

B.C. 2017 disaster report: Extreme weather here to stay

Report cites need to prepare for “the new normal”

BARRY GERDING / May 11, 2018 5:30 a.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS



A comprehensive report on the 2017 B.C. wildfires and floods has resulted in 108 recommendations on how the province can better adapt to climate change.

But to what extent the report’s findings impact the 2018 fire and flood season may be limited.

“I think modestly at least we may be better prepared this year,” said George Abbott, a co-author along with Sto:lo Nation Chief Maureen Chapman of the report, titled “Addressing the New Normal: 21st Century Disaster Management in British Columbia.”

“But we are still much more vulnerable than we should be and it will take substantial investment to raise our game on the (wildfire and flooding) prevention side. I salute what government has done and is doing so far through its own internal review process, but I think the magnitude of the challenge before us shows there is a significant way to go yet.”

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Chapman and Abbott spoke to the media in Victoria on Wednesday in releasing their long-awaited report, particularly for many Okanagan communities and the Okanagan Basin Water Board hoping to see greater emphasis placed on government funding for longer-term preventative fire and flood measures.

The report’s recommendations hit on a variety of themes: Working better on preparedness and planning with Indigenous governments and communities; forming more strategic partnerships with ranchers, farmers, communities, logging contractors and Indigenous people in fighting fires; greater long-term preventative fire and flood land management initiatives; and adopting an aggressive wildfire suppression prescribed burning program.

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Chapman said it’s should be “all hands on deck” when forest fires occur, where all available equipment and manpower resources can be marshalled to assist in a firefighting effort, coordinated in advance through establishing those strategic partnerships.

She said that happened in the Cariboo in 2017 out of necessity because of the volume of fires. “Last summer, some people took that initiative on their own, without permission, and were able to be successful holding smaller fires at bay until the wildfire personnel were able to reach the scene, sometimes days later. We need to start thinking outside the box and remove those boxes.”

Abbott, a retired former Liberal MLA and cabinet minister from the North Okanagan, said their report revisited ideas that evolved from the Filmon Report compiled by the former Manitoba premier Gary Filmon in the aftermath of the Okanagan Mountain 2003 wildfire that were never acted upon, particularly regarding fire prevention measures.

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“We need to start seeing more selective tree harvesting adjacent to communities, greater utilization of fibres now regarded as waste, more prescribed burning at interface and landscape levels...we need realize that forest fires have shaped our eco-system for thousands of years across our province...and prescribed burning is one of the tools in our toolkit.”

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Abbott pointed to one day last summer, July 7, when 170 lightning strikes hit the Cariboo region starting 160 forest fires as a consequence.

“That was well beyond the capacity of BC Wildfire Service to respond to, way too many fires. But as bad as that was it could have been so much worse.”

He was referring to the record drought being experienced in the South Okanagan at that time.

“It was remarkably fortunate the lightning strikes we saw in the Cariboo did not occur in the South Okanagan during the same period. It would have been an overwhelming situation. I’m not sure how we would have managed that.”

Communication and the spreading of misinformation on social media was another issue addressed by Abbott and Chapman, as they called for development of a central hub or “one-stop shop” emergency communication website to provide the public with “reliable, responsive, adaptive, real-time an customer-focused information.”

“For most people, their home and property is their life investment and naturally they want to know what is going on after they are evacuated. There are ways we can up our game in that area. There were some pretty gripping stories we heard about people from Cache Creek hearing their community was being looted and that Ashcroft had burned to the ground,” Abbott said.

Doug Donaldson, B.C. Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development, said the full breadth of the report’s recommendations will take time to be considered, saying a response and cost analysis will be produced by his ministry Oct. 31.

Donaldson noted 19 of the recommendations have already been implemented through his ministry’s internal review of how it handled the 2017 wildfire and flood season was managed, and that his government has pledged \$50 million over the next three years on wildfire prevention and risk reduction around communities.

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