

To Doug Donaldson, Minister FLNRORD

Re: Terms of Reference for review of the 2017 Wildfire and Flood Response

To start with, thank you for initiating the review and for providing us an opportunity for input by Dec. 8th. The people impacted by the wildfires and floods want answers. They would like to provide feedback and everyone wants to see improvements to the way disasters are managed in BC.

Our caucus members who were impacted or involved in the 2017 disasters have reviewed your terms of referenced and provided the following comments:

First, the TOR you've drafted looks back at what lead up to 2017. It looks at how the emergency planning was executed and touches on recovery. Other than one line, what seems to be missing is a review of how fires are fought, technology utilized, how risks are managed and most importantly the need for significant local engagement by those undertaking the review.

In addition, we saw the announcement of who will lead the review which is helpful. What isn't clear is who are the technical people who will support the review? Will they be independent from government or are we asking the people who made decisions during the 2017 disasters to provide the expertise for the review and provide their own job performance review?

Finally, the review may be too rushed. In order to fully learn from the 2017 disasters and help shape our future practices we believe the review should take the time necessary to do a thorough job. Target an interim report for April 2018 and then allow the review to continue (if needed) to provide a more thorough report by the end of 2018. This will allow for more direct engagement with rural and remote communities including First Nations as well as ranchers and contractors. It will also allow for an opportunity to fully examine new or changing technology, other jurisdiction approaches, private sector approaches and to see firsthand how BC's approach works in the field during the fire and flood seasons.

The following are some recommendations to add to the review TOR:

Under Planning and Preparedness:

- **ADD:** Review of water management, decision making, accountability and transparency (Okanagan water level management in particular)
- **CHANGE:** Capacity of the Province to plan for and ensure support to local governments, regional districts and First Nation communities – Need to add Rural and Remote communities.

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- CHANGE: Status of local government, regional district, FN communities' governance AND rural and remote community leadership.
- ADD: Review of emergency preparedness, response and approaches to disasters in other jurisdictions in Canada and internationally.

Prevention and Mitigation:

- ADD: Review insurance programs, building codes and responsibilities for communities/homes in interface areas.
- ADD: Review, develop and accelerate interface fire programs for rural and remote communities and individuals.
- ADD: Review decision making processes for mitigation programs to allow for more direct engagement with rural and remote citizens.

Response:

One of the most important components of this review is to engage with the public, ranchers, contractors and especially those who were directly impacted by the fires. Stories like the one out of Princeton where a contractor claims to have had equipment at the area where the fire started but wasn't allowed to engage in the early hours. Could this have stopped that fire from becoming the disaster it was? Out of Ashcroft, the fire started by the railway tracks along the river and the story is that a crew initially attacked the fire but didn't/couldn't put it out. With such a water supply, why was this an issue? 24 hours later the fire took off and eventually spread all the way to 70 Mile House destroying many homes along the way. Who were the first responders and what was their take on the situation and decision making?

During the 2017 fires many stories emerged about local contractors or individuals not being allowed to engage early. One such story was from a contractor who was moving equipment out of the area of a fire. He wanted to stop and build a fire guard that evening around a relatively small fire. He was told by ministry personnel that he wasn't allowed. The ministry person left and the contractor ignored the direction, stopped and using his equipment to build a guard during the night. The next day the ministry person returned and thanked him for the work explaining that there was no way he could have authorized it. The story goes that this particular fire was contained and extinguished because of the actions of the equipment operator. Over the years there have been many stories where local equipment was not allowed to be deployed in the early hours of fires. This needs to be an important part of the review.

Stories have emerged from fire crews about their experience. For example, one crew leaving for a rest break wanted to stop and volunteer to save a home that was in danger. The supervisor told the crew they would face penalties but they ignored the supervisor, stopped and worked with the home owner to save his house. The same crew was later being rotated out when they saw another home in jeopardy. They stopped and saved that home as well while their supervisor threatened them and said they

wouldn't be paid as they were on time off. Safety and people come first but why if the stories are true, why was this crew threatened for volunteering their time to help save homes?

Some First Nations were cut off but determined to stay behind to protect their homes. Government provided them with a satellite phone so that emergency contact could be maintained. Should this become a standard for governments? What is the liability? Could this approach have been used with other residents who stayed behind to fight for their homes but were completely cut off from communications? What support (if any) should be provided and how could that be achieved?

Another story is from crews who were paid to sit on the side of the highway for days with their equipment waiting. They wanted to get in to help protect a local community but were forced just to wait. This was a very frustrating time for those crews and for the community but no real answers were provided.

Crews traveled from Quesnel to the Chilcotin rather than being redeployed. This wasted many hours daily traveling back and forth. Why? Crews often have to wait in the morning for reviews to be completed before they can be deployed and then have to work through the heat of the day before returning to camp for dinner. Safety comes first and reviews are required but could crews be more effective in the early morning or late evening when the fire activity is more subdued?

Policy is that no people or resources should be placed in front of an oncoming fire. We agree completely with this policy. However, with the new technology deployed by SafeGuard which has no risk to personnel, should this be considered as a new approach to slowing or stopping an advancing fire?

There are many, many stories from the 2017 experience. The review needs to record these, learn from them and build sound recommendations. Time needs to be taken to get this right and the review team needs the flexibility to fully explore the response.

- ADD: Engage with contractors, ranchers and individuals impacted by the fires to understand their experience and what could be improved.
- ADD: Engage with foreign crews who participated in fighting fires in BC in 2017 to ask about their experience and for a comparison to how things are done in their home jurisdictions.
- ADD: Review the decision making, timing and effectiveness of burn offs during the 2017 fire season.
- ADD: Review how and why commitments are made to deploy structural protection units. Why, in some cases, were they not deployed and how was this communicated?
- ADD: Could the purchase of structural protection units by individuals be supported by a government program or taxation credits to help augment any provincial response?
- ADD: Review communications protocols, especially in cases where people stay in evacuated areas. How can this be managed and what are the ramifications on liability issues.
- ADD: Explore and report on options to consider supporting local public or private fire response units including First Nations.

- ADD: Where there was a significant loss of structures, review the decisions and procedures undertaken in those cases and report on how (if possible) approaches could be improved.

Recovery:

- ADD: Review the procedure, guidelines and results of how contractors, businesses and other interests are paid in a timely way.
- ADD: What role should the local, Provincial and Federal Governments play in recovery for individuals, businesses and communities? What has the experience been and should there be a more pre-defined response beyond employment insurance and emergency assistance?
- ADD: What was the experience of individuals evacuated and how can this be improved?
- ADD: What are the long term impacts of disasters and what role should various levels of government play to assist with recovery?
- ADD: Review who qualifies for agricultural support as there are some reports of people with horses or other animals that have been impacted and don't seem to fit under existing recovery efforts.

Thank you once again for allowing those MLAs from the impacted areas and those involved in the 2017 disasters to provide input. We trust that you will take our suggestions seriously and reflect them in the final Terms of Reference.

Sincerely,

John Rustad, Critic for FLNRORD and Donna Barnett, Critic for Rural Development on behalf of the BC Liberal MLAs