



# FORT McMURRAY

Collaborative efforts to successful  
response and recovery

*By Sophie Guilbault*

## THE SCIENCE

The logistics and resource needs following a natural disaster can overwhelm the capacity of local responders. Responding and recovering from extreme weather events requires the participation of several stakeholders in both the public and private sectors. Collaborations between these groups are essential and can help tackle cross-political boundaries, response to large-scale events, mitigation activities, and issues that arise during recovery.

Local and regional emergency management organizations should have key partnerships in place before an event occurs. However, it is common to see new collaborations and alliances emerge during an emergency as unanticipated needs arise. Maintaining and building on these new relationships can increase learning from previous events and enhance preparedness for the future.

## THE TRIGGER

On May 1st, 2016, a two-hectare fire was detected approximately seven kilometres southwest of the City of Fort McMurray. The weather conditions at the time led to the spread of the fire, with high temperatures, low humidity and higher than normal winds and gusts. The dry, hot and windy conditions contributed to the spread of the fire towards the City and in the end, the wildfire spanned an area of approximately 2,600 hectares, burned over 2,400 structures in Fort McMurray and forced approximately 90,000 people to evacuate their homes.

The Fort McMurray wildfire, also known as the Horse River Fire, was unprecedented and represents the most expensive disaster in Canadian history, with losses approaching 9 billion dollars. An event of this scale triggered a unique response from all levels of government, as well as from the private sector.

## THE APPROACH

Responding to the Horse River Fire necessitated strong operational support to effectively prioritize the work that needed to be done. In the Regional Emergency Operations Centre, resources needed to be effectively allocated to control and reduce the damage caused by the wildfire. Several crews of firefighters were deployed in Fort McMurray. "This certainly represented a challenge in terms of logistics and coordination as we wanted all firefighters deployed to work towards the same overall objective. In the end, we did quickly manage to get all of our resources to work toward the same strategy and objectives," said Jody Butz, Regional Fire Chief and Director of Emergency Management for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, who was in charge of operations when responding to the Horse River Fire.

Following the immediate response, key players from the private sector also deployed actions that were never seen in previous disaster recovery settings in Canada. For instance, the Insurance Bureau of Canada worked in collaboration with the Regional Municipality and Province of Alberta to review the communications plan that they had prepared for returning homeowners. Since sections of this document referred



**Figure 16:** *The rebuilding process that took place in Fort McMurray following the Horse River Fire. (Source: ICLR)*

to insurance questions, the Insurance Bureau's staff adjusted the material to make sure all information was accurate and easy to use by homeowners affected by the Horse River Fire. The Bureau also assisted in the recovery by leading a clean-up effort for the disposal of fridges and freezers of all affected households. While normal procedures require individual insurance companies to assess each individual home and conduct their own removal of the damaged appliances, the magnitude of this event led to an unprecedented large-scale clean-up effort, with the Insurance Bureau of Canada organizing for the pickup and disposal of 12,000 refrigerators and freezers. The success of this initiative was also made possible through a new collaboration with the Canadian Red Cross, which funded the pickup and disposal for uninsured properties. According to David McGown, Senior Vice-President of Strategic Initiatives from the Insurance Bureau of Canada, "Having the Insurance Bureau of Canada to help support the recovery effort on the part of insurers made communications easier. The Government of Alberta had invited IBC to be at the table, and be part of the conversation, and one insurance voice at the table helped produce clearer messaging to everyone involved."

## THE OUTCOME

Since the wildfire that affected Fort McMurray in 2016, several of the partnerships that emerged during the emergency response and recovery have formalized in preparation for future events. For instance, there is now a formal relationship in place with between the Insurance Bureau of Canada and the Canadian Red Cross who have committed to work together to coordinate recovery in the future. As part of this agreement, they arranged to work together pre-event so that they can jointly

identify opportunities to increase Canadians' awareness of specific perils and ways to mitigate their associated risks.

On the response front, new resources have also been created to assist with logistics at the Emergency Operations Centre. At the provincial level, a database of all resources available has been created to facilitate assistance requests coming from the Municipality and the Province, as well as the coordination of all resources involved.

Following the events, an important investment has also been made to mitigate the risk of damage from wildland urban interface fires faced by homeowners in the Regional Municipality. More specifically, a \$14.4 million investment (including \$10.5 million from the Government of Alberta and \$3.9 million from the Canadian Red Cross) has been made to pursue FireSmart activities in the area. This investment funds initiatives across all seven FireSmart disciplines, which include education, vegetation management, legislation and planning, development considerations, interagency cooperation, emergency planning, and cross-training. On the education side, free FireSmart home assessments are available to homeowners, offering individual residents the opportunity to have an expert come out and give them a FireSmart assessment to help them protect their homes. "We are also moving toward the implementation of new policies on the land use planning front so we don't plan ourselves into a problem again," mentioned Chief Jody Butz.

## **A WORD FROM FORT McMURRAY**

When asked what lessons he would like to share following his experience with the response and recovery that followed the Horse River Fire, Chief Jody Butz said that "In today's society, it takes a large event to capture the attention of others, and motivate organizations to really focus on what's important. I would challenge anyone who would say 'that won't happen to us, because there are many things that can happen to anyone at any time. We have the obligation to be prepared and ready as best as we can.'" When discussing the partnerships that contributed to the success of the response and recovery in the case of Fort McMurray, Chief Butz added that "You cannot be fully prepared for an event of this magnitude. However, it is important to reach out to partners in the preparedness stage and establish relationships locally, provincially, and nationally so that the response can unfold as well as possible."