

Brief to the Firestorm 2003 Provincial Review

Submitted by the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union

George Heyman, President

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Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to make this presentation on behalf of the 58,000 members of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union. The BCGEU represents thousands of public workers in the Ministry of Forests (MoF), Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC), Provincial Emergency Program (PEP), Ministry of Human Resources (MHR), B.C. Housing Commission, and other areas where public workers have official responsibilities to respond to emergency situations, such as the wildfires of 2003.

BCGEU members took on significant roles in management, coordination, and administration in areas of fire suppression, evacuation, communications, command structure, volunteer coordination, emergency services, and general assistance.

Many BCGEU members also volunteered to work with PEP, the Red Cross, their local fire departments, and to help their families, neighbours, and communities in countless other ways during their time of need.

Auditor General's Report 2001

In 2001, the Auditor General of B.C. submitted a comprehensive audit report titled *Managing Interface Fire Risks*. You are likely aware of the highlights of that report, and the 37 recommendations that flowed from the audit.

In short, the Auditor General stated that while a serious wildfire hazard exists around communities of all sizes in many high and moderate risk areas in B.C. – the general public has limited awareness of the problem. Wildfire prevention and mitigation measures need to be improved upon and implemented. Also, we need to improve our capabilities for response and recovery, in the event of a major wildfire.

As noted in the Auditor General's January 2003 follow-up report, some of his original recommendations have been acted on. However, most of his recommendations have only been partially implemented, or not followed at all.

The reality is that the provincial government has made, and continues to make, massive cuts to budgets and staff in all areas, making it impossible to fully achieve many of the Auditor General's recommendations.

Massive Cuts

One of the Auditor General's key recommendations was to establish a Provincial Interface Fire Committee involving the Ministry of Forests, the Office of the Fire Commissioner and the Provincial Emergency Program, to address and act on the recommendations identified in the report. The committee was appointed. However, no funding was allocated to the committee, limiting its ability to function. I quote from the Auditor General's follow-up report, dated January 2003:

No specific funding for the committee is currently available. Ability to fund committee activities by individual ministries is at present limited because of budget pressures.

In reply to the 2001 recommendation to “mitigate interface fire risks” the provincial bodies responsible for managing interface fire risk noted that since:

...(it) would require a commitment of significant funds by both the provincial government and local governments, the committee will endeavour to complete the development of a framework discussion paper for consideration by government within the 2003/2004 fiscal year.

The three provincial government entities with responsibilities for managing interface fire risks, either directly or in support of local governments do not have the resources or staff to address or put into practice, in a meaningful way, the findings of the Auditor General's 2001 report.

Ministry of Forests

Since it took office, the Campbell government has slashed staffing levels by 35 percent in the Ministry of Forests. Additional budget cuts have closed district offices, and caused further disruption due to restructuring and downsizing, and the layoffs of skilled and experienced workers.

Office of the Fire Commissioner

The number of provincial Fire Safety Officers was reduced from 27 to nine, in 1995. Administrative support staff were also cut.

Provincial Emergency Program

The *Provincial Emergency Program Strategic Objectives 2001/2002* highlighted funding and workload pressures that impeded or prevented work on critical issues relating to provincial emergency programs. In fact, I am shocked that no action could be taken on “Critical Infrastructure Rapid Damage Assessment” (that would maximize the preservation of life in the event of a major earthquake or tsunami), due to “other workload pressures.”

The director of PEP made it clear to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts on December 12, 2001 that due to “current resource levels” the expectations of the Auditor General’s recommendations around wildfires may be beyond current program capabilities.

Other Ministries

In addition to budget and staffing cuts to the three provincial bodies responsible for interface fire prevention, response, and recovery – other key government ministries have faced, and continue to face, massive budget cuts and downsizing. These cuts affect our ability to respond to wildfire emergency situations.

For example, the Ministry of Human Resources, responsible for providing emergency financial aid to individuals and families, has experienced major budget and staff cuts since 2001.

Many government employees in various ministries throughout government are registered as volunteers with the Provincial Emergency Program. However, their ability to leave their jobs and volunteer during times of emergency – as needed during the wildfires of 2003 – is limited due to recent staff layoffs, budget cuts, and resulting workload pressures.

Observations and Recommendations

Ministry of Forests - Fuel Build-up

The wildfires of 2003 in B.C. were caused by lightning or people, but the build-up of fuel at or near the ground level is what caused many of these fires to explode in drought conditions.

The Ministry of Forests does not budget for fuel reduction programs such as thinning and brushing, slashing, prescribed burns, or harvesting saleable timber through partial-cut treatments. This government, which is charged with the responsibility of managing the Forest Land Base, is not necessarily addressing the role of fire and levels of fuel build-up.

Ministry staffing and budget cuts impede even the limited application of fuel reduction treatments, and prevent the introduction of much-needed programs.

Following the wildfires of 2003, we have learned the hard way that “doing nothing” costs our communities and province in financial, environmental, and social terms. We need 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 expert direction of qualified MoF personnel, would go a long way towards reducing the interface wildfire hazard.

The MoF needs to establish a budget line for prevention of wildfires. It must provide provincial leadership and work with the various stakeholders community by community to reduce the explosive fuel build-up in moderate and high-risk areas.

During the winter of 2002, Parks Canada partnered with MoF, Radium Town Council and Slocan Forest Products to reduce fuel build-up and enhance the habitat

for Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep at a cost of about \$360,000. Revenue generated by the sale of the logs paid for the project. These wildfire mitigation measures also greatly benefited Radium through a reduction of fuels around the town's south end.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Forests immediately direct adequate resources to initiate the reduction of fuel in priority interface areas prior to the 2004 fire season, and expand its current mandate to plan and budget for provincial wildfire prevention and mitigation programs that support the health of forests and habitat.

Forest Protection Branch

The Forest Protection Branch employs highly-skilled and experienced staff who provide management and response to provincial wildfires. The Branch currently has 22 wildfire control unit crews of 20 members each, and 112 three-person initial attack crews.

These small expert crews are recognized for being highly-trained and organized. They are efficient, and they are available to work outside of the province on a cost-recovery basis. These crews could be utilized for fuel treatment/prescribed burn programs with an expanded mandate and additional funding.

It is not expected that the Protection Branch would have the all necessary number of staff on-hand to respond in high demand fire years. However, the Protection Branch should be able to call upon the assistance and expertise of Ministry of Forests staff from district offices, timber sales, and other departments as necessary.

In October 1994, the MoF removed fire suppression responsibilities from all ministry departments and gave the Protection Branch sole responsibility for this area. Prior to this reorganization, all ministry staff had responsibility for fire control duties. This provided a large, reliable, fully-trained workforce to fight wildfires in B.C.

The levels of fire management experience and upgrade training across Ministry of Forests staff have fallen since responsibilities were centralized under the Protection Branch. District staff, for the most part, no longer receive direct wildfire control experience.

District staff have reported that they were either not utilized at all, or were under-utilized during the wildfire season of 2003. Instead, the ministry relied upon contractors and out-of-province fire crews, including untrained army personnel. In a number of instances, retired BCGEU members who had been employed in the Ministry of Forests were called back to coordinate and manage the response to the fires.

Our union has received reports that district staff were not even contacted to go on the Protection Branch availability list until the Provincial State of Emergency was declared. One district office staff member has stated *“...with my past fire fighting experience, and being able and willing to go fight fires, it was very demeaning not to help out a little more. I was embarrassed that our district office was not helping out.”*

It is clear that, in many cases, district office staff were not given the opportunity to play a significant role in responding to one of the worst fire seasons on record.

District office staff have in-depth knowledge of the roads and geography of their region, know key people, and organizations in their areas, and should play vital managing and coordinating roles in fire management.

Due to massive budget cuts and staffing cuts, it now appears impossible for the Ministry of Forests to adequately manage and protect the interests of the ministry and people of the province of B.C.

Our members observed cases during the wildfires of 2003 where several different contractors operating in the same fire region were using incompatible computer programs. Our members are concerned about the lack of fiscal responsibility and accountability shown by various contractors, as well as a lack of consistency in a number of contractors' crew skill levels, supplies, and equipment. We have also heard allegations that forest licensees and contractors were not fighting the fires in an efficient manner, in order to continue their crews on payroll. Our members have also raised questions about heavy equipment owners not managing the use of their own equipment in an effective and efficient manner.

With all due respect, I must note that in regards to this review process I am on public record as saying B.C.'s Auditor General should have been asked to review the province's response to the interface wildfires of 2003. The Auditor General's independent mandate and authority under legislation offers protection for government employees when responding to an audit.

In order for this review and Mr. Filmon's report to have credibility and legitimacy in the same manner as an Auditor General's report – testimony from government employees must be encouraged to be open and forthright, without fear of repercussions.

In a letter I sent to the Premier Gordon Campbell on October 22, 2003 – I formally requested that these workers be assured that his government, as their employer, would fully support them in speaking out on this important matter, in the public interest, and would not seek reprisals against anyone who makes comments in this regard.

In the Premier's letter of response to me, dated October 28, 2003, he acknowledged receipt of my letter, but provided no such assurances. It should be no surprise then that public service workers are reluctant to provide detailed documentation about their concerns.

Recommendation: The exclusivity of wildfire management within the Protection Branch be reviewed with the understanding that it would be beneficial to expand wildfire management responsibility to district offices and other Ministry of Forests departments.

It would seem obvious that correct map data is the most essential tool for wildfire management. However, our members have reported mapping deficiencies that may have hampered firefighting efforts in 2003.

Mapping for Forest Protection Branch use is often provided by individual MoF district offices – but these limited mapping resources are often diverted to other district priorities. This situation worsened as a result of the Campbell government’s restructuring of ministry responsibilities in 2001. Most of the MoF’s mapping function was transferred to the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management, which has in turn axed the workers doing that job!

Recommendation: Adequate mapping capabilities be retained in the MoF, and mapping staff be trained and available for fire protection duties such as planning and fuel management.

Succession Planning

Staffing cuts, budget cuts, and seasonal layoffs seriously impact the Ministry of Forests' ability to address succession planning.

Many key experienced employees have left the organization as a result of budget-cutting inducements in the form of early retirement and voluntary departure programs; many more will depart in the next few years. Long-term staff fear for the future of the forests ministry. Career planning, career pathing, and multi-level and cross-department experience is not occurring.

The current policy of limiting wildfire control duties to the Protection Branch means staff from other departments in the ministry are not gaining fire management knowledge and experience. This policy impedes the development of future ministry managers.

In the Protection Branch, for example, unit crews and initial attack crews are laid off at the end of the fire season. Efforts need to be made to offer and expand their role in prescribed burning, career-related training programs, and work opportunities in other departments. The MoF needs to review its ability to meet its mandate (and an expanded mandate for fire prevention and mitigation) in relation to staffing for the future. Having experienced, well-trained staff in the ministry overall will be cost-effective, and provide safety and security for the people and forests of B.C.

I wish to emphasize, the Ministry of Forests needs to invest in staff – not more money for contracted-out services.

Recommendation: The MoF make succession planning and wildfire management training programs a high priority, and engage the cooperation of the BCGEU in planning and implementing effective staffing levels for the future.

Health and Safety

Our members report that some firefighting crews were working 24 hours straight, without sleeping, while battling B.C. wildfires in 2003. This greatly exceeds the maximum one to three days of work at 14 hours per day standard as set out in the MoF's "*Operational Safe Work Standards.*"

Working long hours beyond the maximum 14-day period without two days off was a far too-common occurrence in 2003. Such practices violate the operational safe work standards for firefighter fatigue.

It is recognized that the Protection Branch does a good job of maintaining safe practices in difficult times. However, the shortage of ministry staff and the extraordinary circumstances of last summer pushed the limits of safety.

Some structural fire crews were dealing with forest fire suppression without the necessary training or experience. Such situations are hazardous and were a cause for concern for MoF staff.

Our members have stated it was sheer luck that firefighters on the ground last summer escaped serious injury and/or loss of life. It was not a result of good planning or management.

Recommendation: Safety standards be reviewed in regards to continuous hours and days of work and fatigue and that such standards be enforced. Further, that staffing levels be increased to meet demands, rather than working existing staff beyond safe limits. And, that the safety of firefighting crews be investigated and necessary directives be established.

Provincial Emergency Program

Due to the demands of the wildfires of 2003, our members employed at the Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) reported tremendous workloads, and the backlogging of regular duties. There was no time to catch up before the October floods came. Many report high stress levels on the job due to long hours and exhaustion. Some believe that fatigue impacted decision-making.

Many government employees in various ministries agreed to be on-call during emergency situations. However, as one worker at PEP put it “...*the reduction in staff government-wide made all of our jobs that much harder.*”

Concerns were raised that if we had a serious earthquake or tsunami, or another wildfire, response would have been less than adequate due to exhaustion and other consequences of accumulated fatigue.

PEP’s “*Strategic Objectives 2001/2002*” cited serious workload and funding problems that were hampering its ability to meet its mandate. This reality, coupled with our experience with last season’s wildfires, makes it clear that emergency preparedness should be made a priority by the provincial government.

Recommendation: An immediate audit of the Provincial Emergency Program be conducted by the provincial Auditor General to evaluate emergency preparedness for last season’s wildfires, and to review preparedness for other major disasters, in particular if occurring during a period when staff are already engaged to capacity. Further, that ministry and program budget levels and staff be increased to meet audit recommendations.

Office of the Fire Commissioner

The mandate of the OFC includes working with and providing advice to local government on the delivery of fire protection services.

Prevention and mitigation of interface fire hazards requires a proactive and leadership role by the provincial government.

The Auditor General's survey of local governments and his subsequent report in June 2001 highlighted the serious need for fire risk mitigation in high and moderate risk communities. The Auditor General's follow-up report, submitted January 2003, stated that his original recommendation for mitigation action was only partially implemented.

How can this be acceptable? The Provincial Interface Committee does not even have a nickel in its budget to provide a coordinating role or direction for mitigation of interface fire risk.

The OFC lost 18 safety officers in 1995; we have nine at this time. Their work is currently backlogged by about a year.

How can these workers and their office provide adequate advice and education to local governments on the importance of fire prevention measures? If the OFC is to play a role in preventing and mitigating interface fire risk, budget and staffing levels need to be increased.

Recommendation: The provincial government increase the budget and staffing levels of the OFC so that it can meet its mandate and obligations as recommended in the Auditor General's report.

Ministry of Transportation

It is recognized that dry grasses along highways and roadsides are fuel for wildfires, ignited by a tossed cigarette or spark from a passing vehicle.

Cuts to road maintenance contractors' budgets since 2001 have reduced mowing frequency. In some areas no mowing was done in 2003 at all; in other areas mowing was done only once.

In years past, removal of this "ladder fuel" was done to the fence line. Crews would chip brush and haul away. Now the cut is only to the ditch shoulder, and what is cut is left in the ditches.

Across the province, high grass and brush now commonly stretch from the roadside up to the trees.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Transportation budget for brush and grass removal from the roadside to the fence line be increased, and maintenance contractors be required to remove the "ladder fuel" as a preventative measure against wildfires.

In Summary

BCGEU members played significant roles both as professionals and volunteers in fighting the wildfires of 2003, and they continue to work on recovery efforts. They have done a tremendous job and we are all very grateful.

However, BCGEU members are saying the cuts to ministry budgets and staffing are too deep, and they worry about how our communities and resources will be safeguarded in future.

This is a quote from the provincial government's response to the Auditor General's follow-up performance report on *Managing Interface Fire Risks*:

It must be acknowledged that the fiscal reality will continue to affect our ability to fully implement the recommendations. Implementation of expenditure and workforce reductions is scheduled to continue through to the end of fiscal year 2004/2005.

Looking back over the 2003 season of wildfires and considering the fact that the Auditor General gave us a "heads up" in 2001 on the need for improved wildfire management, it is clear this government needs to rethink its budget-cutting priorities.

The provincial government's "New Era" of cutbacks to important public services is not good fiscal management, not good for the public, the economy, the environment, or our communities.

Staffing levels and budgets for services must be restored and even expanded in many areas to meet demands for wildfire management and emergency preparedness. We cannot afford less.

I urge you to consider our recommendations and forward them to Premier Campbell.