

# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES MAY 2011

## LESSONS LEARNED



Photo Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS AND MITIGATION

*“It definitely was a shocking experience. And I think most people have been effected, but have been able to come back, and get back with their life. It’s something I know of people of Slave Lake: people would stand and bounce back.” (Community Member)*

# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES MAY 2011

## LESSONS LEARNED

*“You were looking to the right, where cars were coming from, and this black wall of smoke and embers is coming at you as quick as you can imagine. Like a freight train. That is when I started to say: ok, this is reality, I need to evacuate. But I always thought that I would have a house to come back to. I never thought that my house would burn. For some reason I never thought that our town would ever burn.” (Community Member)*



Photo Courtesy of Michael J. Kapusta

### The Slave Lake Fires Quick Facts:

- 1,700 municipal emergency responders from across Alberta helped
- 10,000+ people evacuated
- 22,000 hectares consumed
- \$1 billion in damages
- 45,000 hours worked by Red Cross volunteers
- 2 million man-hours needed to rebuild homes
- 233 modular units installed for temporary housing
- \$289 million committed by the Alberta government
- 170+ construction permits issued to date

*“Well, after, I always did think about it, and think about what could have happened or what could not have happened or, why did my place get on fire. But now I’m not upset or anything bad. I’m just: it happened, and I’m alive and good things come out of it, so you can’t change that, so it’s my life.” (Girl)*



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This document is based upon the interviews and community fieldwork completed in the Slave Lake region in the first year after the wildfires. The purpose is to share the lessons learned related to the recovery of the community and its citizens. Findings from the school and household survey are available in other reports; see [ruralwildfire.ca](http://ruralwildfire.ca).

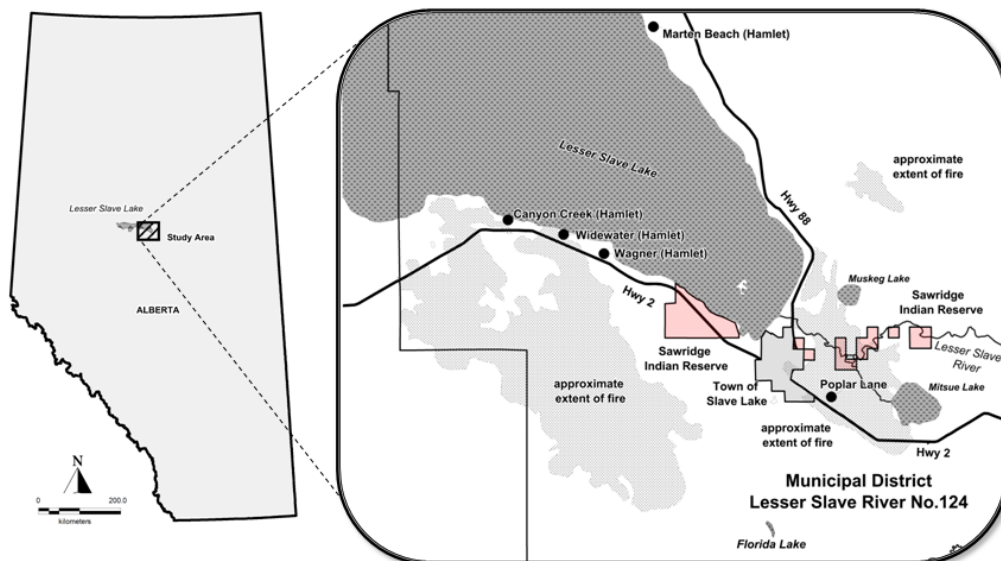


Lesser Slave Lake outlet into Lesser Slave River

Photo Courtesy of Town of Slave Lake

# BACKGROUND

## SLAVE LAKE, ALBERTA, CANADA



### Describing the Area

The Slave Lake area includes the Town of Slave Lake, the Sawridge First Nation and part of the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, including the hamlets of Canyon Creek, Widewater and Wagner. It is located 250 km northwest of Edmonton, on the eastern side of Lesser Slave Lake.

The area is home to approximately 7,427 residents. The Town has 90% of the area's population and acts as regional centre, with retail, education, health, financial, government, and transportation services. Oil and forestry industries are prevalent in the region. Tourism is also increasing mainly due to the beautiful and road-accessible Lesser Slave Lake. Sandy beaches attract people in the summer; and cross-country skiing, ice fishing and other activities are common in the winter months.

*"People are so friendly, and the outdoors are so nice. Why wouldn't I want to live here?" (Community Member)*

### THE 2011 SLAVE LAKE FIRES

On Saturday May 14, 2011, a wildfire (SWF-056) started burning southwest of the town and toward the south shore communities of Canyon Creek, Widewater and Wagner. These communities were put on a two-hour evacuation notice. A second wildfire (SWF-065) started very close to the Town of Slave Lake, in the Mitsue area, and a third fire (SWT-082) started approximately 15 km north of the town. Other areas evacuated include Mitsue, Poplar Lane and the Sawridge First Nation.

The next day, Sunday May 15, 2011, winds gusted to 100 kilometers per hour stirring up both fires and pushing the flames to Widewater and Canyon Creek, and to the town, forcing residents to flee. The entire population of the Town of Slave Lake (approximately 7,000 residents), the Sawridge First Nation and some residents of the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 relocated to different destinations such as Athabasca, Westlock and Edmonton. Residents of the affected area were under a mandatory evacuation order by the Town of Slave Lake until May 27, 2011.

There was one death of a helicopter pilot. No fatalities or major injuries occurred among area residents. The impact of these fires included the destruction or damage of 56 residences and 1 commercial building in the Municipal District communities. About one-quarter of the town was affected. The flames consumed over 400 homes, 3 churches, 19 non-residential buildings, and the Government Centre, which included the municipal library, town administrative offices, and most of the regional provincial government offices. Overall, the magnitude of this wildfire event is unprecedented in recent provincial or national history.

# FROM THE ELECTED LEADERS

SLAVE LAKE, ALBERTA, CANADA



Town of Slave Lake



MD of Lesser Slave River No. 124



Sawridge First Nation

Photos Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig

*The morning of May 14, 2011 was like any warm, sunny Saturday. Because we live in the boreal forest, we are no strangers to forest fires. When we saw smoke south of the Town of Slave Lake, no one thought much of it. Even later that day when residents were evacuated from nearby hamlets, and the MD and the Town declared a State of Local Emergency, there was little alarm.*

*However, by early afternoon on Sunday, with winds reaching 100 kilometres per hour and several threatening fires in the region, we knew this was a real emergency.*

*The three fires resulted in an evacuation of 10,000+ area residents for 12 days, required the combined efforts of some 1,700 emergency responders, and caused an estimated \$1 billion of damage.*

*In the year since the fires, we have learned how resilient and downright tough our people are. The recovery is slowly taking shape, and we are confident we will rebuild to be stronger than ever.*

*One of the biggest lessons we learned was that there is no established guidebook or recipe for disaster recovery. This has brought our communities closer together. We have developed new governance structures that allow for greater collaboration and joint decision-making. We have reinvented ourselves. We have had to think differently. We are a community, working together to heal.*

*Lastly, we are grateful for the tremendous support we have received and continue to receive from the Government of Alberta and the people of Alberta and Canada. We never knew we had so many neighbours, both near and far!*

*Karina Pillay-Kinnee, Mayor  
Town of Slave Lake*

*Denny Garratt, Reeve  
MD of Lesser Slave River No. 124*

*Roland Twinn, Chief  
Sawridge First Nation*



# RURAL COMMUNITIES & DISASTERS



enfo.agt.bme.hu/drupal/en.gallery/3506

## Disasters in Rural Areas

Natural disasters are events that stretch the resources of any community but in rural communities where there is limited infrastructure, disasters are even more challenging. From 1995–2005, wildfires affected over 250 communities in Canada, most in rural or remote areas. During these events, cooperation between local, provincial and federal governments is key in dealing with the disaster while it is happening and during the recovery.

## Rural Health Status and Disasters

Residents of rural communities rate their own health lower than residents of urban areas. Risk factors for poor health such as farther travel distance to reach health care services, increased smoking rates and a higher prevalence of obesity have higher incidences in rural communities. Significantly higher rates of blood pressure and arthritis in rural and northern areas of Canada also contribute to decreased health status.



yaqoita.ca/destinations/

While taking personal measures to improve health is an important step, rural dwellers report a lower likelihood of taking action to improve their health. This overall lower level of health in rural communities has been recognized by local, provincial and federal governments. Across Canada, health promotion activities have been initiated to increase the level of health experienced by rural and northern Canadians.

After disasters, individuals may experience difficulties in coping with the event and the losses they incurred. Mental health resources are often limited in rural areas. Technology provides an avenue to access resources to assist individuals, families and children cope with the changes in their lives.

## THE BENEFITS OF WORKING TOGETHER

### Community Involvement

Currently, the 20% of Canada's population that is rural lives throughout 99.8% of its landmass. Rural Canadians have strong ties to friends and family. The more rural a place is, the more community members are likely to know their neighbours and consider them friends. A strong sense of belonging is also common among rural residents. Likewise, rural dwellers indicate a higher level of trust in their neighbours. Furthermore, individuals who experience a sense of belonging feel as though they "fit" in the community and more often participate in its activities. They also self-rate their health as higher than those who do not feel as though they "fit" or "have a sense of belonging". These characteristics are strengths for rural communities that experience disasters. However, there are also certain aspects that make communities less resilient, such as the tendency of young people to move away, aging infrastructure, and the acute pressure on the largely volunteer core of fire and emergency services, where full-time positions are rare.

**ONE YEAR STRONGER**  
community events calendar

**MAY 2012**

<p><b>May 10 - 21</b> <b>COMMUNITY BLOCK BARBECUES (10 - 21)</b> Mark the anniversary of the wildfire in your own way. The Regional To Cooper has arranged to supply the basics for community block BBQs to assist families and neighbours. Come together during the anniversary period. P: 780.849.8013</p> <p><b>May 11</b> <b>HOME SWEET HOME CONCERT SERIES (11 - 12)</b> Archie Fox Country May 11 Vince Neil May 12 Emerson Drive P: 780.805.4708</p> <p><b>KNITTE / PANWEST FAMILY FUN DAY (13)</b> Hills Glen Park 12:00 - 4:00 pm BBQ and entertainment for the whole family. Bouncy castles, face painting, petting zoo and more!</p> <p><b>ANNIVERSARY &amp; PRESS EVENT (15)</b> Field House 1:00 pm</p> <p><b>May 12</b> <b>LEGION (15)</b> <b>80th ANNIVERSARY (15)</b> Door prizes and fun for the whole family. 80th Anniversary special presentation.</p> <p><b>May 13</b> <b>PIZZA PARTY (15)</b> 5:00 - 8:00 pm Bosnian Pizza Parking Lot Event sponsored by Fire/OnSite Restoration.</p> <p><b>COMMUNITY THANKS (15)</b> Throughout the summer, we will recognize the communities that provide excellent support to our community: Athabasca, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, High Prairie, Bonin, St. Albert, Yellowknife, Wetlock, and Watrous</p>	<p><b>1</b> <b>BIRCH FOREST BOOGIE (1)</b> Northern Lakes College Gymnasium Starts at 8:30 pm</p> <p><b>2</b> <b>LESTER SLAVE FOREST EDUCATION SOCIETY and the Slave Forest Fire Risk Conservation put on a fun-filled evening with lots of singing, laughing, dancing to a DJ, and silent auction fun.</b> P: 780.943.802</p> <p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>7</b> <b>BELLEVILLE'S EXCELLENT COMMUNITY WELLNESS CONFERENCE (10 - 12)</b> Sawridge Inn &amp; Conference Center This is a three-day conference dedicated to health and wellness featuring speakers, professional development, events, and special guest appearances. P: 780.805.0488</p> <p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>9</b></p> <p><b>10</b></p> <p><b>11</b> <b>COMMUNITY BANQUET EVENT (11)</b> Sawridge Inn &amp; Conference Center 5:00 - 9:00 pm Hosted by the Regional Arts Council Open to both wellness conference attendees and the public. P: 780.805.0488</p> <p><b>12</b></p> <p><b>13</b> <b>ELKS MOTHER'S DAY LUNCHEON DINNER (13)</b> Steak and lobster dinner with DJ, music, and entertainment by Roger West or choose the meat and potatoes Emerson Drive concert. P: 780.805.0488</p> <p><b>14</b></p> <p><b>15</b> <b>SMITH MOTHER'S DAY THANKS SHOW (15)</b> Smith School Gymnasium 10:00 am - 4:00 pm Volunteers include local craftspersons, Parryville, Paragonist Chat, Ardmore, Minto Bay, Lacure, Topanawak, Steeped Tea, and many more.</p> <p><b>16</b></p> <p><b>17</b></p> <p><b>18</b> <b>JEAN LUC DESJAIS MEMORIAL EVENT (18)</b> Canyon Creek Beach and all of the event 3:00 pm BBQ to follow P: 780.849.2222</p> <p><b>19</b></p> <p><b>20</b></p> <p><b>21</b></p> <p><b>22</b></p> <p><b>23</b></p> <p><b>24</b></p> <p><b>25</b></p> <p><b>26</b></p> <p><b>27</b> <b>ROTARY CLUB'S 77th FUNDRAISER (27)</b> Grand prize car or boat P: 780.805.0482</p> <p><b>28</b></p> <p><b>29</b></p> <p><b>30</b></p> <p><b>31</b></p>
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SEMI-ELEPHANT Lester Slave River

# COMMUNITY RESILIENCY

Community resiliency has been defined as the **ability of a community** to deal with adversity and develop a **higher level of functioning** as a result. It is a process that all communities experience as they **interact with their environment**, particularly after events such as natural disasters.

## What does resiliency look like?

- Community members working collectively alongside each other develop a sense of belonging.
- This shared mentality and outlook leads to community action that demonstrates leadership and conflict-resolution.
- While these qualities are borne of the specific actions of the community, resiliency does allow for feedback, input and new ideas from external sources.

## What can be done to increase resiliency?

- Supporting the cohesiveness of the community through recognition of local informal leaders and supporting family networks can help communities deal with adversity including disasters.
- Recognizing and attending to those community members who are vulnerable can help to enhance individual and community resiliency during and after a disaster.

## What are the benefits of resiliency?

- If we understand how communities have coped with adversity, their strategies may be useful for others.
- Residents of resilient communities carry a local pride that manifests itself in the life-perspective of its members.
- Resilient community members will exhibit community action as conflict resolution and problem solving activities occur.



[blogs.hds.com](http://blogs.hds.com)

*“Resilience to me is just the commitment to come back and continue on. The commitment is certainly there to rebuild the town, we haven’t really walked away from that.” (Community Member)*

# FROM THE FIRE CHIEF

## LESSER SLAVE REGIONAL FIRE SERVICE

Photo Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig



*The Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service (LSRFS) is a four hall, 80 member, regional fire service that covers 10, 490 square kilometres for the Town of Slave Lake, Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, and the Sawridge First Nation. Over many years of being threatened by wildfires in our area we developed a bond with the people at the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, which included cross training, integrated responses, and for the majority of cases a positive outcome.*

*On May 14, 2011, as the complex of fires surrounding our area started, we looked on, and helped out as we had every other time. As the fires closest to our communities started to grow and change we all tried to spread out our resources to assist where possible. By 5 pm that night we were tired, but nature wasn't done with us yet. A fire 8 km east of the Town of Slave Lake started and split the crews further. This fire within minutes had raced through the forest and started burning homes and properties in the Mitsue area. That firefight continued through the night and into the next day. May 15, 2011 started out as what was to be a control day, try to control the two fires that threatened the most people and property. Starting out the day we had people from every hall in the district, and even people from outside smaller communities trying to help. Just after 3 pm on that fateful day, the lives and feelings of the three communities changed forever. The wind and weather picked up to the 100<sup>th</sup> degree pushing one fire directly into the Town of Slave Lake, while the other fire steamrolled for the Widewater / Canyon Creek areas of Southshore. These unprecedented winds, hot weather, and low humidity all played a role in the disaster that followed: Hundreds of homes burning at the same time over a forty kilometre stretch; a third fire threatening a community in our district 75 km from Slave Lake that has been threatened and burned many times; the grounding of water bombers and helicopters contracted to ESRD due to wind; and the mass evacuation of almost 15,000 people. What was thought of as impossible, became a reality for us, and will forever change our view of wildfire, community, and weather.*

*The question is always the same: What changed that day? The answer I'm afraid is not so simple. I dare say this, every single person that was involved from residents, to emergency workers, to volunteers, the outside resources that came, and helped from other communities have all been changed forever. Sometimes slightly, and sometimes, and in some cases, greatly. No one knows how long it takes for each person to heal, strengthen, and repair, but living here and being a part of these communities has changed us all. Some of these changes are hard to deal with, but some are good changes. Relationships have changed and we all have to manage this aspect; by always trying to think positively, I believe the area will rebuild, repair, and heal, back to 100% one day. Our community can be proud of how they acted, and reacted, helped and supported each other through the incident and beyond. The help, compassion, and support that we received from around the globe was another bright spot in my eyes. People came from every walk of life to help the people of this region with whatever they could: work, donations, support, and whatever was needed at each phase of the incident and recovery. For that I will be forever grateful.*

Thanks,  
Jamie Coutts, Fire Chief, Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service



# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES

## COMMUNICATION

### QUESTIONS REGARDING COMMUNICATION...

- **Have you prepared an emergency communication plan including official, community and media contacts and their pertinent information?**
- **Do you have a plan to use social media to inform the community about what is happening?**
- **Do you have a plan for communicating with the media? Who will brief them, how often and from where?**
- **Who are the unofficial, local individuals and groups that could be helpful? Who can be contacted to mobilize their assistance?**

*"The biggest thing, number one, is communication. When this event occurred, they needed to take the time to make sure that there was minute-by-minute releases about the status of the fire." (Local Authority)*

### COMMUNICATION WITH ALL INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCING DISASTER IS THE KEY

There were various communication resources used throughout the Slave Lake Fires that were instrumental in inter-agency cooperation and timely distribution of information to community members. From the initial confirmation of a fire, local individuals, the local administration, firefighters, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) staff as well as provincial officials were engaged in frequent communication. **All public announcements** were through the local radio station until it had to be evacuated. Social media is useful to inform the public. Twitter and Facebook are used by the Alberta Emergency Alert System and Alberta Wildfire; web pages are used in Slave Lake to notify

residents about recovery efforts. However, the **public needs to be aware** that their use of social media and cell phone use (e.g., sending photos) can hamper the communication resources during the disaster. Emergency communication has to be in accordance with the required Crisis Communication Plan.

**Hiring a communication expert** can help with the transition from an emergency to a recovery effort. They can also assist with the preparation of updates provided at town hall meetings and web pages about temporary housing and the rebuilding of the community.

Developing a mechanism to transfer services from an emergency to a recovery team is essential to ensure that communication does not breakdown.

**Having information available** at the town office on topics ranging from construction firms to where to apply for financial assistance provides a quick and easy way to gather what families need to make decisions.



Photo Courtesy of Robert J. Evans

## WHO NEEDS WHAT? RECOGNIZING COMMUNICATION NEEDS

### COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Community members require a diverse range of information using all available communication media and tools. Information needs vary from the emergency to the recovery period. Presenting all this information in a straightforward manner is also necessary.

### MEDIA

The media can be a powerful ally in informing and educating the public. Proper planning to brief the media by communicating regularly with consistent and accurate information from an appointed source will benefit community members and ultimately the collective disaster response effort.

### FIRE ADMINISTRATION

Fire administration officials require accurate reports from the "front". With correct information, officials will be better prepared to make decisions. These officials also need regular and candid communication with each other to ensure efficient progress.

# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES

## TEAMWORK

### WORKING TOGETHER

In the province of Alberta, ESRD is the Ministry designated to respond to every wildfire within the Forest Protection Area (about 60% of the province's landbase). Key functions include prevention, detection, and suppression. The Ministry's top firefighting priorities are the protection of human lives and communities.



cbc.ca



Photo Courtesy of Town of Slave

The Slave Lake Fires were contained through joint efforts of the ESRD, the Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service and firefighters from across the province and country. Debriefing and discussion of this process will assist in future joint firefighting efforts. Teamwork can involve a **variety of organizations** from the affected community, province, country or even across international borders. Local organizations providing **spiritual and emotional support** can be beneficial to residents. Second Chance Animal Rescue Society offers pet food, crates and temporary homes for pets during disasters. The Canadian Red

Cross provides financial assistance and counseling for those who are in need. American Red Cross consultants provide support for school personnel who are working with children that have experienced the wildfire. **Coordination** of the efforts of these groups to prevent duplication of services is an important goal. Hosting monthly free events to help the residents deal with the fire can be a

benefit for the whole community. Holding **routine community events** such as annual Christmas fairs and summer festivals are important steps in a community's recovery. These will only be successful if there are **government, corporate or individual donors and social support** provided to volunteers and organizations because of the limited capacity in rural communities.

### "COMMON SENSE"

All community members are responsible for the preparation and evacuation of themselves and their families. In the Slave Lake Fires, people followed their "gut instinct" with many packing their most valuable possessions well before they needed to evacuate. Children also packed their own precious belongings which helped them deal with the loss of their other possessions. When the power was down and no public means was available to notify the community to evacuate, the residents calmly evacuated their homes helping others along the way as needed.

## ...AND FROM WITHIN IT TAKES MORE THAN ONE TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS

### LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

Community members want to get involved in the process of making sound decisions about their community. They have knowledge, perspectives and values that they want to share with the local Director of Emergency Management, local decision-makers and decision-makers in general.

### VOLUNTEERS

The volunteerism during the Slave Lake Fires helped to strengthen community ties and build community spirit. When individuals find an area where they can provide support through service, they discover a purpose that turns would-be victims to leaders with intention.

### COLLABORATION

The Area Interagency Council, Slave Lake Regional Tri-Council, the Regional Recovery Coordination Group and the Community Wellness Team have worked well in Slave Lake to coordinate activities and information. Inter-institutional collaboration is vital to coordinate the community recovery.

# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES

## COMMUNITY

### A WELL-DESIGNED COMMUNITY DISASTER RECOVERY PROGRAM IS VERY IMPORTANT

#### WHO IS AT RISK?

When considering who may be at risk in your community during a disaster it is important to identify the different types of risk. Some things that may be “at risk” are economic security, physical property, individual health and social cohesiveness. When planning and preparing your community for a possible disaster, it is key to consider (and plan for) the different faces of risk.

Photo Courtesy of Pablo Pina



Every community in Alberta is mandated to have an emergency plan to initiate a disaster recovery program when the need arises. The loss of neighbours and friends’ homes and businesses has been a difficult issue to deal with by those who fought the fire. **Camaraderie** among the firefighters has been helpful but for many of them, life will never be the same.

**Working with the experts** from disaster agencies helps to design a disaster recovery plan for your community.

**Providing a central location** for information related to disaster recovery including information about insurance claims, rebuilding one’s home, and where to go



Photo Courtesy of Randy Ross

to for financial planning assistance is useful.

There are both short- and long-term needs after a disaster. Families and communities need to consider both when making future plans. **Develop an awareness** of community needs through the creation of teams where community leaders, individuals and organizations work

together to assess needs and provide recommendations.

**Accepting help** from other communities is vital to prevent burnout of community members and developing ways to build local capacity. **Coordinating these efforts** is also key to prevent duplication of services. **Evaluating solutions** will provide information for others to learn from.

#### LENDING A HELPING HAND

Our findings show that people in the Slave Lake area are attached to their community and feel that they can deal with anything that comes their way. During the fire and the recovery phases, people have helped one another to move forward.

*“The display of humanity has been amazing. It’s inspiring.”*  
Mayor Karina Pillay-Kinnee

aseniwuche.com



*“Everybody knows their neighbours and everybody helps each other. You will be there if they need your hand.” (Community member)*

### IN RURAL AREAS... “COMMUNITY IS A WAY OF LIFE”

Rural communities possess a depth that is born of **shared history, relationships and activities**. When disaster strikes, citizens can be counted on to meet the needs of their community through **anticipating needs** and **responding to the communicated needs** as described by local officials and media. Fundraising to help Slave

Lake rebuild has been undertaken by local, dedicated residents.

**Encourage local participation.** Many people in the Slave Lake region volunteered to help in the community recovery efforts. It is important to “ask for help, and accept help” from these individuals.



# THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES

## RESOURCES AND PERSONNEL

### HAVING WHAT YOU NEED AVAILABLE

#### Security & Efficiency

During the Slave Lake fires, local RCMP members were involved in assisting with the evacuation.

To maximize efficiency, involve local law enforcement agencies from the beginning of disaster management planning. A co-created plan can be quickly acted upon for the benefit of the local residents.

Photo Courtesy of Michael J. Kapusta



#### A Royal Visit to Slave Lake



Their Royal Highnesses, The Duke & Duchess of Cambridge  
Photo Courtesy of Town of Slave Lake

In the Slave Lake area, the three elected councils of the three local authorities **worked together** during the disaster and recovery of their communities. They worked with the ESRD personnel, local firefighters and other personnel sent in to assist in the fire fighting efforts. Outside consultants were hired to address a multitude of tasks and assist in the recovery efforts.

**Preparing community residents** for disasters is an activity that all local governments should have a role in. Hosting mock disasters and encouraging residents to have 72-hour “grab and go” bags in case of a disaster are both helpful. **Honouring officials, volunteers and all community residents** after the

disaster through community events is also an important part of the recovery process.

The Slave Lake fires showed there are needs for local capacity building. Inventories of available human and physical resources are useful in preparation for disasters.

**Human resources** such as community volunteers, paid employees from within and outside of the community contributed greatly to dealing with the disaster and recovery. **Revised infrastructure** included a plan to

develop temporary housing for those who no longer had a home. **Leadership building** was provided by Alberta Health Services to the community’s physicians who were caring for the residents while dealing with their own personal losses.

**Physical resources** such as **donations** from corporations and other communities were welcome but overwhelmed the local capacity. Future disaster areas would benefit from cash donations rather than material items such as clothing.

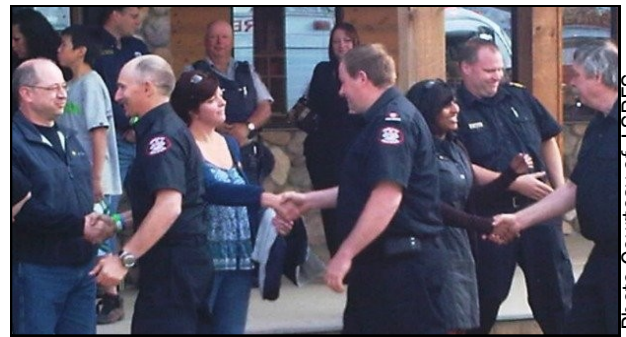


Photo Courtesy of LSRFS

## WHO IS QUALIFIED TO HELP?

### AND IS THERE REALLY TIME TO FIND OUT?

In an emergency situation, the people willing to volunteer are often the ones recruited. There is little time or available staff to conduct formal interviews, perform criminal record checks and contact former employers for references.

Having a volunteer base already recruited, properly screened and equipped with necessary skills is an integral part of disaster planning. Advance preparation will reduce concerns regarding proper volunteer placement. It may be helpful to consider relying on volunteers that have already been screened for other service positions.

Those in leadership positions must also take care of themselves:

*“You need time to refresh. And you need that stability to provide strength and support and leadership to the community.” (Local Authority)*

## THE SLAVE LAKE FIRES

## FAMILIES &amp; CHILDREN

## BEING THERE FOR THOSE MOST IN NEED

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Draw on family and community networks
- Monitor your child's exposure to the media
- Provide factual information to your child
- Re-establish routines
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime and encourage your child to talk about his or her feelings



Photo Courtesy of LSRFS

*“Well, I was frantic and I was upset and I was mad, and I was confused, so I don't know if there is one word that really sums that all up...” (Girl)*

## WHAT CAN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT DO TO HELP ITS FAMILIES AND CHILDREN?

- **Host free monthly family events to provide some needed recreation and social time for families and children who have experienced the fire.**
- **Work with the provincial government in securing additional financial allocation for groups such as Family and Community Support Services to provide integrated and more extensive services for families and their children.**

**Acceptance** of the wildfire and the consequences as a result of it is an important first step. Knowing that it **takes time to deal** with such a loss is an important message for all residents. Most individuals and families do not readily access mental health services after a disaster. It is beneficial to have **local counsellors ready** and

available when families or individuals reach out for help. Families have found that the fire was an important lesson in learning that they value each other rather than material possessions. Part of their recovery is to identify short- and long-term goals. Many families with children lived in the local campgrounds or in

hotels after the fire. **Planning activities** for children—whether or not they lost their homes— helps to relieve pressure on the parents who are busy with tasks such as insurance claims. **Volunteers** from outside of the community can help take children on field trips or be involved in activities within the geographic area.

**Workshops and in-services** about responses to disasters and access to additional personnel assists teachers, mental health workers, and volunteers in helping others after a disaster. **Having neighbourhood activities** such as block parties may also help residents deal with the disaster. Ensuring that **routine activities** such as hockey teams and youth groups are available helps children adapt to their new reality.

## REBUILDING: MAKING DECISIONS &amp; LEARNING TO MOVE FORWARD

Providing information about dealing with insurance companies assists families in their individual circumstances. **Hosting housing information fairs** provides a one-stop source for information for families and businesses that need to rebuild. Families also benefit from **financial planning sessions** to help them meet the many financial obligations they have after a disaster.



Photo Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig

## FIRESMART FOR THE LESSER SLAVE REGION

A FireSmart plan involves two components: the Wildfire Preparedness Guide and the Wildfire Mitigation Strategy. The mitigation strategy provides recommendations for FireSmart activities that span the 7 disciplines of the wildland/urban interface. Vegetation Management is 1 of the 7 FireSmart disciplines with education and outreach, legislation, development, interagency cooperation, cross-training and emergency planning being the others.



Following last May's devastating wildfires, \$20 million has been allocated to develop a FireSmart program in the Lesser Slave Region. To ensure maximum benefits from funding reaches the region, a FireSmart Regional Action Team (FRAT) has been formed with members from the Town of Slave Lake, Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No 124 and the Sawridge First Nation. Key members of the team also include wildfire specialists and representatives from ESRD.

FRAT aims to develop the Lesser Slave Region into a model FireSmart community and has several projects currently underway:

- FireSmart plan for the Lesser Slave Region
- Wildfire Preparedness Guides for each community
- FireSmart education and outreach program
- FireSmart crew with machinery
- FireSmart vegetation treatments around communities
- FireSmart demonstration areas
- Additional firefighting equipment
- Improved access to water for fire suppression

Many of us live in regions prone to wildfires. FireSmart is a proactive approach which reduces wildfire hazard and risk. Wildfire-related losses can be significantly reduced by implementing FireSmart initiatives.

For information on FireSmart visit [www.firesmart.alberta.ca](http://www.firesmart.alberta.ca), and [www.firesmartcanada.ca](http://www.firesmartcanada.ca)



Photo Courtesy of ESRD

## DISASTER RESOURCES TO ACCESS

### ADDITIONAL WEBSITES RELATED TO DISASTER PLANNING

Government of Alberta—Alberta Emergency Management Agency (<http://www.aema.alberta.ca>)

Alberta Emergency Alert System ([www.emergencyalert.ab.ca](http://www.emergencyalert.ab.ca))

The Canadian Centre for Emergency Preparedness (<http://www.ccep.ca>)

Canadian Mental Commission of Canada ([www.mentalhealthcommission.ca](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca))

BeyondBlue – The National Depression Initiative (<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>)

Canadian Red Cross (<http://www.redcross.ca>)

Mennonite Disaster Service (<http://www.mds.mennonite.net/>)

Partners in Protection (<http://www.partnersinprotection.ab.ca>)

Salvation Army—Emergency Disaster Services (<http://www.salvationarmy.ca/eds>)

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The Faculty of Health Sciences  
The University of Lethbridge  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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Photo Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig



Evacuees returning home May 27, 2011

Photo Courtesy of LSRFS

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