



Memo

TO: Chair, Committee of the Whole

SUBJECT: Wildfire Emergency Response

DATE: June 11, 2023

FROM: Chief Administrative Officer

The Town of Lake Cowichan has taken on a proactive approach to dealing with the risk of wildfire. It has undertaken several initiatives through funding made available through the Community Emergency Preparedness Fund. Climate change is causing reduced precipitation and higher temperatures and with those the risk of wildfires has grown as evidenced by events in recent years across Canada and elsewhere.

The Town's Official Community Plan has been amended to require all developments be subject to wildfire hazard guidelines and the requirement for such developments to be subject to a Development Permit approval process. Several strategies to ensure Lake Cowichan is more resilient to wildfire include the adoption of land use and building policies, landscape regulations, vegetation and forestry management, and public education and preparedness campaigns.

Despite prevention and mitigation measures the risk of wildfire remains. Such potential emergencies can be categorized into five levels of response:

Level 1 – we deal with these on a regular basis with site response being provided by the Fire Department, Police and Ambulance with an Emergency Operations Centre not being required;

Level 2 – would be a local emergency if confined to one location and the EOC would be set up at the Arena and Emergency Management Cowichan would be called on for assistance. A declaration of a state of local emergency must be made either by a bylaw or resolution if made by a local authority, or by order if made by the head of a local authority. A written evacuation order, signed by the local authority may be issued;

Levels 3 - an emergency involving multiple jurisdictions can mean affected municipal and regional staff sharing EOC management.

Levels 4 to 5 – will result in direct Provincial involvement.

Please note: The governance of a regionalized model reporting directly to all CAOs is now in place and it is known as Emergency Management Cowichan.

A local emergency order is only valid for 7 days.

The following was taken in whole from the Provincial guidelines.

In B.C., emergency alerts are broadcast on TV, radio, and cell phones to provide urgent public safety information during life-threatening emergencies.

Who can send an emergency alert?

Emergency alerts are issued by different agencies depending on the emergency.

- *The [Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness \(EMCR\)](#) can issue emergency alerts at the request of a Local Government, First Nation partner agency or Province during:
 - *high-risk flood and wildfire evacuations*
 - *extreme heat emergencies*
 - *tsunami warnings**
- *The [BC RCMP](#), independently or at the request of local police, can issue emergency alerts during:
 - [Amber Alerts](#), and
 - *during civil emergencies, including active shooter events**
- *[Environment and Climate Change Canada](#) can issue emergency alerts during severe weather events, including but not limited to:
 - *tornadoes*
 - *thunderstorms**

If an evacuation order is issued it must be complied with.

Evacuation terms to know

Depending on the severity of the situation, an Evacuation Alert or Order may be issued. It's important to understand the difference and to always follow the advice and direction of your local authorities.

- **Evacuation Alert:** *Be ready to leave on short notice*
- **Evacuation Order:** *You are at risk. Leave the area immediately*

- **Tactical evacuation:** This happens when a sudden threat to life requires immediate action and there is no time to prepare or issue written warnings. These types of evacuations are often coordinated by the RCMP or local police, with assistance from other agencies.
- **Evacuation Rescinded:** All is currently safe and you can return home

To be ready, [know your hazards](#) and follow [Prepared BC's guides](#) to prepare yourself, family, home or business in case an evacuation is ordered.

What to do when you receive an Evacuation Order

During an Evacuation Order, evacuees should do the following:

1. Leave the area immediately. Choosing to remain puts yourself and others in danger
2. Follow instructions provided on [where to go](#)
3. Visit [Emergency Info BC](#) or follow [@EmergencyInfoBC](#) for news and updates
4. Wait for the evacuation to be rescinded before returning home
5. You may be told to register online with the [Evacuee Registration Assistance \(ERA\) tool](#) to receive emergency support services

Risks and dangers of not evacuating

Receiving an Evacuation Order can be an emotional experience. You may be reluctant to leave your home and community.

However, choosing to remain in an area that is under an Evacuation Order puts yourself, your family, and first responders in danger:

- Evacuation routes can change or become impassible
- Services, utilities and businesses that you rely on daily may be shut down

- *Help may not be able to reach an evacuated area because of a risk to their own safety or access is blocked*

In other jurisdictions, fatalities have occurred when people chose to remain behind or waited too long to leave.

For example, according to a report from Australia's Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, 31% of the 552 wildfire-related fatalities in that country from 1956 to 2008 were the result of people evacuating too late after an evacuation order was issued. Another 26% of the deaths were related to people attempting to defend properties against an advancing wildfire.

If you're sick or have mobility concerns

If you receive an Evacuation Order and are sick or have mobility concerns:

- *Tell the person that delivers the evacuation order*
- *If possible evacuate by your own vehicle*
- *If you're feeling ill, maintain physical distance wherever possible*
- *If you're concerned about COVID-19, speak to a responder at a reception centre. Always follow guidance from your local health authority*

Where to go if you receive an Evacuation Order

Only travel to support locations designated by your Indigenous governing body or local government. *Supports will not be available if you travel to a non-designated location.*

*Evacuees should first look to use their own resources, such as insurance, to support themselves. If you don't have your own resources the emergency support services (ESS) program may be able to support you. You must connect with a responder at an ESS **designated reception centre** to receive supports.*

Reception centres

A reception centre is a safe space that a First Nation or local government may open during an emergency, and it may be staffed with trained [ESS volunteers](#). It can often be located in a school or community centre.

What is available at a reception centre:

- Receive information about the emergency
- Register with ESS*
- Get referred to food, clothing and shelter suppliers
- Help with finding and re-uniting with family
- Advice on recovery

What to expect when you arrive at a reception centre:

- Intake can take time, and you may need to wait in line, dress for the weather if possible*
- ESS responders will assess your needs
- Responders complete referral forms for essential items
- You may experience a range of emotions - be kind to yourself and others

Wildfire evacuee guidance

If an Evacuation Alert is in place, be ready to leave on short notice. Take the following steps:

- Move patio furniture, cushions and door mats indoors
- Take down flammable curtains and window treatments
- Connect garden hoses and fill large containers with water, such as pools, hot tubs and garbage cans. This can assist firefighters and help slow advancing flames
- Ensure your house number is visible. This will help firefighters locate your home quickly
- Disconnect automatic garage door openers so doors can be opened by hand if you lose power

*If an Evacuation Order is in place, it means you are at risk and must leave **immediately**.*

- *On your way out close doors and windows and turn on both interior and exterior lights so your home is visible to firefighters in heavy smoke. Follow all directions from officials and evacuate using the route they've identified.*

There is more than enough information on the Province of BC websites on how to avert or deal with disasters.



Joseph A. Fernandez