



Subject: Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) Close Out Report

Recommendation:

THAT the Regional Emergency Operations Centre Close Out Report be accepted as information.

Summary:

The Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) was activated on May 1, 2016 given the wildfires within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Subsequently, a State of Local Emergency was declared on May 1, 2016 followed by the Provincial State of Emergency on May 4, 2016. This is a high level account of REOC operations during this event.

Background:

REOC Role and Function

The Regional Emergency Operations Centre was activated to coordinate the initial response and to maintain support for the wildfire. REOC serves as a communication and response coordination centre that is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The structure of REOC is based on the Incident Command System and includes a Director and Deputy Director of Emergency Management, REOC Manager, and Chiefs responsible for Operations, Logistics, Planning, Communications and Finance. In total over 4,161 individuals spent time working in REOC and in the field supporting REOC efforts.

Wildfire Status

On May 1, 2016, an out of control wildfire – located in the Forest Protection Area (FPA) southwest of Fort McMurray – began threatening the city. This fire was one of four (4) fires that threatened the region. The earliest began on April 29th in Parsons Creek, the 2nd occurred April 30th west of Abasand and the 3rd occurred along Prospect Drive. All three (3) of these fires were brought under control through a combination of efforts by Alberta Agriculture and Forestry (AGFOR) and the Fort McMurray Fire Department (FMFD). On May 2nd the Horse River Fire (MWF-09) had reached approximately 862 hectares. With very high to extreme Fine Fuel Moisture Code (FFMC) and Initial Spread Index (ISI) index, by 20:00 hours, May 3rd MWF-09 had grown to approximately 7,551 hectares. MWF-09 entered Fort McMurray the afternoon of May 3rd and resulted in numerous structure fires and the eventual mandatory evacuation of the entire city.

Evacuations

Evacuations started on May 1, 2016 with the evacuation of the landfill followed by the voluntary evacuation of Gregoire, Centennial Trailer Park and Prairie Creek. As the evacuations continued, a reception centre and lodging was set up at MacDonald Island. This voluntary evacuation of Centennial Trailer Park and Prairie Creek was upgraded to mandatory on the eve of May 1st as the fire continued in the area. As the fire continued throughout the following days, evacuations continued in the areas of Beacon Hill, Grayling Terrace, Abasand, Waterways, Downtown, Wood Buffalo, Dickinsfield Timberlea and Thickwood. Residents were advised that all should prepare for mandatory evacuation within a 30-minute notice. As of 18:15 hours on May 3rd, all of Fort McMurray was now under a mandatory evacuation notice. Residents of Gregoire were to evacuate south and residents in all other areas were to evacuate north of Fort McMurray. All lanes on Highway 63 north of Taiga Nova were running northbound to support traffic flows. As evacuations continued, reception centres in Anzac, Wandering River, Lac La Biche, Northlands and at many of the work camp sites were set up to accept the displaced residents of Fort McMurray.

RCMP

The Wood Buffalo RCMP played a key role in making sure the residents of Fort McMurray, and other affected areas, were evacuated in a safe and calm manner. All available members, totaling over 136, assisted the evacuations, making sure that the citizens remained calm and exited the city. When the urgency had subsided and the public was safe, the RCMP replaced the Wood Buffalo Members with fresh RCMP Officers from Alberta and across Canada including Newfoundland, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. This allowed for a seamless transition and provided the required safety and security to the region in the time of need. The number of RCMP officers from across Canada was over 300 personnel to supplement the policing needs of the region and included specialized resources such as the Special Tactical Operations Teams from both Alberta and BC. On May 23rd, Wood Buffalo RCMP Detachment members returned to relieve the outside resources and take over the policing of the region once again. Wood Buffalo RCMP members played a large part in the re-entry of the citizens of the region, along with our other partners.

Municipal Law Enforcement (MLE)

Municipal Law Enforcement supported with traffic, people and property controls in the initial days. Upon return from evacuating to Lac La Biche, MLE sensed the need to assist residents with respect to pets left in homes. A plan was developed with the assistance of the Alberta SPCA, and a number of Alberta-wide animal care agencies, to provide a rescue of animals from homes. A reunification center was created in Edmonton and with the assistance of the RMWB Transit Department. Animals were rescued, transported to Edmonton and reunited with owners. Over 200 pets that were unable to be transported due to technical reasons were provided continuous in-house care during the entire evacuation time and up to re-entry. MLE provided direction with respect to abandoned vehicles and continued to work with industry and residents to match owners to vehicles that had been left in areas outside of the urban centre.

Transit

Transit played a key role in the evacuation and continued REOC operations. After evacuating their buildings, they ran the transit system, including the dispatch of a bus staged at MacDonald Island. Transit provided buses to do a complete evacuation of the hospital including stretchers

and wheelchairs to Firebag. As evacuations of MacDonald Island and Anzac occurred, Transit ensured that all were evacuated safely and efficiently. On the days following the evacuation, Transit has continued to play a role providing charter services from Edmonton daily, to support the individuals who needed to be in Fort McMurray for re-entry efforts, and transporting returnees in conjunction with the Canadian Red Cross from Information Centres and the airport directly to their homes.

Agency Support

In addition to the support from all of our municipal departments, REOC could not have functioned without the support from a number of agencies including the Government of Alberta, Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, Alberta Health, ATCO Gas and Electric, Shaw, Telus, industry partners, Alberta Energy Regulator, Insurance Bureau of Canada, YMM Airport, ADRA Canada, Billy Graham Rapid Response Team, CanTF2, Canadian Global Response, Canadian Red Cross, Christian Aid Ministries, Christian Disaster Relief, Mennonite Disaster Services, North American Mission Board, Salvation Army, Samaritan's Purse, Team Rubicon and IsraAid. Each of these agencies played an integral role in the REOC function.

Operations

The Operations team consisted of Engineering, Underground Services, Public Works, Sustainable Operations, Environmental Services and all the utility companies. The team played a major role in all REOC efforts from ensuring water was available during the fire, assisting in evacuations, fueling equipment, barricading any necessary areas, cleaning large debris from roadways (from burnt houses to vehicles) and ensuring that all critical infrastructure was restored and safe for the residents to meet the re-entry criteria.

Underground Services (Water and Sanitary)

From the onset of the fire, providing large quantities of water to various areas of the city was the primary objective. The volumes of water required quick reaction and close monitoring of the production and distribution systems to ensure that adequate supply was available. At the peak of the fire, the Water Treatment Plant had to be evacuated and Administration ensured the plant was left in a state that could sustain itself during the evacuation.

Immediately after the fire, Underground Services supported the fire response and recovery efforts in heavily damaged areas including Beacon Hill, Waterways, and Abasand, as well as all other damaged areas. These initial efforts concentrated on getting water to reservoirs and to eliminate water system losses due to the burnt homes (water was running through services in the damaged homes and created huge system losses). During this time, main lines were isolated to protect reservoirs and enable water storage and capacity to supply water through the hydrants for fighting fire and protecting private property and critical infrastructure.

After these initial efforts, the focus was shifted to (1) water flushing to recover potable water in the system, (2) cut and cap in the sanitary system to protect the sanitary lines and the biological wastewater treatment plant process from infiltration of contaminants from the burned areas, and (3) catch basin surface covering (i.e. silt socks) and cleaning to protect the storm water system that discharges directly to the environment.

Efforts are still ongoing with potable water being restored to most of the Municipality. The sanitary cut and cap program, consisting of approximately 700 homes, will be completed within a couple of days; and catch basin covering and cleaning will be ongoing until debris removal in burned areas is completed.

Fencing

Safety was the number one priority of the REOC team. To ensure the safety of our residents, over 62 kilometres of fencing was installed throughout the Municipality.

Tackifier

Tackifier is a powdery substance that dries to a hard shell, which prevents ash and other contaminants from becoming airborne. This environmentally safe, non-toxic compound is commonly used in landfills. Based on a test of one Stone Creek property it was determined that tackifier should be used on all damaged areas to lock in any ash and toxins and eliminate the spreading in the damaged areas. Tackifier was applied to all damaged areas within 10 days of approval.

Environmental Testing

Environmental, health and safety concerns following a fire include the presence of contaminants/hazards in ash, soil, water and air. Some of the affected neighbourhoods including Abasand, Waterways and Beacon Hill contain older buildings (i.e. pre 1990) and therefore there is a potential risk that these structures were built using asbestos-containing materials and other hazardous building materials. The Government of Alberta and the Municipality completed testing for various contaminants including dioxins, furans, asbestos, PAHs and hydrocarbons. To ensure the public was not exposed, the REOC performed additional testing and will continue to test as the debris is cleaned up.

Logistics

The Logistics team was responsible to procure and supply any items that were required to support the event. Logistics was responsible for the procurement of goods, accommodation, transportation and security services.

Procurement of Supplies

More than 1,000 orders were placed (valued in the tens of millions of dollars) for Hydrovac services, tackifier, cleaning services, laborers, generators, food services, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), fuel, vehicle and equipment rentals, potable water, temporary accommodations (ATCO Saline Creek setup), security service personnel, cut and cap utility services, printing, consumables, fencing, landscaping, etc. Over 80% of purchases were placed with local businesses (“local” defined as local resident business owners residing within the region of Wood Buffalo).

Accommodations

Logistics arranged all accommodations for emergency responders, Administration, Alberta Health Services staff, and other required resources. Working directly with the Canadian Red Cross on emergency temporary housing during re-entry, over 1,000 hotel and camps rooms were procured for displaced residents/families.

Transportation

Given the air restriction within Fort McMurray, logistics was responsible to arrange flight requests for services that were required by REOC. Daily shuttle services between Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Lac La Biche and Janvier were arranged and assistance was provided to the Sheriffs with transportation for the Vehicle Reunification Program.

Access to Town

Prior to re-entry, access to town was limited. Logistics cleared thousands of critical businesses and contractors through checkpoints in conjunction with Planning.

Planning

The Planning team consisted of the Rapid Damage Assessment Team, GIS, Re-Entry, and the Critical Business Team. Overall, 95 plans were created including plans for animal rescue and reunification, Alberta Health Services Temporary Clinic, evacuation plans and re-entry plans to name a few.

Rapid Damage Assessment Team

A team of safety codes officers from the Municipality and other locations across Alberta completed a Rapid Damage Assessment of all the structures within the Municipality to determine their structural status. The Rapid Damage Assessment results became available in a fire assessment tool that provided detailed information on properties, including property description, damage status and detailed images of all sides of the property before and after the fire.

Re-Entry

In partnership with the Province of Alberta, it was determined that re-entry would begin in a phased approach on June 1, 2016, provided the following criteria could be met:

- 1) The wildfire and ancillary threats no longer posed an imminent threat
- 2) Critical infrastructure was repaired to provide a basic level of service
- 3) Essential services were restored to a basic level:
 - a. Emergency services were restored (fire, EMS, police, 911);
 - b. Open and safe transportation to/within the community;
 - c. Access to emergency medical care/transportation;
 - d. Access to water/electricity/gas;
 - e. Access to food/pharmaceutical/banks/gas stations; and
 - f. Access to mental health support
- 4) The hazardous areas were secured
- 5) Local government was re-established.

To support the re-entry, seven information centres were set up to include representatives from the Canadian Red Cross, the Government of Alberta, Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation, Safety Codes, Shaw, Telus, ATCO Gas, ATCO Electric and many staff from various municipal departments. As of June 22, 2016; 63,262 individuals had checked into an information centre to access support.

Critical Business

It was imperative that essential services were restored to the community in order to allow re-entry. As part of the Planning piece, Critical Business was determined to include grocery stores,

pharmacies, gas stations, hotels and banks. Securing hotels was a primary objective of the Critical Business and Logistics team as the hotels would be used to lodge the individuals working to support REOC and the restorations teams for the critical businesses. Critical Business also worked closely with industry as they were able to provide support and logistics for camp accommodations to increase the number of available rooms for restoration teams. In all, by June 1, 11 hotels, 5 grocery stores, 11 banks, 10 gas stations, and 5 pharmacies were open to support the re-entry of Fort McMurray residents.

Rubicon/Sifting Services

Following the experiences of other communities, REOC made a commitment to ensure that every resident would be given the opportunity to have their property sifted. A partnership was created with Team Rubicon, whose primary mission is providing disaster relief to those affected by natural disasters. By pairing the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders, medical professionals, and technology solutions, Team Rubicon aims to provide the greatest service and impact possible. Team Rubicon has completed close to 900 sifting operations within the RMWB.

Communications

The Communications team worked with various communications partners, including the Province of Alberta, to serve a strategic communications role throughout the emergency. Working with subject matter experts, the team developed plans, content and tactics to communicate with a number of audiences including REOC participants, staff and individuals within the Municipality prior to and following re-entry. As an active participant in SitReps, Command meetings and other meetings as needed, an overall approach was developed for each communications request using various tactics (as strategically appropriate) including developing web content, news releases, key messages, Q&As, speaking notes, media briefings, news conferences, posters, booklets, videos and social media content for Twitter and Facebook. Through mainstream media requests, communication was also facilitated with Albertans, Canadians and audiences around the world, about activities within the Municipality.

Pulse

The Pulse Line is the direct connection for our residents to the Municipality. Re-activating on June 1st, the Pulse Line has responded to over 13,000 inquiries related to landfill to permitting to calls about spot fires and all questions in between. Over 50 Pulse Line operators are providing answers to citizens' questions, and offering support for all inquiries, requests and complaints.

Budget/Financial Implications:

While the expenses related to the wildfire will be covered through Disaster Recovery Program (DRP), the costs cannot be provided at this time as the Municipality continues to collect information related to the wildfire costs. Providing even an estimate at this point would be incomplete as new information is received on a daily basis.

Rationale for Recommendation:

It is difficult to summarize the details of evacuating over 90,000 individuals, protecting and restoring critical infrastructure, supporting over 60,000 residents through information centres, sending over 3,569 tweets, and working as a team to protect the safety and the return of the residents to our Municipality. Each and every task since May 1st tells a part of the REOC story and the REOC Close Out report provides only a snapshot of those efforts.

Strategic Plan Linkages:

Pillar 2 – Building Balanced Regional Services

Pillar 6 – Building a Sustainable Region