

NEIGHBOURHOOD **Emergency Preparedness**

HOW COMMUNITIES ACROSS BRITISH
COLUMBIA ARE BANDING TOGETHER TO
PREPARE FOR NATURAL DISASTERS

BY
BY JANE MUNDY

West Kelowna photographer
Shawn Talbot captured this
image as he was evacuating. He
expected his house to be gone by
morning but the wind shifted and it
was spared. Many others in West
Kelowna were not as lucky.

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Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night with a sudden desire to gather all your important documents into one place with a solar-powered phone charger, some granola bars and a few gallons of water? Do you know where your flashlight is? Most of us at some point in our lives will have had a brush with a wildfire, flood or storm. Yet despite watching news coverage of home evacuations last summer and a fierce wind knocking out my electricity for several hours, I still didn't have an emergency preparedness plan.

PEOPLE ALL OVER British Columbia who never considered themselves at risk from climate change are now waking up to fires and floods.

"We have an urgent climate crisis that's here to stay, so we need systems in place in advance," said BC Ombudsperson, Jay Chalke, on a recent CBC radio interview. "Emergency management legislation is outdated; it needs to modernize, but that takes time. The province's disaster relief program was designed to help people during small-scale emergencies, affecting a few people for a short time. However, the one-size-fits-all approach to emergency relief is not the way to go."

One way to go is by contacting your local FireSmart representative. Along with the obvious things like having a plan in place and an updated emergency kit, FireSmart demonstrates that the best way to defend against any emergency is to work with your neighbours—to reduce risks, respond effectively and support one another.

"This year when the Kelowna fires were so close, we constantly checked in with our neighbours," says Liz Babcock. "Embers were flying across Okanagan Lake and we are surrounded by woods

so that made me nervous, but we made sure everyone had support and a plan, including where we should meet if a fire separated us."

A few years ago, Babcock put together two emergency totes with food—including dog kibble, gallons of water and two suitcases filled with personal items and documents. She packed sensible, not sentimental. "I heard Albertans talk about weird things they grabbed when they had to evacuate—one lady took steer horns from her wall—she must have been in shock. Who knows what you'd grab with just a few minutes notice."

On August 17, the fast-growing McDougall Creek wildfire surrounded the Findlay's beloved Broken Rail Ranch. Miraculously, all their rescue horses were saved but Wilbour, the pig, couldn't escape the flames. "We had an emergency plan for the animals but I still had a moment of panic as the fire loomed behind us," says Crystal Findlay. "The horses aren't used to trailers but thanks to our amazing neighbours, we loaded all 20 in two hours—that was incredible."

Findlay says everyone stayed calm during the order to evacuate. "Alerts happen so frequently we almost become



IMPACT TO REDUCE RISK FROM WILDFIRE

HOME

YARD

OUTER YARD

LARGE YARD OR NEIGHBOURHOOD



NON-COMBUSTIBLE ZONE
0 - 1.5 METRES

A minimum 1.5 metre non-combustible surface should extend around the entire home and any attachments, such as decks.

ZONE 1
1.5 - 10 METRES

This should be a fire-resistant zone, free of all materials that could easily ignite from a wildfire.

ZONE 2
10 - 30 METRES

Thin and prune evergreen trees to reduce hazard in this area. Regularly clean up accumulations of fallen branches, dry grass and needles from on the ground to eliminate potential surface fuels.

ZONE 3
30 - 100 METRES

Look for opportunities to create a fire break by creating space between trees and other potentially flammable vegetation. Thinning and pruning is effective here as well. These actions will help reduce the intensity of a wildfire.

complacent; we trust our government officials and local fire department that everything will be OK, but we were OK mainly because of our community."

DECIDING WHAT TO grab and leave behind is stressful, even though the general rule is "don't bring anything you can replace." Findlay packed family photo albums, passports, birth certificates and some jewelry. "My daughter grabbed my cowboy hat and boots and I took one full outfit and my five bottles of wine," Findlay says, laughing. They were packed and ready to go in 15 minutes. Left behind were videos of the kids growing up, all childhood memorabilia and her great grandmother's beautiful

lamp—items they already miss.

A few weeks after the fire, around 40 neighbours showed up to help rebuild their horse shelters. They gave time and materials and fundraised for the horses. "We've forgotten about past rifts and issues—our community is tighter now," says Findlay.

WHILE SMALL COMMUNITIES have a history of banding together in emergencies and helping each other out, towns and cities with larger populations, like Kelowna, can provide a much bigger logistical challenge. Imagine 26,000 people trying to find a hotel. But Kelowna's deputy fire chief Sandra Follack says that increasingly neighbourhoods are reach-

ing out to the fire department, wanting to FireSmart their community.

"We have learned from this past summer to be prepared—to take care of yourself for the first 72 hours. And prepare now because you never know when you have to leave," advises Follack.

"One community had significant property loss but one FireSmart home was completely untouched—it had Hardie Board siding and all the bark mulch and shrubbery near the house was removed," Follack says. "The majority of homes we lost were up against a hillside and trees fell on their houses. And if embers land on bark mulch near your home that could level your property. Ember casting [embers are 'cast']

BEFORE



AFTER



Changes within the 10 metre zone of your home will have the biggest impact. Above, the trees touching the house have been removed.

downwind from the fire and create ‘spot fires’] started the fire in Kelowna that came from West Kelowna—the embers flew across the lake.” No wonder Babcock was nervous.

Elaina Konoby is an emergency management project manager and nurse advocate trained in disaster emergency management. She says that Emergency Management BC provides guides and checklists for all kinds of disasters but developing a checklist for your family and neighbourhood is key.

“Carry out neighbourhood drills: if someone has a cardiac issue, who can put them on oxygen immediately? If there are health issues, address them now,” Konoby says. “Can the pharmacist give you extra meds? Where is your water main and electrical panel? How do you turn off the gas? Take responsibility because the gas company doesn’t own your house, nor does the doctor own your body.

Konoby suggests that you can start an emergency preparedness plan by knocking on doors and introducing yourself.

Discuss skills and knowledge you can share. It’s important to do a risk assessment and learn what you need and how you can obtain any missing knowledge by doing, for example, first aid training or CPR. Smoke inhalation is a concern; think about having your community invest in an oxygen concentrator (like those in hospital), or a generator in case the power goes out.

“These recent fires have brought awareness and let’s hope that action follows,” says Konoby. “I want neighbourhoods to gather and have a dialogue about their worst-case scenario. With preparation, we are less fearful when an event happens and we will have less chaos. For instance, Fort McMurry sent fuel tankers on the highway—people were stalled driving south. Always have your gas tank at least half full.”

We all know that emergency rooms are experiencing staffing challenges, and their waiting times are long. In a major

emergency, all response teams—fire, ambulance, police—and emergency rooms will be overloaded. Does your neighbourhood have a nurse, a paramedic or a doctor that can teach basic first aid for the whole neighbourhood? Or consider taking a certified course. “It is critical that neighbours know each other and what they can count on,” adds Konoby. Share with neighbours your name, phone, email and home address, including the skills and resources that you can share in an emergency.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S FireSmart Neighbourhood Recognition Program (NRP) provides free neighbourhood assessments for groups interested in enhancing their community’s resilience to wildfire threats. Neighbourhood assessments identify evacuation concerns such as access/egress points, population demographics and generalized wildfire risks. The NRP provides \$1,000 annually to recognized FireSmart Committees which can spend the funds in a number of ways, such as a

barbecue to promote neighbourhood resiliency, a contractor with a chipper to remove wood debris or build a neighbourhood evacuation plan through community organizing events.

At a recent FireSmart presentation in a North Cowichan home, representatives Sarah Jackman and Todd Carnahan explained to homeowner Derek and five neighbours how to make their home and property survive an ember storm. (However, the first question this evening concerned fire insurance—whether insurance companies would obtain these assessments and increase home premiums or not insure them at all. Jackman assured everyone that FireSmart is funded by the federal government and they are forbidden to disclose any information about home assessments.)

“Most of us have properties surrounded by forest and in one afternoon three fires started. Several nearby homes could have been lost if the firetrucks

were putting out fires elsewhere,” says Derek. “Trying to be proactive, our local firehall connected me with FireSmart. Last May we held a barbecue featuring a FireSmart presentation and 80 percent of the community showed up! That event created enough interest to get on board with their NRP.”

To make your home and property more fire-resilient, the best plan is to get to know your neighbours and help protect your community together. For instance, elderly neighbours may not be able to remove leaves from their gutters and could use some help.

“We must work together because any home that ignites can cause others to burn,” says Jackman. “Think of your home from an ember ignition perspective: 1.5 metres is the critical zone

Thin and prune trees in the 10 to 30 metre zone around your house. Remove lower branches so grass fires don't ignite the trees.

around your home where drifts of embers could land.” Make that area—including around the deck and outbuildings—a non-combustible zone. As for the roof, vents and walls, choose non-combustible materials—cedar shake is not great.”

Jackman says that maintenance is also important to survive a wildfire ember storm. Embers, which cause 90 percent of home ignitions, can smolder in bark mulch for many hours and ignite the home after firefighters have moved on. Clean gutters regularly, cut grass to less than 10 centimetres, and avoid storing combustible materials beside your home. Check your vents for three-millimetre metal fire screens and ensure that dryer vent dampers are functioning properly. FireSmart landscaping means avoiding the use of plants in the 1.5-metre zone around the home and excluding conifers in the 10-metre zone around the home. Some plants are better choices, ▶



BEFORE



AFTER

