

# Government of Alberta

September 2017 Kenow Fire

Post Incident Assessment

Common Themes Analysis

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# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose

The Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) conducts a formal Post Incident Assessment (PIA) after each significant activation of the Provincial Operations Centre (POC) to promote collective learning. The Kenow Fire was a complex event involving federal, provincial, municipal, and local authorities, several industry and economic sectors, affected parties and other stakeholders. AEMA has created this Common Themes Analysis based on PIA reports received from a variety of stakeholders. The purpose of this report is to identify and address common themes experienced by stakeholders. The recommendations in this report will assist in improving Alberta's emergency management system and strengthening relationships between the Government of Alberta and other stakeholders when reacting to complex incidents in the future.

## Scope

This report identifies common, over-arching themes identified by multiple stakeholders following the Kenow fire. It is focused on higher level or cross-jurisdictional issues that came into play during the response. Tactical decisions will not be reviewed as they are covered in the source documents in varying detail. As the Government of Alberta was not the convening authority for some of these reports, it is not in a position to validate or refute all of the observations provided.

## Approach

In order to compile this common theme analysis, input was solicited from all stakeholders who were engaged in responding to the event, including federal and provincial government departments and agencies, municipal and local organizations, and affected groups or individuals. These emergency management partners were asked to submit their post-incident assessments, lessons identified, or other feedback. Several common themes were identified from these reports. AEMA then held a collection effort meeting, where the identified themes were presented to stakeholders for further discussion and comment. A list of the organizations and documents that contributed to this analysis can be found at the end of this report.

## Executive Summary

AEMA, in accordance with best practices, launched a broad analysis of the various post incident assessments submitted by the key stakeholders in order to identify common themes or issues across the emergency management spectrum. AEMA solicited feedback from its stakeholders in the form of reports and other documentation, and hosted an information-gathering session in order to discuss key issues and possible solutions. The key common theme that emerged from this review was that command and communications challenges arose as a result of the jurisdictional complexity of this incident.

## Background

On the night of August 30, 2017 lightning struck in British Columbia near the Alberta border, igniting a fire which spread eastward through British Columbia towards the Waterton Lakes area. This fire, designated as the “Kenow Fire,” could not be controlled in its initial stages due to weather and wind conditions, and by September 1, was classified as “out of control.” Parks Canada Wildfire assets began engaging the fire in close co-operation with Alberta and BC Wildfire, but high winds, challenging weather, and complex terrain meant that the fire remained out of control, rapidly driven westward by high winds, threatening both the Waterton Lakes Townsite, as well as the Castle Provincial Recreation Area.

On September 4, the Alberta Provincial Operations Centre (POC) was elevated to Level 2 in order to assist in the co-ordination, and provision of additional structural firefighting assets requested by Parks Canada in order to protect the Waterton Townsite. The Municipal District (MD) of Pincher Creek, Cardston County, and Blood Tribe First Nation Municipal Emergency Operations Centers were alerted and stood up through the period September 2 to 7, as high winds and high fuel load conditions created rapid fire growth. In response, the POC moved to Level 3 (Mandatory Key Government of Alberta (GOA) Coordination). On September 8, Parks Canada ordered a precautionary mandatory evacuation of Waterton Lakes National Park. A “Unified Command” structure was adopted at the Incident Command Post that included Parks Canada, Alberta Wildfire, and the Pincher Creek Emergency Services Commission (representing MD and Town of Pincher Creek).

On the night of September 10 - 11, the Kenow Fire, driven by severe high winds and extreme conditions, made a significant run through the Park, encircling the Townsite, and moving out of the National Park boundaries into the grasslands of the neighboring municipalities. In response, the MD of Pincher Creek, Cardston County, and Blood Tribe First Nation all issued mandatory evacuations for various parts of their jurisdictions on September 11 - 12. Grassfires driven by high winds damaged some rural properties, but were largely contained by local firefighting efforts through September 12 - 14.

By September 14, due a change in the weather, the fire threat to local municipalities receded, and mandatory evacuation orders were lifted. By September 19, re-entry and recovery activities in the local municipalities and the National Park were underway, and recovery operations continue to present.

## COMMON THEMES

### Command

“Command” in an emergency management context is defined as the legal authority to order, or direct actions, resources or activities, and is usually derived from legislation and regulation. The Kenow Wildfire presented a unique challenge in terms of jurisdictional collaboration, as it involved the close tactical and operational co-ordination of multiple agencies, departments and communities

from all three levels of government. Jurisdictional issues were a common theme reported by stakeholders at all levels. During the Kenow fire, some stakeholders did not understand the jurisdictional responsibilities outside of their boundaries. Some felt that it was never made clear to them who had the legal authority, who was in command, or what terminology was being used. This includes questions related to communication of information between stakeholders.

One approach that was used to help overcome these jurisdictional challenges was the adoption of the “Unified Command” model from the Incident Command System (ICS) doctrine. This model allows for several different agencies or jurisdictions to fully collaborate and share command authority when there are overlapping jurisdictions. Unified Command was implemented at the Incident Command Post in the Waterton Townsite, but it was perceived that neighboring jurisdictions were not always fully represented, and communications and actions were sometimes confused by a conflicting understanding of how Unified Command was being applied. Some believed that Unified Command was only for the purposes of fighting the fire, while others believed that it was the command structure for managing all aspects of the incident.

Stakeholders with different views of the command structure had different expectations of the responsibilities and authorities of their partners. Assumptions were made on who would be responsible for which task, creating further confusion between jurisdictions. Discussions occurred with respect to legal authorities between Parks Canada, which is governed by the *National Parks Act*, and provincial and municipal authorities, which are governed by both the *Municipal Government Act* and *Emergency Management Act*.

Multi-jurisdictional events are expected to become more common in the future. Fires, floods, windstorms, train derailments, and other possible events will not stay inside specific jurisdictional lines. Emergency Management practitioners at every level must learn how to navigate and manage disasters cross-jurisdictionally at all levels. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- The ICS concept and practice of adopting a Unified Command structure be incorporated into an education and exercise framework so that it can be better understood and operationalized within Alberta.
- When Unified Command is adopted by various agencies, a clear understanding of the time, space, responsibilities and authorities is approved and widely promulgated by an overarching coordinating authority. In the provincial context, in accordance with the *Emergency Management Act*, Government Emergency Management Regulation and the Alberta Emergency Plan, this should be the Provincial Operations Center representing the Government of Alberta, or, for specific hazards or emergencies, it may be another designated government department or agency as laid out in the Alberta Emergency Plan.

## Control

Control is the ability to safely and effectively deploy and track resources in response to an event. Physical control measures used between the myriad of responding agencies were seen to be effective in the majority of the PIAs that were provided. This speaks to the tactical maturation and collaboration of emergency first responders. Access and route control measures for affected residents, however, were seen to be confusing and poorly communicated in some cases, especially when trying to reach their property to assess the damage. This was often a case of

miscommunication, which is specifically addressed further in this review.

A number of submissions from affected property owners also noted that they were in some cases prevented from assisting with or participating in firefighting efforts in support of saving their own property even though they clearly had a stake in the outcome. While safety of first responders and the public is clearly of paramount concern, some thought should be given as to how to safely and effectively incorporate these unconventional, spontaneous firefighting assets into suppression or protection efforts, particularly in rural areas which have large geographic dispersion. It is therefore recommended that:

- Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) work with the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association and other stakeholders to develop protocols to safely and effectively incorporate “spontaneous” firefighting volunteers into rural or remote area fire response.

## Crisis Communications

Given the rapidly changing situation and the number of jurisdictions involved, it is not surprising to see that communications, both between jurisdictions and to the public, was a challenge, as it is in most emergency situations. The concern around the coordination of crisis communication between the different agencies, levels of government and within government, again speaks to the overall theme of jurisdiction and clarity in command.

The reports and feedback from the Kenow fire specifically identify challenges with crisis communications to impacted residents and other members of the public. Residents voiced concern over the lack of information and the timeliness. They also questioned whether they were being told the correct information. They struggled to find information on road closures and other evacuation information. Residents in each of the multiple jurisdictions reported that they were not getting the same information as others. It was also observed that the various communications teams were not always working cohesively to create consistent messaging. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- To effect unity of messaging at the provincial level, the Lead Ministry must be clearly identified and they must place communications representatives at the POC, and that they must work closely with the local or regional emergency operations centers to ensure timely, accurate and effective public communications.
- Communications and joint messaging must be included in the process for Unified Command. There needs to be one cohesive message being shared, and all involved parties must have access to the required information.

## Coordination

From a provincial perspective, the standing emergency management framework and POC standard operating procedures provided an adequate level of co-ordination internal to the GoA and with the Federal government. Deployment of additional GoA assets to support the co-lead departments was seen to be effective at coordinating between the various jurisdictions and agencies involved, although one stakeholder noted that the Government of Alberta was perceived to be intrusive in its

efforts to support local authorities.

The deployment of AEMA Field Officers and the newly created AEMA Incident Support Team (IST) was also seen to be successful in filling in some of the co-ordination gaps between jurisdictions. A Public Affairs officer was dispatched by Alberta Environment and Parks on September 11 to help provide communications co-ordination between the various jurisdictions, and this was found to be helpful by most accounts.

The sourcing, dispatch, and employment of wildfire and structural firefighting assets from a wide variety of jurisdictions was highly successful, and likely resulted in the saving of the bulk of the Waterton Townsite, and the rapid control of grassfires that spread outside of the National Park, saving millions of dollars in critical infrastructure and public and private property. It is therefore recommended that:

- AEMA formalize the Incident Support Team (IST) program, to include the addition of a designated GoA Public Affairs representative, preferably from the designated lead Ministry / Agency, to ensure seamless co-ordination of public messaging with the responding jurisdictions.
- The process and procedures used by the Office of the Fire Commissioner, and Alberta Wildfire be captured and formalized as best practices, and exercised on a routine basis to ensure similar effective execution in future circumstances.

## Situational Awareness and Information Sharing

A common theme emerging from some of the reports was the challenge for stakeholders to maintain awareness of the situation outside of their jurisdictional boundaries. There seems to be a perception that information was not being passed equally between various ministries, levels of government, and other stakeholders. Again, this issue stems in part from the multiple jurisdictional challenges, which makes the creation of a “single source of truth” much more difficult, especially if an organizational culture or key personality does not encourage transparency and collaboration.

In complex emergencies, it is clearly necessary for information to flow in all directions. Jurisdictions must be willing to share situation reports with all involved stakeholders if they wish to receive material back in return. It is therefore recommended that:

- Incident Command System (ICS) training and use be mandated to ensure a common doctrine and lexicon is used in large scale emergencies, and common understanding and situational awareness can be better supported
- AEMA and the Provincial Operations Center (POC) widely share its Situation Updates and Common Operating Picture Reports (COPR) with all municipalities and agencies involved or interested in the response in order to share and improve situational awareness
- Every opportunity is taken to create a culture of collaboration and co-operation in emergencies, and that this be reinforced through regional and local emergency management collaboration opportunities, including regular exercises and training.

## Additional Observations / Recommendations

Improvement Districts (IDs) are municipal authorities in rural areas where the population is too small to support a local government. Within Alberta, there are eight IDs. Five of these districts have contiguous boundaries with federally-managed national parks. The boundaries of Waterton Lakes National Park are contiguous with Alberta Improvement District #4.

Local government functions for any town sites within an ID are managed by the Government of Alberta, while the Government of Canada is responsible for the national park. Other national parks in Alberta that interact with Improvement Districts include Banff National Park, Jasper National Park, Elk Island National Park, and Wood Buffalo National Park. Further, the towns of Jasper and Banff exist within their own borders inside their respective national parks.

Emergency situations are unlikely to respect these boundaries and have the potential to cause jurisdictional issues between the federal and provincial governments. In order to become better prepared, the various levels of government must begin to build relationships and understand each other's responsibilities in these areas. It is therefore recommended that:

- AEMA and some of its key Government of Alberta partners engage with the various jurisdictions in the vicinity or within National Parks to better define and prepare those involved to plan for and respond to a large scale, multi-jurisdictional events, using a scenario along the lines of the Kenow wildfire as its basis.



# CONCLUSION

Trying to overcome jurisdictional issues in the midst of an event is difficult and is not conducive to effective event or issue resolution. Relationships must be built in advance and agreements made in order to quickly solve questions of jurisdictional responsibility at the beginning of an event. Stakeholders must be aware of what is going on outside of their borders, and be willing to share information with their neighbors. Having conversations about jurisdictional issues in advance or establishing connections quickly will improve communications and situational awareness across boundaries. Implementation of the recommendations contained in this report will improve all-hazards emergency management in Alberta.

# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ICS concept and practice of adopting a Unified Command structure be incorporated into an education and exercise framework so that it can be better understood and effectively implemented within Alberta.
- When Unified Command is adopted by various agencies, a clear understanding of the time, space, responsibilities and authorities is approved and widely communicated by an overarching coordinating authority.
- Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) work with stakeholders to develop protocols to safely and effectively incorporate “spontaneous” firefighting volunteers into rural or remote area fire response.
- To ensure unity of messaging at the provincial level, the Lead Ministry must be clearly identified, must place communications representatives at the POC, and that they must work closely with the local or regional emergency operations centers to ensure timely, accurate and effective public communications.
- Communications and joint messaging must be included in the process for Unified Command. There needs to be one cohesive message being shared, and all involved parties must have access to the required information.
- AEMA bolster the Incident Support Team (IST) program, to include the addition of specific GoA Public Affairs representative(s), preferably from the designated lead Ministry / Agency, to ensure seamless co-ordination of public messaging with the responding jurisdictions.
- The process and procedures used by the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Alberta Wildfire to source and co-ordinate wildland and structural fire protection units be captured and formalized as best practices, and exercised on a routine basis to ensure similar effective execution in future circumstances.
- Incident Command System (ICS) training and use be mandated to ensure a common structure and terminology are used in large scale emergencies, and common

- understanding and situational awareness can be better supported.
- AEMA and the Provincial Operations Center (POC) widely share its Situation Updates and Common Operating Picture Reports (COPR) with all municipalities and agencies involved in order to improve situational awareness.
  - Every opportunity is taken to create a culture of collaboration and co-operation in emergencies; reinforced through regional and local emergency management collaboration opportunities, including regular exercises and training.
  - AEMA and some of its key Government of Alberta partners engage with the various jurisdictions bordering or within National Parks to better define and prepare those involved to respond to large scale, multi-jurisdictional events, using a scenario along the lines of the Kenow wildfire as its basis.

## SOURCE REPORTS REVIEWED

### **Federal**

Parks Canada

### **Provincial**

Alberta Emergency Management Agency  
Provincial Operations Center Incident Debrief  
Communications and Public Engagement  
Alberta Health  
Alberta Wildfire  
Alberta Environment and Parks

### **Municipal**

Municipal District of Pincher Creek

### **Stakeholders / Partners**

Alberta Energy Regulator  
Shell  
The Coalition of Residents, Ranchers, and Ratepayers of the Twin Butte Area on the South Side of Pine Ridge Directly and Adversely Impacted by the Kenow Fire