COMMUNITY RE-ENTRY CONSIDERATIONS

FOR FIRST NATIONS AND LOCAL AUTHORITY

Reference Guide



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SCOPE

In recent years, wildland urban interface (WUI) fires have forced evacuations in a number of communities throughout British Columbia. This document is intended to guide Local Authorities (LA) and First Nations (FN) in developing their own re-entry plans, and to enable the safe return of residents to their communities while supporting further recovery and long-term restoration activities.

WUI fires affect each community differently, creating a unique set of considerations and challenges during re-entry. It is within the LA or FN's own discretion to determine the minimum level of service required for re-entry. Some critical infrastructure services should be restored prior to rescinding an evacuation order while other service providers may be granted access at the same time as residents when an evacuation order is lifted. Throughout the process, special consideration must be given to public communication, ensuring residents are adequately informed to the available service levels and how to best prepare for returning home.

There will be a lot of public pressure to rescind evacuation orders as soon as possible. This needs to be carefully balanced against what services will be available and the risks that residents may face by returning too soon.

WISE PRACTICES

The following wise practices are based on lessons learned from recent events that occurred across North America.

- Provide regular updates that are as accurate as possible, thorough, and coordinated to affected residents in order to dispel rumours, enhance safety, promote transparency and trust, promote access to services and supports, and share knowledge.
- Hold a town hall or community gathering type event prior to re-entry to address public
 concerns, to acknowledge community resilience, and explain safety measures and re-entry
 procedures. Gatherings must be compliant with <u>current provincial COVID-19 restrictions</u>,
 and considerations should be given to virtual options. It is important to provide messaging to
 the public on the level of services that will be available and the need to be prepared for
 services to be unavailable for a time.
- Consider what services will be in place when an evacuation order is lifted and how to set priorities for re-establishing essential services within the community needed for re-entry.
 Several organizations provide re-entry services and materials including FNHA and Red Cross.
- Identify residents whose homes are damaged and notify them of the loss prior to re-entry.
 Mental health supports and traditional and cultural health supports can be made available and supported through FNHA. Disaster psychosocial information is important for the community but also for anyone involved in the emergency response efforts. Residents' first notice that their home was damaged or destroyed should not be on site. At this time, it is

- important to inform them of other short-term housing options and other available supports and services, where required. Messaging is important.
- Establish a Resiliency Centre, in compliance with current provincial COVID-19 restrictions, that will act as a "one stop shop" for all information and supports required by residents following re-entry. This could also look like setting up a booth at the entrance to the community to remind people about home safety, what to expect, and being available to troubleshoot communications may be down, and a physical presence may be needed. Supports and services may include information regarding health and safety; contact information for insurance providers, mental health supports, government programs, utility companies; and the provision of welcome kits to residents. These often become community hubs for information exchanges, community barbecues, and other community-building activities that help build resilience, hope, and overall acceptance of the new normal. Consideration should be given to the needs of transient workers as well as vulnerable populations, as needed.
- Consider the needs of people who may be negatively impacted by re-entry decisions. For example, school districts, daycares, seniors and elder care centres, shelters, and businesses may have separate re-entry processes and measures.
- Provide welcome kits for returning residents that include Red Cross Clean-Up kits with
 cleaning and sanitation supplies, personal protective equipment, and information on safe
 practices related to housing, food, sanitation, water, and smoke damage. Welcome kits can
 also include signs to be placed in home windows that alert utility providers of the need to reestablish gas, water, phone, and power services.
- Incorporate Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), volunteer groups, and faith-based organizations into re-entry efforts with a defined role in the re-entry process. The role of NGOs could include the provision of mental health and chaplaincy services, distribution of donations, and mobilization of volunteers.
- Identify and assess hazards prior to re-entry. As part of this effort, high-risk areas should receive perimeter fencing. This might include trails and rec sites which may have been impacted by wildfire or fire response efforts.
- Consider re-establishing retail services (ie. food, pharmacy, gas, and banking) prior to reentry. Ensure workers are in place. Additional services to consider include laundry, garbage and waste removal, food security and additional needs in the community for supplies.
- If applicable, provide residents with controlled bus tours of affected areas with psychosocial support available on the bus.
- First Nations self-determine the process for re-entry and the timelines for re-entry are
 occasionally different than for a local authority. In previous events, some First Nations have
 decided to make time for traditional healing and blessing ceremonies, community
 gatherings, and other forms of preparedness before opening access for re-entry.
- Conduct rapid damage assessment prior to re-entry to determine the extent of damage to residences, small businesses, and public and critical infrastructure. This will assist communities in determining the number of residents who will be requiring lodging support upon return.

CAUTIONS

- After an initial influx of resources being provided during the re-entry phase to communities, it
 is natural for this support to decrease over time that may result in capacity and resource
 gaps. Recovery takes time and may require the support of a recovery manager. In addition,
 establishing a monitoring system to track effectiveness of measures and identify other
 impacts may be helpful.
- Vulnerable populations returning to the area may require additional supports and services that need to be considered (ie. interim housing, psychosocial supports, food vouchers, etc.).
- Communities that have experienced emergency evacuations in recent years have noted that
 more collaboration between agencies is needed to clarify roles and responsibilities through
 recovery. EMBC provides coordination support and can provide further information about
 the recovery process.
- Work with applicable health leaders in your community to ensure that mental health supports are accessible and provided in a confidential, sensitive, and culturally-safe manner.
 Disaster Psychosocial Services Program, First Nations Health Authority, Canadian Red Cross, local faith-based organizations, First Nation elders, or toll-free phone lines may be appropriate delivery methods.
- Economic assistance must allow individuals the autonomy to make their own funding decisions.
- Financial and material donations must be distributed transparently. If unusable material
 donations must be disposed of, it should be done in a way that is sensitive to public
 perception.

RE-ENTRY CONSIDERATIONS

EMBC has developed the *Considerations for Community Re-entry Screening Checklist* to support LAs and FNs in determining when it is appropriate to lift an evacuation order and begin re-entry. The following includes considerations in making this decision and some items to consider shortly after re-entry.

1. WILDFIRE AND RELATED RISKS NO LONGER POSE AN IMMINENT THREAT

- BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) confirms to return to affected area;
- Hazard tree assessment completed;
- Air quality assessment completed;
- Drinking water assessment completed;
- Soil quality assessment completed;
- Hazardous materials identified and mitigated;
- Hazardous area secured; and
- Post-wildfire assessment underway.

Wildfire must no longer be a danger. British Columbia Wildfire Service (BCWS) monitors the fire and will provide the FN/LAFN/LA with an assessment confirming that a community is safe prior to re-entry. BCWS uses a number of criteria in making this assessment, including the size of the fire, weather forecasts, size and position of guards and breaks, and wind conditions.

An assessment of natural hazards should be considered as a significant hazard(s) may affect the ability of residents to return. Identified hazards should be secured, and mitigation actions should be started. The Ministry of Forest, Lands, and Natural Resources Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD) and BCWS may be able to assist local government with this.

While fire may no longer pose a direct danger to your community, the scale of fires further afield may bring large quantities of smoke into your community, significantly impacting air quality. The ministries of Health and Environment and health authorities will assist with this assessment. Depending on the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI), measured levels of fine particulate matter, or a visual assessment of smoke intensity, residents with respiratory or cardiovascular health issues, pregnant women, children and seniors may want to consider not returning home immediately, and this should be reflected in your public messaging.

If air quality continues to be an issue, FN/LAs should try to ensure that there are adequate clean air shelters available to the public, such as shopping malls or community centres. These would need to have clean, filtered air. For additional information on clean air shelters, contact your regional environmental health officer, through your local health authority.

Consideration should be given to ash, air, soil, and water testing prior to re-entry, once clean-up has occurred, and potentially longer-term. Residents will likely be concerned about the health impacts of fire on their homes and neighbourhoods, whether it is from the fire itself, exposure to smoke, fire retardant or water bombing, etc. It is the responsibility of the land owner to complete soil testing. Consistent messaging about the health risk, any testing being done, and what a homeowner can do, will increase confidence in coming home and rebuilding.

It is the responsibility of the water purveyor to ensure that the drinking water is safe to consume. As the local government, you may be the local water supplier and therefore responsible for this. If you need assistance in getting the water tested, contact your health authority's drinking water office, or the BC Centre for Disease Control.

2. TRANSPORTATION ROUTES ACCESSIBLE / CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE SAFE AND SECURED

- Consult with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure on your re-entry plan;
- The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure will conduct a hazard assessment (geotechnical, danger tree, structures) for Provincial highways identified in the re-entry plan and have been impacted by fire;
- FN/LA should assess possible impact on road and bridge infrastructure;
- Other road owners should assess if roads into the community are accessible and not at risk:

- Coordinate with other LAs, FNs, and the RCMP if re-entry routes run through other
 jurisdictions under an evacuation order to ensure security is in place and that routes are
 not overwhelmed by multiple re-entries at the same time;
- Confirm a traffic management plan for the re-entry process with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. Communicate this through government and media outlets;
- FN/LA ensures transportation arrangements are made for residents who do not have their own means to return to the community. Consider providing masks for people who may want to wear them in shared transportation vehicles;
- Consider staging re-entry by area, especially for larger communities;
- Consult with The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure to identify safe locations for information checkpoints, including a system for ensuring only permitted local residents are able to re-enter, until a full re-opening is in place; and
- Plan to re-establish public transit, ensure communication with residents.

3. PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND TOURS

- Public communications (air quality, service accessibility, etc.);
- COVID-19 public health orders and guidance are being followed for all tours, community events, and visits;
- Controlled resident tour of affected areas, if applicable; and
- Controlled media tour, if applicable.

Sufficient and effective communication with returning residents is key to a successful community re-entry. Being forced from one's home is a traumatic and often confusing event for residents, and the addition of poor communication from government is one stressor that can be mitigated by an effective strategy.

Controlled tours for both residents to see their homes and their community at large enable residents to see what their post re-entry life will look like, and it will help ease some of their anxieties about life in the future. While resident safety always takes priority, residents should be allowed to visit their damaged or destroyed home, and depending on the level of destruction, sift through their property in hopes of finding possessions. This offers a sense of closure to some, and a sense of empowerment to others. Escorting residents to the site may need to be coordinated by the local government. Sifting through damaged structures should be done under escort, with officials trained in sifting through fire-destroyed properties. There are several volunteer organizations with experience in sifting. Damaged and unsafe structures should be cordoned using tape or barricades to ensure safety and guard against unlawful access. For some larger, public buildings, security may even need to be put in place until the building can be re-built.

Media tours may also be helpful, depending on the size of the community – as not all residents will be interested or able to engage in a direct tour. Additionally, some residents may not be

psychologically up to visiting their community but seeing it on camera will provide enough situational awareness without causing further damage.

A public information meeting, town hall, or community-wide meeting (either in person held according to Orders of the Provincial Health Officer or virtually) will allow affected parties to express their concerns. The community meeting will also allow local government to explain the status of the re-entry effort and ensure affected parties know what is expected of them.

The most important aspect of resident communication is honesty in describing the level of service that will be available in the community upon re-entry. Here are some factors to consider and then describe to returning residents:

- Will there be a boil water advisory? How long is it likely to be in place?
- What will be the access to critical retail, pharmacy, and health services?
- Will people need to bring more supplies with them? For how long?
- Are any relevant evacuation alerts still in place?
- Are there hazard areas closed off or that need to be closed off?

It is important that returning residents have as much information as possible in order to make an informed decision. Consider putting together an information package or "Welcome Home Package" for returning residents with all the important details can be very helpful and will aid in local government efforts to be positive and organized.

4. ACCESS TO UTILITIES

- Restored access to critical infrastructure operators;
- Electricity restoration plans underway;
- Hydro services have been restored in re-entry areas;
- Public access to potable water;
- Access to water for firefighting;
- Sanitation or temporary toilet access;
- Communication systems restored;
- · Natural gas systems secured and safe; and
- Public access to fuel.

Local utility services should be functional at some minimum acceptable level prior to re-entry. In order to best facilitate this need, it is helpful to allow essential workers to access your community before an order is lifted in order to assess and/or repair utilities prior to general reentry of residents.

Should some utilities be inoperable or operating at a lower capacity you must inform residents through your messaging campaign and/or through public meetings.

5. STRUCTURE DAMAGE ASSESSMENTS COMPLETE

- Determine a priority order for the assessment of damage to buildings and critical infrastructure:
- Conduct an initial area or 'windshield' assessment to determine broadly which parts of the community have been damaged. This will help focus where you subsequently send damage assessment teams to inspect individual buildings;
- Conduct Rapid Damage Assessment in affected areas. Teams can be formed using local building inspectors, contractors or local government staff;
- Conduct damage assessment to local government assets including parks; and
- Ensure a Critical Infrastructure (CI) damage assessment has occurred by the infrastructure owner.

Damage assessments are a local government responsibility for most structures, and BC Housing is a provincial agency which can provide staff training and assistance. Local government should consider what level of damage to residential structures would make that building unsafe to use (e.g. just structural damage or maybe also a lack of certain utilities etc.) Damage to critical infrastructure will generally be assessed by the CI owners, but staying in touch with them is beneficial for both parties.

If structures were damaged by the firefighting efforts, such as being bulldozed to create a fireguard or water bombed or doused with fire retardant, these structures have to be assessed and a process developed with BCWS to compensate the owners.

6. ESSENTIAL SERVICES RESTORED TO BASIC LEVEL

- Fire services available:
- Police services available; and
- 911 dispatch available.

Public safety is a key responsibility of local government and it should be a consideration whether to allow re-entry without these services in place. It is important to recognize that if police and fire resources are occupied with emergency response activities, they may not be able to provide an appropriate level of day-to-day coverage to the community, and this needs to be considered.

7. HEALTH CARE SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE

- Hospital or health centre access;
- Ambulance or emergency medical services;
- Any specialized health services as advised by the local regional health authority;
- Long term care facilities available (in many cases evacuation alerts will remain in place and it is unlikely a health authority would repatriate/re-open long-term care facilities under an alert, given the vulnerable population and the challenges in moving residents in and out of a community);
- Traditional and cultural health supports;
- Psychosocial supports; and
- Information provided to residents at a higher risk of health concerns.

COVID-19 remains a threat to public health and safety and it is important to communicate to residents re-entering their communities the continued need to follow Orders of the Provincial Health Officer and public health guidance, including seeking testing if symptoms develop. Community evacuations are stressful and returning home does alleviate some but not all of those stressors. This stress may exacerbate pre-existing health conditions of some residents. If some health care services that are normally available in your community will be unavailable for a foreseeable amount, it may be a good idea for some of the more vulnerable populations to remain where these services are readily available.

Having mental health supports for returning residents and local employees is critical, and those supports must be in place prior to and during re-entry. All efforts should be made to ensure mental health supports are culturally appropriate, and trauma and violence informed.

Consult with your local health authority and/or the First Nations Health Authority regarding health care services, including local public health officials and/or medical health officer.

8. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

We recognize that every community will have different needs. Indigenous communities have unique needs and Indigenous leadership knows best how to address these needs.

Understanding the cultural dynamics within a community, and differences in protocol amongst communities, is critical. Ultimately, the relationship built with the community is paramount, and may determine whether a service provider is welcomed or not. Some considerations for support could include:

- Consulting with Chief and Council, as well as identified community Elders and respected leaders, to determine communities' unique cultural and traditional needs (e.g. traditional healing ceremonies, drum circles) during the re-entry process and involving them in the development of re-entry plans, drawing upon their knowledge and leadership skills;
- Special needs of elders during evacuation may result in additional considerations for transitions back to community, including health and mental health supports;
- Residential school survivors may experience higher levels of trauma upon evacuation and re-entry and may have increased needs to support mental health recovery;
- Self-determination of steps for enhancing community resiliency through the recovery process; and,
- Disproportionate impacts to food security and food security governance including access and availability of traditional foods, loss of food security in the home, in the community, and within the traditional territory.

All Indigenous populations have an intricate connection to their lands and traditional territories, which support many layers of spiritual ceremonies and practices, as well as provide food and medicinal resources to communities and their membership.

Specialized support may be needed for the trauma of environmental losses, over and above personal and housing losses, which may affect the ability to practice spiritual rituals, the ability to gather traditional foods and medicines, the ability to access traditional hunting grounds, and the loss of one's culturally significant land uses and practices. Community Liaisons should look for evidence of trauma or ask community members about their experiences.

- Traditional hunting areas and wildlife populations may be impacted by wildfires, which can also attract more predators to the area. Hunting bans could be considered;
- Firewood gathering areas may be impacted and it may not be safe to gather firewood in traditional areas;
- Recreational sites and trails may have been impacted there may be opportunities for directing community members to use other trails instead as a temporary measure. Put up signs to mark off unsafe areas;
- For those accustomed to traditional diets, consider facilitating cross-community food sharing opportunities, hosting or asking a neighbouring community to host a feast; and
- Opportunities to support impacts on cultural livelihoods and traditional economies.

Agencies that specifically support Indigenous communities and their members with disaster management include:

- Canadian Red Cross
- First Nations Emergency Services Society (FNESS)
- First Nations Health Authority (FNHA)
- Indian Residential School Survivor Society
- Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)
- Aboriginal Friendship Societies and Centres
- Local First Nations community health centres
- Local First Nations Elders councils
- Local First Nations police liaison officers
- Local First Nations traditional healers

Knowledge sharing around emergency management systems (e.g. accessing ESS, EMBC, ISC, Canadian Red Cross, etc.), clarification of terminologies (e.g. recovery plans, DFA) and processes for applying for funds and grants may be helpful. Further considerations include:

- Support for needs assessment for communities;
- Support for complete community damage assessments before returning home, coordinated with the band leadership;
- Support for community based recovery planning, and potentially additional personnel for bands to enable this;
- Support for non-evacuated Indigenous host communities who incurred costs, monetary or otherwise, due to their roles supporting other evacuated communities; and
- Consulting with other Indigenous communities that have experienced similar events, as they have valuable knowledge to share.

Through EMBC, ISC will reimburse eligible costs for damage and re-entry assessments. When Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) is declared for an event, as it has been for the recent 2018 wildfires, ISC would advise communities to apply through the DFA platform for recovery costs. As DFA covers 80%, ISC will top up the remaining 20%, in addition to directly considering recovery needs which fall outside of the DFA eligible scope, for example:

ISC has some ability to support with compensation for personal losses. Personal losses refer to an individual's basic and essential property from their primary residence that sustained damage due to an Emergency Management Assistance Program (EMAP) eligible emergency event. Through EMAP, ISC may reimburse costs incurred by the First Nation residents in the clean-up, restoration, repair and replacement of basic and essential property (this is not intended to be a substitute for private personal insurance).

Some of these additional supports ISC is now able to offer are through the new Building Back Better Strategy Guide, which is enabled through EMAP programming, and supports additional needs during response and recovery (www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1534954506773/1535121720820)

Communities should work with the Province with ISC's support for questions and needs that fall outside of the provincial services – including supports through Building Back Better. Once the Province (including DFA) have processed eligible costs, the community recovery plans come to ISC for works that can be further supported through the Department's federal EMAP program. This can also be done concurrently.

9. LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES AVAILABLE

- Garbage/Waste/Debris disposal services available; and
- Administration offices open.

If local government services are going to be operating at a reduced capacity, residents must be informed. Additionally, if your community has services delivered by the provincial government, it would be helpful to coordinate and/or ensure their operation upon re-entry. Your local PREOC can assist you with provincial coordination and finding the correct ministry.

Local governments should be mindful of effects on staff; some staff members may have been personally affected and care should be taken to provide staff with mental health supports, time off, and morale-boosting activities. This will work toward minimizing frustration and reducing the risk of staff burn-out.

10. RECOVERY SUPPORTS ESTABLISHED

- Public information available;
- Resiliency Centres established, if applicable;
- Access to transitional housing, if applicable; and
- Available NGOs and contractors to support affected residents.

It is highly recommended to set up a Resiliency Centre, or a "one stop shop", where residents can get information on services available to support them as they prepare to move back to their home, clean up, and transition to recovery. These centres should be set up a location that is easily accessible for residents, either a town centre or where the majority are temporarily housed. Mobile centres could be a consideration where evacuees are located in different locations. All physical gathering spaces should be organized with public health and safety in mind, ensuring appropriate COVID-19 safety plans are in place.

Consideration should also be given to education and recreation services. While these may not be essential services upon re-entry, they are important to support community and psychosocial recovery.

11. ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

- Public access to food.
- Public access to prescribed pharmaceuticals; and

Public access to financial supports.

Consideration should be given to whether critical retail owners should be provided priority access to the community. Some businesses have well established business continuity programs and can be up and running within days, but others may take time. Coordination with these private business owners is a local government responsibility.

Residents and businesses that have not experience total loss (i.e. structure deemed to be uninhabitable) will require cleaning supplies to begin their own recovery. Consideration should be given toward where and who residents/business owners can obtain cleaning supplies. The local government may be required to provide a residential/business cleaning kit in the early stages, until sufficient resources in the impacted community are brought online.

The time it will take to restore critical retail will depend on how long they have been shut down, whether power was out, and how long it will take to get rid of spoiled goods, clean-up and replenish stock.

If stores are operating at some reduced level of capacity, residents should be informed to make decisions on whether or not to return, and/or the type and amount of supplies they should bring with them.

Where communities do not have the full spectrum of retail services available, consider informal alternatives suitable to the local needs.

12.INSURANCE SUPPORT ESTABLISHED

Insurance providers/assessors should be available, if applicable.

Contact the Insurance Bureau of Canada to coordinate with insurance companies toll-free at: 1-844-2-ASK-IBC.

13.RECOVERY ASSETS IN PLACE

• Consider what equipment might be required to commence recovery assessments and debris removal including: Heavy equipment available (bulldozer, excavator, etc.).

14.RE-ENTRY LIVESTOCK

- Residents re-entering homes or farms may be affected or distressed by lost pets or livestock and may look for assistance in finding animals. Residents may also discover wounded or deceased animals in their homes. Consult with the local SPCA for assistance on how to deal with these situations and if a local call center has been opened and/or if a call centre should be established.
- Include contact information for any groups or re-location centres where animals that may
 have been rescued and instructions on how residents can be reunited with their pets or

- livestock. In most instances, these will have been established by the SPCA and their partners and/or the BC Wildfire Service.
- Disposal of large number of livestock, cattle in particular, requires special attention.
 Permits are required if carcasses need to be transported. This should be coordinated though the PREOC.
- Veterinary services support services should be available. If veterinary establishments
 have been affected, consider temporary facilities for veterinary locums to operate. The
 need for such facilities may require an assessment of volume to accommodate a large
 number of animals if necessary. This should be done in consultation with the College of
 Veterinarians of BC.
- Pet shelters and rescue centers should be available.
- Refer to the *livestock re-location policies*.
- Consult with your PREOC for other emergency programs that may be available to assist with livestock recovery efforts.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

INFORMATION	LINK
Livestock relocation policies	<u>Livestock relocation</u>
Communicable disease prevention plans	https://www.worksafebc.com/en/covid-19/bcs-four-step-restart