

## BROADENING EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO INCLUDE EMERGENCY ECONOMIC RECOVERY (2024)

### **Issue**

Ensuring that all residents of BC can depend on reliable emergency services is vital to the province's growth and prosperity. Over the past ten years, increasingly frequent major events such as floods and wildfires have highlighted multiple issues for governments, communities, First Nations, and first responders.

At the same time, labour issues, restraints on how emergency personnel and first responders can be deployed, response times, and funding shortfalls have added pressure to provide safe and dependable environments for all BC's residents and visitors.

### **Background**

Multiple policies are already on the BC Chamber policy and positions books,<sup>1</sup> dealing with various specific sub-issues within emergency management, i.e.,

1. Emergency Management: Enhancing Preparedness & Prevention (2022).<sup>2</sup>
2. Authorizing The Use Of Peace Officers To Complement The Work Of Police As Part Of A Tiered Response (2023).<sup>3</sup>
3. Emergency Medical Services For British Columbians (2021).<sup>4</sup>

With this new policy, we have taken a broader look at recent history and a look ahead in an era of climate change and evolving relationships between different levels of government management of emergency issues, alongside increasing autonomy of First Nations governments across the province.

The following factors apply stress to all systems and emergency response levels in the everchanging dynamics of growth in the province of British Columbia.

### Factors for Consideration

There is an ongoing increase in major emergency events as a result of climate change in BC.

- These increased events, including flooding and wildfires, damage property, impact families, and derail the economy. The accompanying increase in demand to appropriately service these events puts pressure on systems that are already in crisis.
- Wildfires alone have seen three years out of the last ten with a cost over \$500M (2021-\$718.8M; 2018-\$615M; 2017-\$649M).<sup>5</sup>
- Taken together, the direct costs of the 2021 "atmospheric river" floods in BC amount to almost \$9 billion to repair everything lost<sup>6</sup>, not counting the \$2.5B impact on Canadian trade through the Port of Vancouver. Clearly, these are enormous budget items for multiple levels of government, insurance companies, and the province's residents.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bcchamber-website.glueup.com/policy-search>

<sup>2</sup> <https://bcchamber-website.glueup.com/policy-search/emergency-management-enhancing-preparedness-prevention-2022>

<sup>3</sup> <https://bcchamber-website.glueup.com/policy-search/authorizing-use-peace-officers-complement-work-police-part-tiered-response-2023>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bcchamber-website.glueup.com/policy-search/emergency-medical-services-british-columbians-2021>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-statistics/wildfire-averages>

<sup>6</sup> Globe and Mail, February 19, 2022 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-cost-of-rebuilding-bc-after-november-storms-nears-9-billion>

## Government Initiatives

New government initiatives have been implemented to better manage the escalation of emergency events. Under the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, a new Premier’s Expert Task Force on Emergencies has been assembled, with representatives from around the province and many First Nations. The Premier’s Expert Task Force on Emergencies was established in October 2023 to provide strategic advice and action-oriented recommendations on how the province can better support people on the front lines of emergencies, enhance support delivery for evacuees and apply lessons the province has learned in preparation for the next emergency.

It is critical that an effective framework, encompassing expedited recovery and recognizing economic loss, is closely tied to delay in recovery. This has been evident in the rebuild of the Village of Lytton,<sup>7</sup> where one building permit was issued after a two-year wait, with a dozen more to come in the first half of 2024.

The recovery timeline (two years and counting) in the Village of Lytton demonstrates that there is a lack of provincial framework—legal, financial, and social—that helps communities recover more quickly. A more rapid recovery timeline would be welcome for residents through BC. It took Lytton nearly two years to rescind its State of Emergency declaration and lift the evacuation order for residents.<sup>8</sup>

The Premier’s Task Force could take on these learnings and improve the timelines for affected residents under such orders. The repair of the Coquihalla Highway, after devastating floods broke the supply chain to and from the coast, shows that the province has the power to accelerate change. This could be reflected in the outcomes of an expert panel to develop a better and faster framework for recovery.

There is also an issue with evacuation routes for built-up residential and semi-rural areas, as well as government response times to improve transportation out of an impacted area experiencing wildfires, floods, or other infrastructure losses such as power or water. Improvements were made on the Sumas prairie lands after the floods, but to date, no improvements have been made in the West Kelowna/Peachland areas following multiple wildfires there in the past decade.

Currently, the Task Force is focused on broad areas of engagement.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2023, the BC Government published its *FAIRNESS IN A CHANGING CLIMATE: Ensuring disaster supports are accessible, equitable and adaptable* report.<sup>10</sup> The report’s core focuses primarily on immediate response mechanisms; however, the longer-term, broader economic and social recovery noted in this policy would be better enabled by adopting the new report’s recommendations.

The inclusion of “*Responding to the Realities of Long-Term Displacement*” and “*Recovery and Rebuilding: the Disaster Financial Assistance Program*” as subjects in the report offers some reassurance that longer-term economic and social recovery, i.e., issuance of building permits, pre-build geotechnical testing might proceed on a more efficient and timely basis, assisting citizens and communities to re-establish necessary infrastructure.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2023/12/21/lytton-rebuild-wildfire/#:~:text=People%20are%20displaced%2C%20living%20in,land%20needed%20to%20be%20reviewed>

<sup>8</sup> June 15, 2023 CBC News Lytton, BC, to end state of emergency almost 2 years after most of village was destroyed by wildfire <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lytton-state-of-local-emergency-to-end-1.6877479>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-management/emergency-management/emergency-activation/em-taskforce>

<sup>10</sup> [https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/OMB-FireFlood\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/OMB-FireFlood_report_web.pdf)

## **THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS**

That the Provincial Government:

1. Mandate funding through the “*Premier’s Expert Task Force on Emergencies*” to proactively manage the demands on emergency response with a plan for implementation within two years.<sup>11</sup>
2. Either continue and expand the Premier’s Expert Task Force on Emergencies or establish a new working group involving economic development professionals at all levels of government along with representatives of the business community, as well as appropriate representation from the UBCM and regional districts and other local governments, to explore legal and funding options to expedite community recovery post-emergency.
3. Develop a plan, including training and funding, to promote local involvement, with support during emergencies from subject matter experts and the public at large, and the involvement of the provincial administrator, as dictated in the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (Bill 31-2023).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.leg.bc.ca/Pages/BCLASS-Legacy.aspx#%2Fcontent%2Fdata%2520-%2520ldp%2Fpages%2F42nd4th%2F3rd\\_read%2Fgov31-3.htm](http://www.leg.bc.ca/Pages/BCLASS-Legacy.aspx#%2Fcontent%2Fdata%2520-%2520ldp%2Fpages%2F42nd4th%2F3rd_read%2Fgov31-3.htm)