

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

AUGUST 2003

LESSONS LEARNED



“It became a story bigger than itself, and when you talk about the Lost Creek Fire, you talk about the fire fighters at that wall of flame, holding it back while everybody else left, whether or not that’s true, that’s the folklore. That’s the story that comes out of the whole thing.”

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LESSONS LEARNED



Smoke from the Lost Creek Fire no longer obscures the magnificent Crowsnest Mountain. The days when it did, however, are fresh in the memories of the residents that fought with a great and collective strength to protect the community and wilderness that is their home.

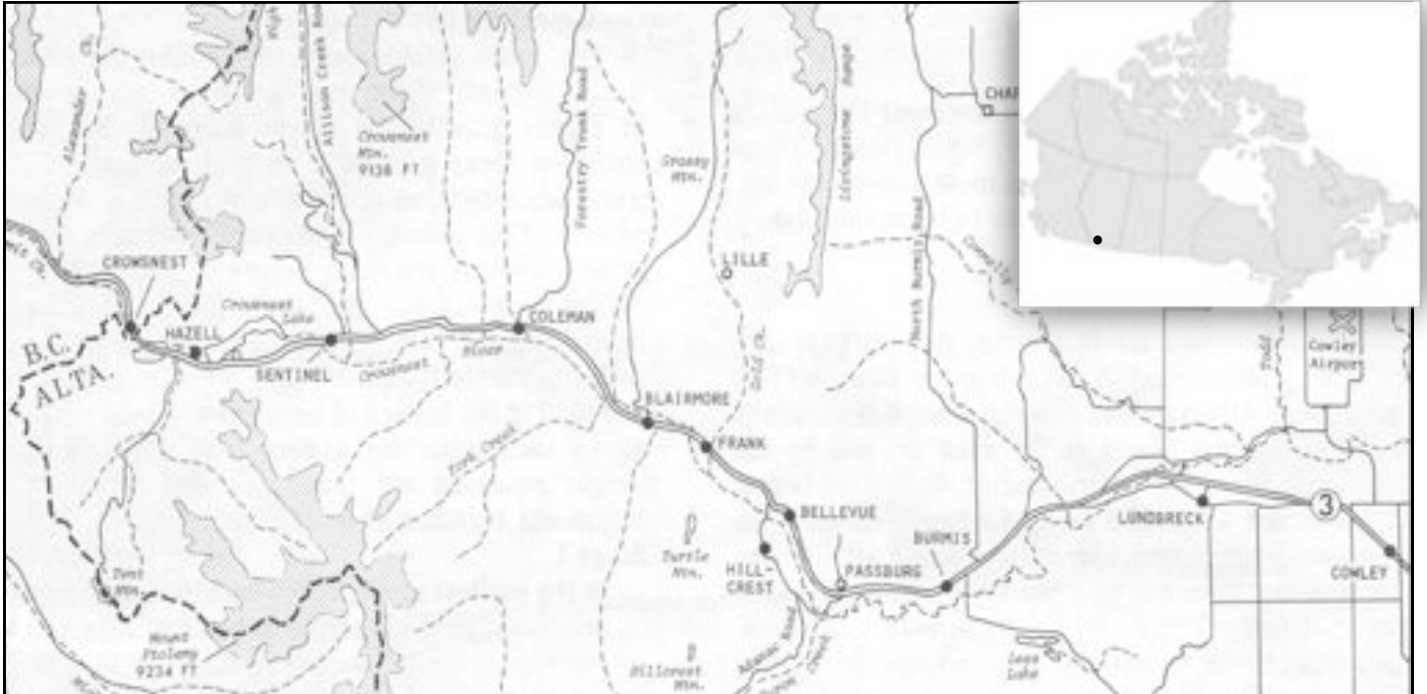
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THE CROWNEST PASS

SOUTHERN ALBERTA, CANADA



The Municipality of the Crow's Nest Pass was incorporated, effective January 1, 1979 as a single municipality with the consensual amalgamation of the towns of Coleman and Blairmore, the villages of Bellevue and Frank, Improvement District #5 with 13 hamlets (the largest being Hillcrest Mines), and a portion of Improvement District #6. In 2006 the population was recorded at 5,749 residents, a decrease of just over 500 people from the previous census. The Municipality, which is often referred to as the "Pass," is situated within the Rocky Mountains and is an area that offers a wide variety of activities, such as snowmobiling, hiking and camping. The history of the Pass dates back to the early 1900s after coal was discovered in the area. As a result, many multicultural groups came to the area to work in the underground coal mines, and with them they brought their diverse and unique traditions and heritage.

Throughout its long history, the "Pass" has seen its share of tragedy. In 1903 the town of Frank was devastated when a nearby mountain collapsed, burying part of the town and killing nearly 80 people. This disaster has been recorded as the greatest landslide to have ever happened in North American history. An equally devastating event struck the town of Hillcrest Mines in 1914, when a methane and coal dust explosion from a local mine killed 189 men. These events, as well as the labour unrest of the early 1930s, helped to unite residents and develop strong, unified communities. After the Second World War, the Pass fell on economic hard times, when a number of local mines began to close. This sudden loss of revenue was due in large part to the Canadian Pacific Railroad's conversion from coal to diesel engines. In 1983, the last operating mine in the area, which was located in the town of Coleman, officially closed. Closures such as these, have forced many area miners to find work outside of Alberta.

In an effort to reduce the cost of maintaining five separate administrative structures, the towns decided to amalgamate in 1979. This decision, though economically sound, has not been easy given individual town allegiances and the physical structure of the Pass. The five towns are spread over a 20-kilometre section of highway and are limited in their potential for growth, due to their mountainous location. In addition, the Frank Slide physically separates Coleman and Blairmore in the west, from Frank, Bellevue and Hillcrest Mines in the east. However, with consolidation of the schools and the influx of new residents, amalgamation is becoming less of an issue.

In summary, the Crow's Nest Pass has dealt with many challenges and disasters, such as mountain slides, labour unrest, loss of industry, severe windstorms and forest fires. And yet despite these setbacks, the area has continued to demonstrate remarkable resiliency.

FROM THE MAYOR

THE CROWSNEST PASS



To the Crowsnest Pass, the Lost Creek Fire of 2003 had the potential to be a disaster of the magnitude of the Hillcrest Mine Disaster of 1914, or the Frank Slide of 1903. In that year of fires, the Lost Creek Fire, in terms of area and fuel load, was the largest wildfire in North America—with the best result!

When we realized the threat to our beautiful community and homes, and activated our State of Emergency, we set two principal goals—no loss of life, and no loss of structures. We opted to not use the traditional pyramid organizational structure, but rather a flat organizational structure in which representatives of every unit or group in our team would participate in every debriefing, planning meeting or discussion. Communication and coordination were emphasized, and great synergy resulted. “What if?” thoughts developed into successful action plans.

The fire rolled into the community, but everything worked! With the help of our neighbours and the SRD firefighters and air force, and a bit of luck given that we were ahead of competition for resources and ordnance, our goals were realized—no loss of life, and no loss of structures. After five weeks, our State of Emergency was lifted. We are everlastingly grateful to everyone who contributed to our success. Thank you!

-John Irwin, Mayor, The Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Currently, the 20% of Canada's population that is rural lives throughout 99.8% of its landmass. Rural Canadians enjoy a lifestyle that is unique, compared to the majority of the population who still reside within cities. Issues such as youth migration, access to health care services, economic development and community involvement are all central to understanding rural communities.



Rural to Urban Migration

Statistics Canada reports that there is a large rural-to-urban migration of youth aged 20-24 that is currently taking place, as youth leave their rural communities to pursue greater educational opportunities. However, individuals with a university education are three times more likely to move back to a rural location, after relocating to an urban setting. However, the same is not true for individuals with a grade nine education or less. Rural areas are indeed competitive in attracting community members.

Rural Health Status: What are the Issues?

Residents of rural communities rate their own health lower than residents of urban areas. Risk factors for poor health, such as travel distance to health care services, smoking, and obesity, are considerably higher in rural communities. Significantly higher rates of hypertension and arthritis have also contributed to decreased health and functioning in both rural and northern Canadian areas.

Rural dwellers report a lower likelihood of taking action to improve their health. This diminished health status in rural communities has been recognized by local, provincial and federal governments. Across Canada, healthy lifestyle activities have been initiated, in an effort to increase the level of health experienced by rural and northern Canadians.

One example of these initiatives is the "Kick the Nic" program funded federally in Yellowknife and the Northwest Territories. Similar youth anti-smoking initiatives recognize the dangers of smoking and challenge young rural Canadians to make healthy choices early in life.



THE BENEFITS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Community Involvement

Rural Canadians have strong ties to friends and family. Individuals who live in more rural places develop trusting and close relationships with their neighbors. A strong sense of belonging is also common and it is these characteristics that help rural residents work together when facing adversities such as economic downturns and natural disasters.

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.



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 most communities experience as they interact with their environment, particularly after events such as natural disasters.

What does resiliency look like?

The attribute of resiliency is the result of a dynamic process. Community members working collectively alongside each other will naturally develop a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging and shared 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 are the benefits of resiliency?

Resilient communities provide good examples for other communities. By understanding how affected communities have coped with adversity, others can benefit from their strategies. Residents of resilient communities carry a local pride that manifests itself in the life-perspective of its members. These community members will exhibit community action as conflict resolution and problem-solving activities occur.

What can be done to increase resiliency?

The social strengths of a community, such as multi-generational families, a healthy cohesiveness between residents and the influence of powerful informal leaders, can be valuable assets in a time of disaster. Resiliency will be promoted once community members increase their recognition that all residents are vulnerable and interdependent.

“There is power in this community, in the surrounding landscape and in the people who call the Crow-nest Pass home. If we can gain pride and respect for the things that perpetuate that power...then we will have a rallying point through which we can form that new foundation for a respect of one another.”

—Community Member

FROM THE FIRE CHIEF

THE HILLCREST VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPT.



The Hillcrest Fire Department located in the Crowsnest Pass, is normally a quiet small-town fire department, but in the summer of 2003 everything changed; some for the worst and more for the better. On a quiet, warm summer day I, Jerry Newman, the Hillcrest Fire Chief, received a call from the Alberta Sustainable Resource Development officers, to meet at my fire hall, to discuss the upcoming threat of the approaching fire. From that point on everything in Hillcrest changed. Suddenly men and equipment coming from all corners of the province bombarded us and to say we were a little overwhelmed is an understatement. It took a little time and a lot of help from the people of the community to get organized. Once we had equipment staged and manpower on stand-by, the job of how to address the Lost Creek Fire seemed easier.

For such a small community, there are a lot of people with large hearts during a time of need. There were people who came to the fire hall with food and baking, and others who wanted to join the fire department or volunteer in any way they could. There were so many people with different skills, that we had to start a list which ended up being pages long. The disaster of The Lost Creek Fire changed the landscape and scenery forever. It did not change the strength and support of the people in the Crowsnest Pass, which carries on today. And again I would like to thank the people of the Crowsnest Pass for the help and support they have shown. Because of their help we were able to save our beloved little community of Hillcrest.

- Jerry Neuman, Chief, Hillcrest Fire Department

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

COMMUNICATION

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

QUESTIONS REGARDING COMMUNICATION...

- Is there a prepared emergency communication plan including official, community and media contacts and their pertinent information?
- Is there 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?

MALE COMMUNITY MEMBER:

“If I was ever involved with an event like this again, one of the first things I would do is get the ‘fire boards’ set up. Without accurate and adequate access to information, rumors can start and anxiety escalates. People just need to have simple, basic questions answered.”

During the Lost Creek Fire (LCF) a number of communication resources were utilized that helped in inter-agency cooperation and a timely dissemination of information to community members.

From the initial confirmation of a fire, local individuals, the Municipality of the CNP, administration, local firefighters, Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) staff, as well as provincial officials, were engaged in frequent communication.

These individuals met together every morning and evening in the Municipal Office, to discuss ongoing issues related to the handling the fire.

All public announcements including general information and evacuations, were communicated through the local radio station.

A 24-hour phone line was staffed at the Municipal Office to answer calls. This phone line allowed concerned community members to phone in with general questions about fire status and evacuations. Out-of-town callers were also able to access the phone line, in order to receive information

regarding their evacuated family members.

Information booths, or fire boards, were set up throughout the community and updated regularly with maps conveying fire size and location. SRD staff were available at the fire boards to answer community members’ questions.



WHO NEEDS WHAT? RECOGNIZING COMMUNICATION NEEDS

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Community members require diverse information. Individuals desire detailed information regarding the land they know intimately. The public also requires information that is presented in a straightforward manner, free of jargon with clear, concise directions.

THE MEDIA

The media can be a powerful ally for informing and educating the public. Effective planning on getting consistent and accurate information to the media will in the end, benefit community members and ultimately the collective fire 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 one another to ensure efficient progress.

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

LEADERSHIP

THE QUAD SQUAD

The Quad Squad is a local group of individuals who enjoy riding their all-terrain vehicles in the backcountry surrounding the CNP. During the fire, members of the Quad Squad provided local leadership as they assisted with evacuations, patrolled the streets to secure the area and provided emotional support to evacuees and isolated elderly community members.

LEADERSHIP THROUGH TEAMWORK

The local volunteer fire departments in the CNP worked together. During the LCF, many of the firefighters chose to forfeit their pay and work alongside one another to serve their community. The CNP firefighters offered local leadership by working closely with the SRD to share insight gained through years of experience fighting fires in the community, as well as learning more about the science of fires from their Provincial colleagues.

LEADERSHIP COMES FROM THE TOP...



In the province of Alberta, Sustainable Resources Development (SRD) was responsible for fighting wildfires. **SRD policies were based** upon scientific research examining terrain and forest types, fire behavior and experience in dealing with fires

all of which was integrated with the necessity of ensuring public safety. The Incident Command System **separated the Lost Creek Fire into divisions**, with Division Supervisors and firefighters responsible for the fire line in each of their sections.

While daily meetings with various officials to **discuss the fire and make decisions** were implemented to enhance shared leadership of the fire effort, the actual prediction of the fire's movements proved difficult due to geography and weather

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

LEARNING CENTRE

The staff at the Learning Centre provided leadership for those in the community that needed accommodation, meals and emotional support. The Centre provided a central location where community members could gather to address concerns and assist one another.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Community members were willing to share their extensive knowledge of the local terrain. This willingness to provide first-hand information about the geography of the land, allows for fire leadership to make solid decisions.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers helped to strengthen community ties and build community spirit. When individuals found an area where they could lend their support, a purpose was discovered that transformed them from would-be victims to leaders with intention.

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

COMMUNITY

THE PRESENCE OF A WELL-DESIGNED COMMUNITY
DISASTER RELIEF 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 delineate between 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 crucial to consider (and plan for) the multifaceted face of risk.

LENDING A
HELPING HAND

Hutterite and Mennonite groups from 50km eastward were among the first to respond to community needs. They provided and prepared food for the many men and women fighting the fire, as well as for those who were displaced by the fire.

Every community in Alberta is provincially mandated to have a disaster relief program. The CNP learned valuable lessons while meeting community needs throughout the disaster.

Provide a central location

from which to offer services:

The Learning Centre in the CNP served as a point of registration, as well as a place of refuge for evacuees. Out-of-town family members were able to confidently leave a message for loved ones at the Centre, while local residents were able to contact one another during the uncertainty of evacuations.

Develop an awareness of

community needs: Local community businesses and indi-



viduals donated supplies, such as air mattresses and TVs for the Learning Centre. Food donations helped those involved in the fire effort, as well as community members who were evacuated and unable to prepare meals. Adults also provided lunches for community children, while parents were busy with the fire effort. Local

radio stations provided up to date information regarding community needs and proposed solutions.

Encourage local participation :

Interdenominational prayer services were held each evening and ministers from local congregations shared in leading the community in prayer for safety and favourable weather.

IN RURAL AREAS...

“COMMUNITY IS A WAY OF LIFE”



“Whenever there is a big thing that happens in the Crowsnest Pass...we’ve always been there for one another” - community member

Rural communities possess a depth that is built from **shared history, shared rela-**

tionships and shared activities. When disaster strikes, citizens can be counted on to meet the needs of their community, both by **anticipating the needs and responding to the communicated needs** that are described by local officials and media.

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

PERSONNEL

MAKE SURE THE RIGHT PEOPLE
ARE AT THE HELM

Security & Efficiency

During the LCF, local RCMP members were involved in assisting with evacuations and providing security to the CNP community. To maximize efficiency, involve local law enforcement agencies from the beginning of the disaster management planning. A co-created plan can be quickly acted upon for the benefit of the local residents.



“Our disaster plan was set up according to a traditional hierarchal model. When we realized that the fire could be a rather long and drawn out threat to the community, we structured our response very differently with basically a flat model. Involved representatives of every group that we could imagine were brought together for daily meetings.”

-Mayor of the CNP

In the CNP, the **Mayor** and the **Chief Administrative Officer** (CAO) both during the course of the LCF. The Mayor was responsible for working with the CAO and revising the management model, through which the LCF was handled. This flat structured model allowed for more input from all involved in the fire management. The Mayor also

gave daily updates about the fire over the local radio station. The CNP learned that the value of the CAO extended past municipal administration. This individual **gave consent** for fire-

expenses and **ensured extra municipal staff** were in place to meet administrative needs. The CAO **served as an ambassador** while attending news conferences, receiving official visitors and accompanying

them on tours of the fire.

The SRD is learning to work with communities to include the knowledge of local residents in the management and control of fires.

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 reliable volun-

teer 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 been approved for other service positions. During the Lost Creek Fire, school teachers on summer holidays were used to staff the Learning Centre, because of their availability. Incidentally, these individuals had already been screened.

THE LOST CREEK FIRE

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

EQUIPMENT AND RESOURCES TO DEAL WITH THE DISASTER MUST BE ALLOCATED

The Lost Creek Fire Required:

- 800 SRD firefighters and personnel
- A coordinated team of 868 identified workers including all 104 local volunteer fire and rescue personnel, as well as other trained volunteers from surrounding communities.
- 21 helicopters and 8 water bombers
- 30 bulldozers and 20 water trucks
- The total cost for the fire effort was \$40,394,180.



ing Municipality Office personnel to work the 24-hour information line was one way that the **revised infrastructure** contributed to a more effective disaster management. **Physical resources**, such as corporate, individual and community donation of food, cots, mattresses and televisions were necessary in maintaining the cohesiveness of the

The LCF demonstrated that there are needs for **human resources** and **revised infrastructure**, as well as **physical resources**. Human resources such as community volunteers, paid employees from within as well as outside of

the community, contributed greatly to dealing with the disaster. Allowing volunteer firemen time away from their regular employment is an example of the need for flexibility when it comes to allocating human resources. Redistribut-

community during the fire. Creating inventories of what human and physical resources are available in your community, will be a useful exercise in preparation for disaster management.

WHAT CAN THE MUNICIPALITY DO TO HELP ITS LANDOWNERS WITH DISASTER PLANNING?

- **Work with local health & social services personnel to conduct public education about disaster management and preparation.**
- **Develop materials such as fridge magnets that emphasize the essentials needed for successful evacuation. Reminder notices that can be sent in monthly bills or tax notices and the inclusion of information about disaster planning and management that can be placed in the local newspapers.**
- **Adopt updated provincial policies related to disaster planning.**

SIGNED CONTRACTS MUST BE IN PLACE TO PROTECT PERSONAL PROPERTY

Having an up-to-date list of contractors with equipment useful in fire management will be helpful. Having signed contracts with these individuals and their companies to access their equipment during disasters will help ensure efficient disaster planning.



RESOURCES TO ACCESS

GROUPS PROVIDING INFORMATION TO INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES INTERESTED IN DISASTER PLANNING

CANADIAN RED CROSS- DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

<http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=000286&tid=025>

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS- DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

<http://www.redcross.org.au/default.asp>

Follow the “disaster and emergency services” quick link

THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

www.ccep.ca

MENNONITE DISASTER SERVICE

www.mds.mennonite.net

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

HOMEOWNER'S WILDFIRE MITIGATION GUIDE

<http://groups.ucanr.org/HWMG/>

LIVING WITH FIRE- A GUIDE FOR THE HOMEOWNER EVACUATION PREPARATION AND CHECKLIST

http://www.nmfireinfo.com/docs/Living%20With%20Fire_nm_jes.pdf

IS YOUR FAMILY PREPARED?

http://www.getprepared.gc.ca/index_e.asp



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