

*“The districts hold onto well trained and qualified people until the minister directs them to be available. Ministry staff should all be required and available to spend a minimum amount of time each year on Wildfire duties”*

*“The expectations of government employees in emergencies need to be better outlined in advance.”*

*“There is a huge need for early training, and to bring on additional staff to mentor.”*

*“There were capacity issues within EMBC, and there weren’t enough TEAMS members to assist in Provincial Regional Operations Centres or the Provincial Emergency Coordination Centre.”*

## **Other Provincial Programs**

There are an array of programs and activities within the provincial government that support planning and preparedness for fires and floods. For example, FLNRORD’s Water Management Branch houses the province’s dam safety program, which regulates more than 1,500 active dams in the province. The Branch’s flood safety section assists local governments, diking authorities and provincial ministries to manage flood safety systems and prepare for flood emergencies. The River Forecast Centre analyzes snow pack data generated by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy’s Snow Survey Program, predicts flows in British Columbia’s rivers and streams, and produces bulletins, maps and warnings

<sup>2</sup> BC Auditor General, Catastrophic Earthquake Preparedness, March 2014. Available at: [https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/publications/2014/report\\_15/report/OAG%20Catastrophic%20Earthquake\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/publications/2014/report_15/report/OAG%20Catastrophic%20Earthquake_FINAL.pdf).



to inform emergency managers and the public. The forest ministry's inventory program gathers and shares data about the extent and condition of our forests. Four provincial ministries, along with BC Hydro maintain networks of weather monitoring stations. Government researchers study relevant environmental processes, like how climate change affects forest health, the nature of hydrologic processes and the effectiveness of watershed management practices.

Despite the importance of these activities and other activities for supporting effective emergency management, beginning in 2001, the BC Liberal government made deep cuts to B.C.'s public service. The agencies that manage the environment and our natural resources were particularly hard hit, with budgets and staff for the ministries of Environment and Forests being cut by more than a third. Today, staffing levels in these organizations remain almost 25 per cent lower than in 2001. In short, the scientific and operational capacity of this part of the public service was gutted.

The loss of resources, capacity and expertise over the past 15 years has important consequences for emergency planning and preparedness, as well as the other areas covered by this review (prevention, response and recovery). Key programs operate with extremely limited resources — they are now just “bare bones” operations. For example, for years there have been just two dam safety officers to cover the entire province. Significant portions of our forest inventory data are woefully out of date or have had limited field verification completed.

This week, FLNRORD released a consultant's report on the 2017 flood response, which highlighted understaffing and a lack of resources in the River Forecast Centre and the Snow Survey Program as significant constraints on the optimal functioning of these programs.<sup>3</sup> Even though British Columbia is geographically larger, it employs just one-third the river forecasting staff as the U.S. Northwest region, and one-fifth the staff that Alberta does. The report's authors write that within the River Forecast Centre, staffing levels are so low that there is a “lack of

resilience to normal and predictable staff movements (e.g. retirements and maternity leaves) that occur within organizations.”

Overall, when human or financial resources are not available to regularly monitor dams, to gather forest inventory data, to update maps, or to repair monitoring stations in a timely fashion, the quality of the information available for decision making suffers. Especially in the context of a rapidly changing climate, future emergency preparedness depends on provincial programs that have the resources to do research, mapping, environmental monitoring and data gathering in a robust way. As such, we urge the reviewers to recommend renewed investments in ministry programs that support emergency preparedness.

## Health and Community Social Services

BCGEU members deliver health and community social services across the province. They staff residential care facilities for seniors, group homes for people with developmental disabilities, supportive housing for individuals struggling with addiction, and transition houses for women escaping domestic violence. Every day, our members serve the most vulnerable British Columbians. During an emergency, our members' clients are even more vulnerable, and we need to be better prepared to ensure their safety and care in the event of an emergency.

As such, renewed investments in emergency planning and preparedness must extend to health and community social services. Many community social services are delivered by small non-profit agencies with few resources, and these agencies need help to prepare and to coordinate plans. Resources must be in place — financial, human and informational — to ensure up-to-date plans are in place for emergencies, staff are well-trained, and emergency procedures are practiced regularly.

It also needs to be said that strengthening supports and services for the our most vulnerable citizens

<sup>3</sup> Associated Environmental, Review of 2017 Flood Response: Okanagan Lake Regulation System and Nicola Dam, Dec. 2017. At: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/air-land-water/water/integrated-flood-hazard-mgmt/2017\\_flood\\_response\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/air-land-water/water/integrated-flood-hazard-mgmt/2017_flood_response_report_final.pdf)



more broadly can make an important contribution to emergency preparedness. Because of deep cuts to public services under the BC Liberals, today there is little slack in the system to accommodate the additional demands of an emergency situation. Social services workers with chronically heavy workloads can hardly take on more when an emergency hits.

Many residential care facilities — understaffed at the best of times — are similarly ill-prepared to receive additional clients during an evacuation. And citizens that do not have decent housing, good mental and physical health, or adequate financial resources are more vulnerable in the face of a natural disaster. Investing in strong public services serves to build our resilience going forward.

## First Nations

Another aspect of preparedness is the need to further clarify how the province works with First Nations during emergencies. This includes planning, training, and building relationships between emergency management agencies and First Nations. As one BCGEU member wrote: “There is a need for more integrated, respectful, and coordinated planning with Indigenous groups and First Nations in BC.” Again, emergency management organizations need adequate staff and resources to effectively strengthen relations with First Nations.

In the 1990s, the Ministry of Forests established a number of First Nations unit crews as part of the BC Wildfire Service. The crews were based in local First Nations communities, and were part of a training and economic development initiative. The crews offered an opportunity for First Nations wildland firefighters to begin their career with the Forest Service in their home community. A number of crew members eventually moved on to leadership positions within the BC Wildfire Service and other public agencies. The ministry subsequently moved away from this model, and most of the crews were disbanded. Taking this program as a past example, we urge the government to work with First Nations to consider ways to support more Indigenous British Columbians to build careers in emergency management.

*“EMBC/ BC Wildfire will hopefully work further with First Nations to develop a common fiscal understanding, criteria for contractors, and other protocols.”*

*“More clarity on how the province works with First Nations in the event of an emergency is needed.”*

## Prevention and mitigation

### Fuel management

It is generally accepted that fire suppression, forest health problems, and forest management practices have led to a buildup of excessive fuels in our forests, which contributed greatly to the seriousness of last summer’s wildfires. Inadequate funding over the past decade has meant that little progress has been made in reducing fuels in interface areas, leaving many B.C. communities at high risk for wildfires.

On this, the BCGEU reiterates the recommendation we made about fuel management over a decade ago in our submission to the 2003 Filmon review — that the government make a significant, long term investment in a fuel management program. Environment Minister George Heyman, BCGEU’s president at the time, told the review:

*“We need, I believe, the provincial government to commit to a sustained and properly funded fuel management strategy. A fuel reduction treatment program using both mechanical methods and prescribed burning under the direction of qualified Ministry of Forests personnel would go a long way toward reducing the interface wild fire hazard.”*

FLNRORD and BC Wildfire Service staff should play a leading role in wild fire prevention and mitigation programs that support the health of forests and habitat. Further, there is work to be done to change current forest practices and remedy past forest practices that contribute to greater wildfire risk, including dealing more effectively with waste from logging operations, changing replanting practices, and treating previously replanted areas.



*“Is the government willing to spend some money proactively, to avoid having these kinds of massively destructive fires? Pay now or pay later?”*

*“Fuel management has been effective in areas where it has been implemented.”*

*“Financial support for fuel mitigation has steadily declined since the last busy fire season in 2010 in the Cariboo.”*

*“Not enough work has been done to mitigate fire hazards around communities. More funding needs to be made available to extend fire fighters to carry out these jobs during the winter months.”*

*“Industry has poor standards on cut blocks in regards to waste management of non-merchantable timber and debris from logging operations.”*

## Highways maintenance

The Ministry of Transportation’s highways maintenance contractors make an important contribution to preventing wildfires and minimizing damage to our road infrastructure during flooding. The dry grasses and brush along B.C.’s roadsides are fuel for wildfires that can be ignited by a tossed cigarette or a spark from a passing vehicle. Over time, however, cuts to road maintenance budgets have limited mowing to the shoulder and paved roads only, reduced mowing frequency, and ended the removal of brush and grass from the area.

In the past, highways crews also did routine maintenance to clear culverts of brush and sediment, and replace damaged culverts. Now, this kind of maintenance happens primarily on an ad hoc basis, prompted when an issue is identified rather than done on a preventive basis. According to our members, contractors also do more limited ditch maintenance operations than in the past. Reducing this kind of maintenance threatens proper drainage, and risks damage to roads during periods of high runoff.

Going forward, we recommend that the Ministry of Transportation both requires and budgets for enhanced routine road maintenance to prevent wildfires and protect our roads from floods.

## Public Education

Greater investment is needed in public education aimed at prevention and mitigation. Educating and supporting residents to understand the risks of living in the wildland/urban interface and what actions they can take to mitigate risk and make their lives safer should be a priority. Helping B.C. residents to be FireSmart will save lives and reduce the cost of fires in the future. Informing the public about the resources and the practices of our emergency management agencies — and what they are actually able to achieve in the face of intense wildfire and flood events — should also be a priority.

*“This summer, I saw affected communities that had done little FireSmart work to their properties.”*

*“Proactive and pre-emptive community outreach on how we fight fires, I believe, would make deployments easier, as communications staff would not be starting from zero.”*

## Climate Action

Finally, part of flood and fire prevention and mitigation should include accelerating the province’s efforts to reduce B.C.’s greenhouse gas emissions. While the overall impact may be small, we must make a contribution to mitigating the effects of climate change.

## Response

### Communications

Today, British Columbians have very high expectations for governments to provide detailed, accurate and frequently updated information when an emergency happens. Last summer, in the context of scarce resources and unprecedented wildfires, government communications staff were not always able to meet the public’s expectations. In some cases, there were challenges in coordinating communications across multiple agencies and levels of government, so that residents received different information from different official sources. In some communities, emergency



notification systems were in place to provide residents with official information directly by text and email. However, low participation limited the effectiveness of these systems.

Social media is a tremendously important communication tool during an emergency, but it also poses significant challenges and can even have a negative impact on response efforts. Last summer, provincial and local government officials used social media effectively to communicate with the public. Similarly, British Columbians used social media to connect with each other, provide information to one another and to officials, and to express their support and appreciation for frontline workers. But, activity on social media also generated rafts of inaccurate and irrelevant information that caused confusion, and the efforts to correct wrong information diverted scarce government communications resources. Further, social media fueled rumours and anger towards emergency response staff, a dynamic that was damaging to morale among firefighters and other public servants on the frontlines of the disasters.

Going forward, there is work to be done to improve planning and coordination of communications. As others have suggested, building a single communications platform for emergency communications that emergency management agencies and local governments can utilize is worthy of consideration. As well, investing to achieve broad public participation in local emergency notification systems will also support better emergency communications during future incidents. Finally, building communications capacity within emergency management agencies is needed to support improvements.

*“We have more than 30,000 people in our regional district, but before the fires I think we only had about 3,000 people signed up for [our emergency notification system.]”*

*“There is a real need to establish one official source for communications. I live on the border between two regional districts, and I got conflicting messages about what was happening. There was a lot of confusion.”*

*“It was really hard to wait for so long for updates.”*

## Deployment and Utilization of Personnel

In preparing this submission, we received comments from BCGEU members about how personnel were deployed and utilized during the floods and fires last year. Many members said that deployments went smoothly, and staff were effective in their roles. However, some concerns and opportunities for improvement were also identified. These included:

- Capacity issues within provincial and local government agencies which need to be addressed;
- A need for more supports are needed for staff facing fatigue and burnout;
- Challenges related to the widespread use of out-of-province personnel who have limited experience with local conditions and practices;
- A need to better utilize local knowledge and skills, including ensuring there is a local component on Incident Management Teams (IMTs);
- Better processes should be developed to improve the transitions between IMTs;
- The First Nations liaison role added tremendous value, and should be regularly included on IMTs;
- Skilled personnel within the public service, like Conservation Officers, BC Parks staff and commercial vehicle inspectors were underutilized;
- Rehabilitation specialists should be included as part of IMTs to mitigate damage to the landscape; and
- The management of shifts for frontline fire personnel should be improved to ensure that crews are able to complete work outside of the burning period.

*“There were capacity issues within EMBC and local government staff.”*

*“The government was short staffed on the ground with firefighters. The contract crews were expected to work beyond their training/ skill level.”*

*“I found there weren’t great processes for the hand-over when new teams came in.”*



*“In the back country, involve your local Conservation Officers, who know the land, the people, and have the equipment and ability to assist.”*

*“We need better assessment of out-of-province resources, better utilization of at-home talent, and a First Nations Liaison attached to each Incident Management Team.”*

*“Command teams should always have a local component. The lack of local knowledge was often painfully evident in 2017.”*

*“Rehabilitation is not included as a position within an incident management team, and the culture of rehabilitation barely exists within the wildfire community...with earlier recognition and collecting spatial rehabilitation data earlier can minimize many of the negative effects that will occur on the landscape during the freshet in 2018”*

*“We haven’t quite figured out night shifts yet. Start times should be during day light hours to overlap with day time crews for a quick turnover...we can be most effective if we start action in priority areas as soon as the fire dies down – it gives you the longest window to work.”*

Further, in the Ministry of Forests in particular, staff and budget cuts were combined with a long-term process of reorganizing and centralizing ministry operations. Dozens of local offices were closed, seriously reducing the ministry’s local presence. Responsibility for wildfire fighting was placed in the specialized Protection Branch, now called the BC Wildfire Service. Forests ministry staff — forest technicians in particular - that were previously integral in dealing wildfires and their consequences were instead sidelined. Overall, these changes have negatively impacted the capacity and the responsiveness of personnel to action wildland forest fires. Instead of strengthening our own firefighting capacity, we have become increasingly dependent on contractors and inter-jurisdictional resource sharing to meet the demands of a busy fire season.

In health and community social services, the unprecedented evacuations that occurred last

summer made it clear that it is also necessary to mobilize personnel to provide support and care for the most vulnerable British Columbians. For instance, last summer several BCGEU members were evacuated with their developmentally disabled clients. Housed in a gym, they stayed with their clients, working for more than two weeks straight. It was a difficult and traumatic experience for both the staff and the clients. Similarly, residential care facilities that received evacuated clients did not always receive additional staff support.

In our view, these situations might have been avoided if there was better planning and coordination to make care workers available during emergency situations. A multi-agency review, including EMBC, health authorities and other agencies like Community Living BC and the Ministry of Children and Families should be conducted to develop strategies that ensure care workers and their clients are better supported in future large-scale incidents.

*“Our care facility has staffing issues as it is. The evacuated people stayed with us for six weeks, on cots and stretchers in hallways and lounge areas. Some other places got more staff, but we didn’t until the very end, when they brought in some agency nurses.”*

## Managing Assets and Spending

The firefighting and flood response efforts in 2017 cost the province hundreds of millions of dollars. Certainly, the ability to tightly manage equipment and spending in the context of a large-scale emergency is limited. However, there is room to proactively improve systems and practices to ensure that the provincial emergency response is handled as efficiently as possible.

We recommend that the contracting and asset management systems of EMBC and BCWS are reviewed, with the aim of improving efficiency and accountability. In this effort, the perspectives and experiences of frontline workers — who know many of the issues and can offer practical solutions — should be included.



*“There was no system in place for tracking equipment and vehicles. Consequently, equipment went missing and vehicles did not get the maintenance they needed. What we need in place is a system used consistently by everyone. All equipment should be tracked and signed out so we don’t waste time looking for things like radios and ATVs.”*

*“Regarding equipment, it should all be bar coded and issued out to fires via an electronic process. This would enable centre resource hubs to review where supplies are and reallocate or recover them more efficiently”*

## **Recovery**

### **Ongoing Mental Health Support and Training**

The events of last summer deeply affected our members and the people they serve. Many British Columbians are still working to make sense of their experiences and to get their lives back to normal. It is important that those affected have access to the services they need. Strengthening mental health services across British Columbia is an important part of the recovery process. Supporting training programs like Mental Health First Aid would also make a contribution and would build community resilience for the future.

### **Research on Impacts**

Assessing the impacts of last summer’s fires and floods on the environment, communities and emergency responders is critical to improve planning and decision making going forward. There are many worthwhile areas to study, and we urge government to invest in a research program aimed at better understanding how our province was affected by the 2017 fire season.

In particular, our members that are wildfire fighters — along with many other emergency response staff — spent weeks working on the frontlines, and were exposed to high levels of smoke for long periods. These exposures could have significant negative long-term health impacts, which deserve to be monitored, studied, and mitigated as much as possible in future fire seasons.

**On behalf of BCGEU members, we thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.**

