

Speaking Remarks
Jason Brolund
on behalf of
Central Okanagan Regional District Emergency Program

District of West Kelowna
'Facing the Fires' Community Celebration

"They are talking about evacuating some homes in West Kelowna – you may want to pop into work...."

That is how a hot Saturday afternoon in July played out for me. No one knew at the time that it was the start of an intense 24 hour a day operation that would last for the next 5 days and involve me and 254 others who came together as a team to support the firefight that was to take place in your community.

On Saturday July 29th, I found myself in Costco with my family when my phone rang. I soon learned that Fire Chief Schnitzler had made a request to activate our region's emergency plan due to a rapidly spreading fire.

That phone call quickly set off a chain of events that would see staff from municipalities throughout the Central Okanagan assemble within the Regional Emergency Operations Centre. We also brought together a host of agencies including local fire departments, the Ministry of Forests, Ministry of Transport, B.C. Ambulance, RCMP, Westbank First Nation, BC Hydro, Terasen Gas, School District 23, and the Interior Health Authority.

What was initially 20 or so homes quickly turned into several hundred, which over the first hour of the incident evolved into several thousand, including the closure of a major highway, and upon learning of the 2nd fire at Rose Valley later that night, led to the eventual evacuation of over 1/3 of your community. This incident evolved very rapidly – we had little time to get the word out, and it needed to happen quickly.

I am sure that many of you are wondering – what is an Emergency Program? What happens in the EOC? What impact did this have on our fire?

It has been demonstrated that our Emergency Plan and the people who gather as a part of that plan are second to none, within the province, if not within the country. Our Regional Emergency plan dates back to the early 90's. The intent and purpose of our emergency program is to be prepared to support the emergency responders within your community, when a large scale incident occurs, through good planning and emergency preparedness, combined with a guiding set of emergency management principles that helps with making good decisions in the heat of the moment.

The Regional Emergency Program is sustained and continually supported by its member communities to respond exactly as it did. Training sessions help prepare for large-scale emergencies, but no simulation can compare with what happens in an active EOC in the height of an emergency response.

Here are some facts about the EOC and the response to the fires in West Kelowna and at Terrace Mountain this summer:

- Our EOC was active for 28 days (over 43 12-14 hour shifts)
- There were 254 staff that participated
- We filled requests for more than 50 fire apparatus and several hundred firefighting staff
- We facilitated the evacuation of 17,000 people from 6000 homes
- We (along w/ Min. of Hiways) coordinated the closure of Hwy 97 for 3 days
- We held 7 major media conferences, hosting media from around the globe
- We issued 88 news releases to keep the community informed
- We used nearly a kilometer of paper to print maps to support the incident

Volunteers from Shaw Cable and the Red Cross established a call centre to assist with the heavy call volume from the concerned residents of the region. The public information call centre received 4,196 calls, keeping evacuees and concerned citizens up to date on the latest information. Our Amateur Radio group quickly and skillfully deployed 30 volunteers throughout the community and within

the EOC to provide a reliable method of backup communications throughout the duration of the incident.

The support and resources provided through the Emergency Social Services program were second to none. The volunteers that met with evacuees and provided assistance took on a seemingly impossible task of registering and providing accommodation and monetary assistance and met the needs of evacuees with compassion and understanding.

Perhaps the most interesting stat that I will share with you tonight - came to me when I was walking through Wal-Mart in West Kelowna a few days after the fire had started. No doubt due to the large number of residents evacuated without even the simplest of possessions -this large department store had been completely sold out of Men's underwear!

Disasters affect us all in many different ways. This community demonstrated that it was willing to step up and help those that needed it, and for that the Regional Emergency Program is grateful – we could not have accomplished what we did without the help of the community.

We are confronted on a daily basis with pictures of disasters from around the world. In general, disasters usually don't result in positive outcomes. But that is what is different about the fires that we have experienced in this region in 2003 and again in 2009. I can say that because of the agencies represented in this room and the residents of this community – we can all be proud of what took place and the lessons were learned from this incident that will help others when faced with this again in the future. Ironically – we get better each time we are challenged. The community should be proud about the way it faced the fires and is stronger now than it was before.

To build on that strength - there is something that each one of you can do tonight when you go home. Something that will help the community and your loved ones the next time a disaster like this strikes.

That is – make a plan.

Talk to your family about what you would do if this happened again, in your neighborhood. Talk about the important things that you would take if you needed to evacuate with only a moments notice. Talk about where you would meet and how you would reunite if you were separated. Talk about how you could survive for 72 hours in your home without any help from emergency responders. Then write it down and take the steps to make sure you are prepared.

We will face disasters again in this region, and indeed again in this community. How well we cope with them will be in no small part due to the way we prepare for them ahead of time.

On behalf of the Central Okanagan Regional Emergency Program, I'd like to thank each and everyone who was involved in the firefighting and emergency management effort. All involved went above and beyond to assist their fellow community members in a time of need. While it is difficult to thank each person individually for their contribution – know that your hard work and extraordinary effort was much appreciated!