







PUBLIC SAFETY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA:

Transforming the Fire/Rescue Service

A report by the Fire Services Liaison Group
September 2009




Executive Summary

The approximately 350 independent community-based fire departments that make up British Columbia's fire/rescue service are facing major and growing challenges. They are coping with increasing demands for service, in both the range of services expected and the ability to respond to natural and man-made disasters. At the same time, they are operating within significant financial and resource constraints – particularly those in small communities.

The cost of providing fire and rescue services is subject to pressures beyond the control of the fire departments and local governments; changes in technology, demographics, the economy and the regulatory environment are driving up the costs to protect the public.

Further, while the fire/rescue service is expected to play a major role in public safety, its management and policy direction is divided between different levels of government and a large number of individual fire departments.

And, because B.C.'s fire/rescue service has evolved without any central leadership and direction, there is a lack of coordination, cooperation and consistency that is hindering its ability to meet the challenges of today and the future.

These problems are especially acute in smaller communities that depend on volunteers for fire and rescue services. However, fire departments in larger communities also face tough choices in the future, if municipal cost pressures continue to cause budgets to lag behind the demand for public services.

B.C.'s fire/rescue service needs to transform. The public policy framework governing the fire/rescue service, along with its operations and practices, need to be modernized to reflect public needs, expectations, operational demands and fiscal challenges. To do this, the fire/rescue service needs

a long-term commitment from the provincial government, local governments and fire departments to make the changes needed to ensure firefighters can continue to effectively protect their communities.

The Fire Services Liaison Group, which represents the key stakeholder groups in B.C. that have responsibility for or direct interests in the fire/rescue service, makes 14 recommendations in this report that are intended to achieve the transformation that is required.

Key problems addressed in this report include: responsibility for fire and rescue services, the need to improve governance of B.C.'s fire/rescue service, fire/rescue service gaps, the challenge of province-wide competency standards, inadequate fire/rescue service information for effective decision-making, operational implications of independent fire departments, budget pressures and heavy stress on the volunteer sector.

The foundation of this report is the common vision that the Fire Services Liaison Group developed for the fire/rescue service: “To have a competent level of fire and emergency services that is supported by sustainable resources for all residents of and visitors to the province of British Columbia.”



Immediate priorities to be addressed by the provincial government

RECOMMENDATION 1: ESTABLISH A FIRE SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately establish a new Fire Services Advisory Board to provide policy leadership and coordination for B.C.'s fire/rescue service.

The board would be a single representative body to speak on behalf of B.C.'s fire/rescue service, to address issues and challenges, to act on common issues and to put forward initiatives to the provincial government. B.C.'s Fire Services Act provides for the creation of a Fire Services Advisory Board.

RECOMMENDATION 2: BROADEN THE MANDATE OF THE OFFICE OF THE FIRE COMMISSIONER

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately broaden the mandate of the Office of the Fire Commissioner to reflect the full range of services provided by B.C.'s fire/rescue service.

This recommendation seeks to update the mandate of the Office of the Fire Commissioner and provide oversight of all aspects of fire/rescue services provided to British Columbians.

RECOMMENDATION 3: STANDARDIZE COMPETENCIES AND TRAINING STANDARDS

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate immediate action, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board, to clarify and specify training standards for the fire/rescue service, specifically interior firefighting.

Because there is no enforcement of standards for the B.C. fire/rescue service, there is no certainty that fire departments meet minimum competency and safety standards. This recommendation addresses a safety risk to the public and firefighters, and a liability risk for departments and local governments.

RECOMMENDATION 4: SUPPORT TRAINING, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION FOR VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENTS

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately provide support for training, recruitment and retention for volunteer fire departments in small and rural communities, including:

- *Ongoing support for training and training opportunities*
- *Development of recruitment/retention programs and incentives*

This recommendation would address some key challenges for B.C.'s volunteer fire departments. Due to limited resources, these departments are generally unable to meet recognized standards for firefighter training. They are also facing a volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention crisis; many volunteer departments are under-strength and finding it difficult to maintain minimum acceptable staffing levels.

RECOMMENDATION 5: IMPROVE THE FIRE INVESTIGATION AND INSPECTION SYSTEM

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund a joint study with the Office of the Fire Commissioner, local governments and the Fire Services Advisory Board on improving the fire investigation and inspection system in British Columbia, with particular attention to the Local Assistant to the Fire Commissioner system.

Improvements are needed to B.C.'s fire inspection and fire investigation systems, both of which are critical fire prevention services.

RECOMMENDATION 6: IDENTIFY AND FILL GAPS IN SERVICE COVERAGE

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately undertake the following initiatives in order to identify and fill service gaps in fire/rescue coverage in B.C.:

- *Initiate a study to clarify services and identify gaps in coverage for fire/rescue services in B.C., through the Office of the Fire Commissioner.*
- *Develop a joint strategy between the fire/rescue service and the Emergency Health and Services Commission to address gaps in medical first responder coverage.*
- *Make legislative changes that enable local governments to enact fire or building bylaws intended to improve public safety.*
- *Implement a province-wide public fire education strategy through the Office of the Fire Commissioner.*

This recommendation seeks to address gaps in fire, rescue and emergency services in the province, and also provide clarity about what services are available in different areas of the province, and who is responsible for them.

**Immediate priorities** to be addressed by local government**RECOMMENDATION 7: INVESTIGATE LOCAL AND REGIONAL EFFICIENCIES**

That local governments and fire departments in B.C. initiate reviews of their operations and services with the goal of achieving efficiencies.

In order to cope with fiscal restraints and improve service delivery, the fire/rescue service in B.C. must seek regional efficiencies and revisit business models to review services and service levels.

RECOMMENDATION 8: PROVIDE ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TO VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENTS

That local governments, with support from the Office of the Fire Commissioner, ensure volunteer departments within their jurisdiction have the necessary administrative and management support.

Volunteer fire departments lack administration and management resources, limiting their ability to effectively and efficiently deliver fire/rescue services.

Longer-term priorities to be addressed by the provincial government

RECOMMENDATION 9: ESTABLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOR FIRE/RESCUE SERVICES

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General undertake the following initiatives, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner, to improve accountability and oversight of the B.C. fire/rescue service:

- *initiate a transition plan and make the necessary legislative changes to give local governments responsibility for all fire departments within their jurisdiction (except for industrial, federal and First Nation departments), and*
- *take steps to require local governments to file annual service plans for the fire departments within their jurisdiction.*

Giving local governments responsibility for all fire departments will ensure the fire/rescue service has the appropriate oversight, accountability and more consistent protection levels. The filing of annual service plans will ensure transparency and accountability regarding decisions made about fire/rescue services.

RECOMMENDATION 10: UPDATE COMPENSATION AGREEMENTS FOR SERVICES TO PROVINCIAL AGENCIES

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund a joint study with local governments, the Local Government Management Association and the Union of B.C. Municipalities to review and update:

- *the tariffs paid to fire departments for services provided to provincial agencies, and*
- *the requirement for fire departments to receive pre-authorization from the Provincial Emergency Program to be compensated for calls outside their service areas.*

This recommendation seeks to ensure fire departments are fully compensated for providing services to provincial agencies, and to reduce delays caused by the requirement to receive pre-authorization.

RECOMMENDATION 11: IMPROVE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate projects intended to improve access to firefighter training and to provide leadership training for the B.C. fire/rescue service. The Office of the Fire Commissioner should lead the projects.

This recommendation addresses a significant concern for B.C. fire departments and local governments by improving access to training and helping create a systematic process to develop leadership and management skills.

RECOMMENDATION 12: ENFORCE COMPETENCY, TRAINING AND OPERATING STANDARDS

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate the development of a strategy for improving firefighter competencies over an extended transition period, including a deadline for all volunteer firefighters in B.C. to attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate, and mandatory fire department registration and certification. This work should be conducted by the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board. Voluntary registration and certification should also be offered to federal, private, First Nations and other fire services providers.

This recommendation works towards achieving and maintaining a minimum mandatory training standard for all firefighters in B.C.

RECOMMENDATION 13: RESEARCH AND DEVELOP BEST PRACTICES

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General direct the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board to research trends and issues, and to develop, publish and promote best practices guidelines for fire and rescue services, including information specific to volunteer departments.

This recommendation works towards the creation of a fact-base of trends, issues and best practices to assist local governments and the fire/rescue service, particularly small departments, in effective decision-making.

RECOMMENDATION 14: IMPROVE INTEROPERABILITY IN THE FIRE/RESCUE SERVICE

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board, initiatives to promote greater interoperability within the fire/rescue service.

This recommendation works towards improving interoperability, coordination and information-sharing in the fire/rescue service. Opportunities to be studied include recommended practices for small- and medium-sized departments, the sharing of fire service information, improved communications and information management, liability coverage for out-of-jurisdiction work, and joint purchasing.

The combined effect of these initiatives will be a transformed B.C. fire/rescue service that is equipped to meet the needs of the future. Some of these initiatives will require legislative changes or place new responsibilities on governments and fire departments. As well, without additional financial resources from the provincial government, some proposed changes will not be productive, and could in fact be counter-productive.

While these initiatives are not directed at fire departments outside the purview of the FSLG – such as First Nation, federal (i.e. airport or Department of National Defense) or private (i.e. industrial) fire forces – the FSLG strongly recommends that all fire departments in B.C. consider and adopt many of these recommendations as best practices.

It is important to note that, despite the manner in which the fire/rescue service evolved in B.C., fire departments have been very successful in protecting people and property – until now. This situation will not continue if the challenges described in this report are not addressed, and the recommendations are not acted on. If the fire/rescue service does not adapt to the new environment it must operate in, we will quickly see an erosion of the level of protection it can provide to British Columbians.



Acknowledgements

As Chair of the Fire Services Liaison Group, I would like to thank the organizations that provided the funding that supported the development of this report:

- Office of the Fire Commissioner, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
- Building Policy Branch, Ministry of Housing and Social Development
- Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure
- British Columbia Ambulance Service
- Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
- Protection Branch, Ministry of Forests and Range

The Fire Services Liaison Group and the project Steering Committee dedicated many hours of service to this project. Organizations involved in the FSLG and Steering Committee have included:

- Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C.
- B.C. Professional Fire Fighters Association
- Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C.
- B.C. Fire Training Officers' Association
- Fire Prevention Officers' Association of B.C.
- Union of B.C. Municipalities
- Local Government Management Association
- Fire Commissioner (ex-officio)

I would also like to thank the members of Fire Services Liaison Group, the fire/rescue service, the associations and the local governments who participated in the task groups that helped to define the issues this report addresses. These individuals contributed their time, energy and talent, and their participation is greatly appreciated.

Many individuals within the fire/rescue service, local government and the provincial government gave generously of their time in the research and analysis supporting the development of this report. I would like to thank these individuals for their assistance and support.

The support and participation of representatives of the Local Government Management Association and the Union of B.C. Municipalities was crucial to refining and focusing our recommendations for transforming the fire/rescue service.

Finally, I would like to thank members of the Office of the Fire Commissioner for their guidance and support in undertaking this project.



Stephen Gamble, CFO, MIFireE
Chair, Fire Services Liaison Group

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Introduction

Approximately 350 independent volunteer and career fire departments make up the fire/rescue service in British Columbia. While they do not function as an organized entity, as a group they work to protect the lives and property of British Columbians through the provision of fire, rescue and emergency services. This report is proposing some important changes to how those services are governed, delivered and supported, in order to better protect the public and firefighters. While the recommendations focus on community-based departments, they would also assist B.C.'s industrial, First Nations and federal fire forces in improving their response and safety.

The Fire Services Liaison Group (FSLG) was formed to bring together representatives of the key stakeholder groups in B.C. with direct interests in the fire/rescue service, and to develop joint solutions to issues facing the fire/rescue service. The FSLG includes the Union of B.C. Municipalities as well as the five associations whose members are directly involved in the fire/rescue service delivery in B.C.:

- The Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C.
- The Fire Prevention Officers' Association of B.C.
- The B.C. Fire Training Officers' Association
- The B.C. Professional Fire Fighters Association
- The Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C.

In April 2007, the FSLG began work on this report after determining the current structure of fire/rescue service delivery in B.C. is deficient in a number of areas. Funding for the report was provided by a variety of provincial and federal agencies. Guided by the project Steering Committee, 17 tasks groups with a total of 106 members conducted the initial phase of research and discussions on which the 14 recommendations are based. The Local Government Management Association joined the Steering Committee after the research phase and contributed to the discussions that led to the report's recommendations.

The FSLG developed the report based on the common vision that has been adopted by the fire/rescue service: "To have a competent level of fire and emergency services that is supported by sustainable resources for all residents of and visitors to the province of British Columbia."

While many of the recommendations in *Public Safety in B.C. – Transforming the Fire/Rescue Service* apply to both career and volunteer departments, several focus specifically on the needs of the volunteer sector. In its research, the FSLG discovered that small volunteer fire departments face some major and urgent challenges due to the economic and demographic stresses facing many small communities in B.C. The FSLG recognizes the critical role volunteer firefighters play and the immeasurable value they provide to the province. To ensure the ongoing vitality of this critical public safety resource, the FSLG recommends that priority be given to assisting the volunteer sector. However, a number of the recommendations also address pressing concerns and challenges faced by urban and suburban departments.

This report necessarily focuses on problems within the fire/rescue service. This should not be taken to mean that everything about the current way of doing things is wrong or broken. Much of the current system is performing well and should be retained and built upon. It is important to recognize the skills, capabilities and commitment of firefighters in career and volunteer departments across the province. The recommendations in this report have been designed to deal with shared challenges and make the system in which these firefighters serve more effective.

Terminology

Common terms used in this report:

"Fire/rescue service" – refers to the hundreds of independent volunteer, career and composite (a blend of volunteer and career) fire departments that provide fire, rescue and emergency services in B.C. These departments do not act as a single entity, but it is necessary to refer to them collectively in the report.

"Fire departments" – represents the individual departments providing fire, rescue and emergency services in B.C. While they clearly do more than fight fires, "fire departments" is a universally recognized term that is widely understood to represent their full range of services.

"Local governments" – refers to municipalities and regional districts in B.C.

It should also be noted that this report was originally known as the *British Columbia Fire Services Model Development Project*; the change in name reflects the need to transform the fire/rescue service to prepare it for the challenges of tomorrow, and to act on the recommendations in a timely manner.

Current System

As mentioned above, approximately 350 independent community-based fire departments operate throughout B.C. (see Appendix A), collectively employing about 4,000 career firefighters and 10,000 volunteer firefighters. This count excludes about 100 airport, First Nations and industrial fire departments. About 180 of the approximately 350 fire departments are based in municipalities and regional districts, while the remaining 170 operate in small, unincorporated communities under the direction of improvement districts or societies.



Fire services in B.C. come under the umbrella of the Office of the Fire Commissioner, part of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. Its services include administration and enforcement of fire safety legislation, coordination of the network of Local Assistants to the Fire Commissioner, fire-loss statistics collection, fire inspection, and response to major fire emergencies. It also provides advice on delivery of fire protection services, public fire safety education and firefighter training standards. It has very limited field operations.

There is no mandatory legislative requirement in B.C. for a community to have a fire department, and essentially all decisions related to the fire/rescue service are made at the community level. Local government officials are responsible for all fire department services in their communities, including evaluating the need for services, providing necessary resources and assessing the capabilities of their departments.

Costs of fire/rescue services are borne by local residents, either through tax funding or donations. The provincial government collects approximately \$375 million annually from the Insurance Premium Tax (see Appendix B), a tax on property and other insurance premiums. Initially, some of this tax was intended to support the fire/rescue system. Today, the provincial government spends approximately \$0.67 per capita on community fire services (including funding for the Office of the Fire Commissioner), compared to \$68.69 per capita for the B.C. Ambulance Service.



In addition to protecting their home communities, fire departments provide highway rescue, medical first responder and interface fire services to provincial government agencies. The provincial government has also built fire/rescue resources into its planning for large-scale emergency events, but with limited consultation with local government, and no funding to improve local fire/rescue service resources and interoperability.

More information and background about the fire/rescue service can be found in Appendix C.

Towards Transformation

While fire departments in B.C. have been very successful in protecting people and property to date, the challenges they face are increasing and must be addressed before they become insurmountable and begin to negatively affect public safety in our province.

The report seeks to address a variety of systemic problems that are hindering the ability of the fire/rescue service to meet the challenges of today and the future. These problems are listed to the right.

Report Format

The fire/rescue service is a shared responsibility of the provincial government, local governments and fire departments. Each of these parties has an important role to play in improving public safety. The recommendations in this report have been directed to the parties responsible. In some cases, responsibility is shared.

The 14 recommendations in this report are divided into two main sections: immediate priorities, and longer-term priorities that are required to achieve the transformation this report aims to achieve.

Some of these initiatives will require legislative changes or place new responsibilities on governments and fire departments. Without additional financial resources from the provincial government, some proposed changes will not be productive, and could in fact be counter-productive.

Systemic problems hindering B.C.'s fire/rescue service

1. Responsibility for fire and rescue services
2. The need to improve governance of B.C.'s fire/rescue service
3. Fire/rescue service gaps
4. The challenge of province-wide competency standards
5. Inadequate fire/rescue service information for effective decision-making
6. Operational implications of independent fire departments
7. Budget pressures
8. Heavy stress on the volunteer sector





Immediate priorities

The eight recommendations in this section are viewed as the most urgent of the 14 recommendations. They have the greatest impact on public safety and set the stage for the longer-term recommendations in the next section.

Six of the immediate priorities are directed to the provincial government and two to local governments. In cases where action by a party is required that is not clearly stated in the recommendation, a Responsibilities section has been added. The priorities are not listed sequentially. While some priorities rely on the completion of others, all are equally critical.

Some of the recommendations require legislative changes. It is important to note that without additional financial resources from the provincial government, some of these proposed changes will not be productive, and could in fact be counter-productive.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 1: ESTABLISH A FIRE SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately establish a new Fire Services Advisory Board to provide policy leadership and coordination for B.C.'s fire/rescue service, as provided for in the *Fire Services Act*.

Problem

The current lack of coordination of B.C.'s fire/rescue service often results in a reactive, unorganized and unpredictable response to issues and to emergencies, resulting in a potential threat to public safety.

Key Issues

- Made up of hundreds of independent entities, B.C.'s fire/rescue service must work as one system in order to ensure coordinated, comprehensive and consistent fire and emergency response across the province.
- A single representative body is needed to speak on behalf of B.C.'s fire/rescue service, to address issues and challenges, to act on common issues and to put forward initiatives to the province.
- The mandate of this body must cover all services provided by B.C.'s fire/rescue service.
- B.C.'s *Fire Services Act* provides for the creation of a Fire Services Advisory Board (FSAB).
- The FSAB is critical to achieving other recommendations included in this report.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Provides competency standards required to safely and effectively provide fire and rescue services, ensuring greater safety for citizens.
- Promotes best practices, so that citizens across the province receive comparable, high quality fire/rescue services.
- Proactively identifies issues affecting public safety and develops policies and programs to deal with them.

Background

Recognizing the need for a single body to represent the province's fire/rescue service, Section 4 of B.C.'s *Fire Services Act* provides for the creation of a "Fire Services Advisory Board" whose duties include advising the Fire Commissioner on operational issues, preparing reports on fire suppression for the minister, and fulfilling other duties as required by the Minister.

B.C.'s fire/rescue service is made up of approximately 350 independent departments that are managed by a mix of local governments, societies and improvement districts, and are affected by the policies, decisions and activities of numerous other agencies and organizations, such as the Ministry of Forests and Range (i.e. Protection Branch interface firefighting requirements), Emergency and Health Services Commission (i.e. emergency medical first response) and WorkSafe BC (i.e. Guideline G32.23 – Entry into Buildings).

No single body exists that: coordinates the activities, policies and procedures of these approximately 350 departments; speaks for the fire/rescue service as a whole; or helps the fire/rescue service as a whole improve or move forward. Certain associations do exist that represent a portion of the fire/rescue service (such as the Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C., Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C., Fire Prevention Officers' Association of B.C., B.C. Fire Training Officers' Association and B.C. Professional Fire Fighters Association), and some of these associations participate in task groups, committees and agencies. However, these associations are mandated to represent the views of their members and not the fire/rescue service as a whole.

Resulting issues include:

- Lack of action on emerging issues that require a higher-level, coordinated response (i.e. interoperability between departments, regional service cooperation).
- Lack of proactive and strategic issue-identification and action that could mitigate crises before they occur.
- Lack of common procedures and policies at different departments.
- Uncertainty about liability and compensation for out-of-jurisdiction coverage.
- Lack of a coherent fire/rescue service response to changes/actions by provincial government agencies that affect the service.
- Lack of a forum that other provincial government agencies can approach to address common issues.

Establishing the FSAB

The FSAB board should be chaired by the Fire Commissioner and consist of representatives of stakeholders with operating or governance roles in the fire/rescue system, including associations directly involved in fire/rescue service delivery and local government. The board should be permanent, meet regularly and be appropriately funded. The Office of the Fire Commissioner should provide administration and support services. Please see Appendix D for board size, composition and subcommittee recommendations.

The FSAB would provide critical, system-focused policy leadership for the province-wide fire/rescue system. The Ministry would retain policy-setting authority, while the FSAB would serve in an advisory capacity and undertake initiatives in agreed-upon areas. Specifically, the FSAB would:

- Advise the provincial government on matters affecting fire/rescue service, including seeking ways to build, integrate and sustain fire, rescue and emergency services in the province.
- Identify priorities for changes to the fire/rescue service.
- Advise the provincial government on standards or proposed standards that affect the fire/rescue service.
- Develop guidelines and best practices recommendations for fire departments and local government.
- Develop consistent responses to proposed changes by provincial agencies that affect the fire/rescue service, and develop common, consistent procedures for working with other emergency services providers.
- Make recommendations to the Minister about education and other matters related to sustaining necessary competencies.
- Make recommendations to the Minister about actions and policies to maintain province-wide system viability, sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Provide general advisory assistance to the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

Supporting Evidence

- Section 4 and 5, *Fire Services Act*
- *Analysis of Fire / Rescue Service Gaps in BC*, Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008
- *Report on Benchmarking*, Manitou Incorporated, June 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008

Additional Information

- Appendix D – Support Materials for Recommendation 1

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 2: BROADEN THE MANDATE OF THE OFFICE OF THE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately broaden the mandate of the Office of the Fire Commissioner to reflect the full range of services provided by B.C.'s fire/rescue service.

Problem

The current mandate of the Office of the Fire Commissioner reflects only a small portion of the activities of B.C.'s fire/rescue service.

Key Issues

- The mandate of the Office of the Fire Commissioner has not kept pace with changes to the fire/rescue service in B.C.
- The B.C. fire/rescue service lacks a point of contact pertaining to the full range of activities it performs.
- There is no oversight of all aspects of fire/rescue services provided to British Columbians.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Provides the oversight of all aspects of fire/rescue services provided to British Columbians that is necessary to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the fire/rescue service.

Background

Traditional fire services included structural fire suppression, fire investigation, fire inspections and public education about fire safety. Many departments have added a range of rescue and emergency services over the years in order to meet rising service demand.

The table to the right shows the result of a survey of B.C. fire departments conducted for the Fire Services Liaison Group, showing the percentage of respondents whose departments provide services beyond structural fire suppression.

This growth in services has occurred without changes to the legislative framework for the fire/rescue system, or to the mandate for the Office of the Fire Commissioner. Section 3 of the *Fire Services Act* defines the duties of the Fire Commissioner as:

- Fire prevention and inspection
- Fire suppression
- Providing advice about matters such as the adequacy of water supplies, installation and maintenance of fire alarms, and other “fire” matters.
- Collecting and disseminating information about fires.

| Services Provided | % of Departments |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Public education | 70% |
| Road rescue/automobile extrication | 66% |
| Fire investigations | 60% |
| Emergency medical first responder | 59% |
| Fire inspections | 45% |
| Hazardous materials response | 29% |
| Technical rescue services (incl. high angle, enclosed space, swift water rescue) | 23% |
| Water/ice rescue | 16% |

Source: Survey by Dugal Smith & Associates for the FSLG, 2008

Clearly this definition is no longer relevant in the context of today's fire/rescue service. Implications include:

- There is no central entity responsible for tracking and reporting all activities of the B.C. fire/rescue service.
- The fire/rescue service has no central point of contact with the provincial government for non-fire-related issues and concerns.
- There is no central mechanism for formulating province-wide responses to non-fire issues and challenges.
- There is no mechanism for handling the effectiveness, efficiency and competence of the fire/rescue service.

The advisory/coordination mandate of the OFC should be expanded to address the full range of services provided by the fire/rescue service, and to liaise with other provincial government agencies (i.e. Ministry of Forests and Range, Emergency and Health Services Commission) that make decisions that affect the fire/rescue service.

This change will require an amendment to the *Fire Services Act*. It is expected that the OFC will require additional resources to fulfill its expanded mandate.

Supporting Evidence

- *Survey of fire/rescue departments and local governments*, Fire Service Liaison Group
- Section 3, *Fire Services Act*



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 3: STANDARDIZE COMPETENCIES AND TRAINING STANDARDS

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate immediate action, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board, to clarify and specify training standards for the fire/rescue service, specifically interior firefighting.

Problem

Lack of coordination and enforcement of standards for the fire/rescue service is resulting in inconsistent competency and training levels in B.C.'s departments, placing the public and firefighters at risk and exposing local governments and departments to liability claims.

Key Issues

- There is no enforcement of standards for the B.C. fire/rescue service, and as a result there is no certainty that fire departments meet minimum competency and safety standards. This presents a safety risk to the public and firefighters, and a liability risk for departments and local governments.
- A single agency should be in charge of establishing, monitoring and coordinating the various competency and training standards that apply to B.C.'s fire/rescue service, to ensure a consistent level of service throughout the province.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Works towards providing a consistent level of training and competency for the fire/rescue personnel who protect British Columbian lives and property.

Background

Competency standards establish what firefighters need to know, how they need to be equipped and what they need to do to provide safe and effective fire/rescue services. Mandated standards that apply to the fire/rescue service in B.C. include:

- WorkSafe BC regulations – equipment and competencies regarding operating procedures for providing certain fire suppression services.
- Ministry of Forests and Range – fighting wildfires and interface fires.
- Emergency and Health Services Commission – medical first responder services.
- Motor Vehicle Act – licensing and driving vehicles.
- National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) – the training standards for B.C. fire/rescue personnel, as stipulated by the provincial government (Solicitor General).

Despite the existence of these standards, no single agency in B.C. is in charge of establishing, monitoring or coordinating standards specific to the fire/rescue service. There is no mechanism for ensuring that standards are met for the fire/rescue service, that fire departments are competent and comply with standards, or that the impact of the various standards is assessed and coordinated.

Because there is no enforcement of standards for the fire/rescue service, there is no certainty that fire departments meet minimum competency and safety standards – a safety risk to the public and firefighters, and a liability risk for departments and local governments.

A primary concern is that many volunteer fire departments are not able to meet NFPA training standards (i.e. Fire Fighter I, the implied minimum for interior attacks on burning structures) for all their firefighters, or even the lower Basic Fire Fighting Certification that focuses on the core elements of Fire Fighter I training. (See Recommendation 4.)

Relevant facts:

- The current training standard for B.C. firefighters (as directed by Minister's Order on December 18, 2002) are those published by the National Fire Protection Association. NFPA 1001 – *Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* “identifies the minimum job performance requirements for career and volunteer fire fighters whose duties are primarily structural in nature.”
- Since the minimum standard for firefighter training in NFPA 1001 is Fire Fighter 1, it could be assumed that Fire Fighter I is the minimum competency standard for firefighters in the province. However, this is not the case. Apparently, the Minister's Order has been interpreted to mean that fire departments must train to NFPA 1001 (which means they must employ this material) but are not required to attain any particular competency standard.
- Fire Fighter I is generally accepted as the minimum competency level required for firefighters to undertake an interior attack on a burning structure.
- A Basic Fire Fighter Certification program is being offered across the province to improve volunteer firefighter training. The program contents are based on NFPA Fire Fighter 1, but the course only covers the core elements of the training modules. As a result, it does not bring course participants to Fire Fighter I competencies. Additional training and evaluations (a bridging program) are required for individuals to achieve Fire Fighter I certification.
- An estimated 10 per cent of volunteer firefighters have completed Fire Fighter 1. Fire Fighter I certification requires approximately 250 training hours, not including the recently added hazardous materials (HazMat) operations element. This translates into a training period of three years, if this training takes place once per week. By comparison, Basic Fire Fighting Certification can be attained with 45 training hours.
- The Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C. states that the two major impediments to volunteers training to Fire Fighter I are high cost and limited availability. The association also believes there would be mass volunteer firefighter resignations if the Fire Fighter I competency was mandated at this time.

Action required:

Action is required immediately to address the inconsistencies regarding competency and training in the fire/rescue service, by clarifying and specifying what standards should be in place (particularly for interior firefighting) and by developing a strategy for how competencies can be improved over time.

It is recommended that the provincial government immediately task this issue to the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board (or, in the short-term, appoint a working group of fire/rescue service representatives drawn from management of volunteer and career departments, training officers, local governments and the union).

Once these issues have been addressed, it is recommended that:

- All fire departments focus on ensuring all firefighters attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate, with provincial funding assistance (see Recommendation 4).
- The Fire Services Advisory Board and the Fire Commissioner develop a strategy for improving competencies over an extended transition period (see Recommendation 9).
- The Fire Services Advisory Board set a deadline for all firefighters to attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate. The specific date must take into account the availability of funding and overcoming the impediments to accessing training (see Recommendations 4, 9).

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Benchmarking*, Manitou Incorporated, June 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008

Additional Information

- Appendix E – Support Materials for Recommendation 3
- Recommendation 4 – Support Training, Recruitment and Retention for Volunteer Departments
- Recommendation 9 – Enforce Competency, Training and Operating Standards

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 4: SUPPORT TRAINING, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION FOR VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENTS

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately provide support for training, recruitment and retention for volunteer fire departments in small and rural communities, including:

- Ongoing support for training and training opportunities
- Development of recruitment/retention programs and incentives

Problem

B.C.'s volunteer fire departments lack the resources to meet recognized training standards and to recruit and retain volunteers, placing volunteer firefighters and citizens in small and rural communities across the province at risk.

Key Issues

- B.C.'s small and rural communities are protected by volunteer fire departments, which make up approximately 75 per cent of B.C.'s fire/rescue service.
- B.C.'s volunteer fire departments struggle for funding and are generally unable to meet recognized standards for firefighter training. It is estimated that only 10 per cent of volunteer firefighters have achieved the Fire Fighter I level, generally accepted to be the minimum competency level required for an interior attack on a burning structure.
- B.C.'s small and rural communities are facing a volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention crisis; many volunteer departments are under-strength and finding it difficult to maintain minimum acceptable staffing levels.
- Citizens in small and rural communities are not receiving the same level of firefighting service as those in urban areas.
- The provincial government relies on volunteer fire departments in regional and provincial emergencies.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Ensures all citizens in B.C. are protected by firefighters whose training meets the minimum competency standards for fire/rescue services.
- Ensures B.C.'s volunteer fire departments have the firefighting resources to adequately protect their communities.
- Supports the volunteer departments that protect small and rural communities in B.C.

Background

Approximately 268 volunteer fire departments protect B.C.'s small and rural communities. If a fire or accident occurs outside a major urban centre, the firefighters who respond will almost certainly be volunteers. These volunteer departments are critical to the delivery and maintenance of fire/rescue services across the province, but they are also chronically underfunded, largely due to a limited economic base – a situation aggravated by the declining resource industry and the economic downturn.

Funding is a top issue for fire departments of any size: surveys of B.C. fire departments and local governments identified firefighter training as the number one problem within the fire/rescue service. The funding issue is even more critical for volunteer departments, as they try to keep pace with increasing competency standards, the rising demand for services, a shrinking economic base and increasing difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Training

Training is a major concern for all fire departments, but it is a particular concern for volunteer fire departments. Due to a lack of resources, smaller departments are generally unable to meet recognized standards for training, which places both firefighters and the public at risk. The pressure is increased by more stringent training standards for firefighters, and the need to train and upgrade skills to fill the vacancies caused by the aging workforce.

Top concerns:

- Firefighters and citizens in small and rural communities are being placed at risk because of inadequate training for volunteer firefighters.
- While all fire departments are faced with more stringent training standards (such as the National Fire Prevention Association 1001 standard), volunteer departments already do not have adequate funding to meet the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate level, let alone training to a Firefighter 1 level.
- Training is not easily accessible locally or regionally for most volunteer departments.
- Volunteers are making greater personal sacrifices to be trained. In many cases, volunteers have to pay for travel to attend a training course.
- Volunteer fire departments already face significant recruitment and retention challenges. Increasing training demands will make vacant positions even more difficult to fill.

Provincial support for volunteer firefighter training is warranted for several reasons, including:

- The provincial government relies on volunteer fire departments in regional and provincial emergencies.
- As provincial government fire and rescue services are organized on a province-wide basis (i.e. Ministry of Forests and Range, B.C. Ambulance Service, Provincial Emergency Program.), it's in the interest of the provincial government that all B.C. departments are trained to similar competency standards.
- Firefighting is a trade. There is a well-established body of knowledge firefighters need to learn to be safe and effective. The provincial government should treat this trade like other trades and fund training of volunteer firefighters where standards have been mandated. The provincial trades training system provides a model that could be applied to volunteer firefighter training.

Action required:

Provincial support for small and rural communities should include the following:

- Funding for volunteer firefighter training, including travel expenses, to ensure that all volunteer firefighters obtain at least Basic Fire Fighting Certification.
- Development of training opportunities for rural areas, such as:
 - Expanding the “train the trainer” system – this is a proven successful delivery option (i.e. Basic Fire Fighting Certificate, gas safety, electrical safety), with benefits that include improved access to training, greater in-house capacity, reduced costs and minimized impacts on volunteers.
 - Regional training delivery and mobile training units – would improve access to training, reduce costs, improve interoperability and minimize the impacts on volunteers.
 - E-learning – making greater use of technology to deliver “non-hands-on” training. Benefits would include greater access, lower costs and reduced impact on volunteers.
 - Joint training opportunities – partnering with industry, other departments and other emergency service providers for training, particularly specialized training such as hazardous materials, high angle rescue or auto extrication.
 - Trades training institutions – making use of existing institutions to provide accredited firefighter training.

Recruitment and Retention

Volunteer fire departments in small and rural communities – the largest segment of the B.C. fire service – are facing a recruitment and retention crisis. According to a survey of B.C. fire/rescue departments and local governments, firefighter recruitment and retention were one of the top two most important issues facing departments in small- and medium-sized communities served by volunteers.

Steps must be taken immediately to address recruitment and retention pressures, and create more robust and sustainable volunteer departments. This issue must be addressed before the strains on the system become overpowering or irreparable.

Top concerns:

- Many of volunteer fire departments are under-strength and finding it difficult to maintain minimum acceptable staffing levels, putting citizens and firefighters in small and rural communities at increasing risk.
- This is a North America-wide problem that is mainly caused by factors beyond the control of fire departments, such as the aging workforce and ongoing decline of the economic base. The issue has come to the attention of organizations and jurisdictions such as the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Volunteer and Combined Officer Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the State of Pennsylvania, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, the Province of Alberta and the Province of Saskatchewan.

Targeted programs as well as incentives such as tax breaks and medical benefits are needed. For example, the Province of Nova Scotia provides a refundable tax credit of \$500 for volunteer firefighters, as well as accidental death insurance. In Canada's House of Commons, two private member's bills have been introduced to provide income tax deductions for volunteer emergency workers (Bill C-240 and the more recent Bill C-420 were both at first reading as of summer 2009). At the local level, Grand Forks is considering offering medical, extended medical and dental coverage to its volunteer firefighters as an incentive. Research is needed to evaluate existing incentive programs and concepts in other jurisdictions for their potential application.

Action required:

Provincial support for small and rural communities should include the following:

- Development of volunteer recruitment and retention programs by the Fire Services Advisory Board or other designated agency.
- Development of tax or other incentives to encourage volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention, including considering of incentives for both employers and firefighters.
 - Incentives should be structured to recruit from non-traditional groups.
 - The provincial government should also encourage local governments to offer incentives.

Responsibility

- Provincial government –
 - Funding support small and rural communities in volunteer firefighter training.
 - Development of recruitment/retention programs and incentives.
- Local government – develop incentives for volunteer firefighters.

Supporting Evidence

- Appendix A: Fire/Rescue Departments in British Columbia.
- *Survey of fire/rescue departments and local governments*, Fire Service Liaison Group
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- Nova Scotia Volunteer Firefighters Tax Credit
- Bills C-240 and C-420: *An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (deduction for voluntary emergency service)*

Additional Information

- Recommendation 11: Improve Training Opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 5: IMPROVE THE FIRE INVESTIGATION AND INSPECTION SYSTEM

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund a joint study with the Office of the Fire Commissioner, local governments and the Fire Services Advisory Board on improving the fire investigation and inspection system in British Columbia, with particular attention to the Local Assistant to the Fire Commissioner system.

Problem

Fire inspections and fire investigations are not being conducted in a comprehensive and consistent manner around the province.

Key Issues

- Fire inspections and fire investigations are critical fire prevention services, but both systems need improvement in B.C.
- Many public buildings in unincorporated areas of B.C. do not receive life safety or code inspections by a qualified inspector.
- Qualified fire investigators are not available in a timely manner in communities around the province.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Improves the effectiveness of, and access to, fire prevention services in all areas of the province.

Background

Depending on where you live in British Columbia, fire inspections and investigations may or may not take place in a timely and accurate manner.

Fire Investigations

The *Fire Services Act* provides for Local Assistants to the Fire Commissioner who may carry out fire investigations. However, the act does not specify any technical qualifications or training requirements to act as a Local Assistant.

While the Office of the Fire Commissioner has recommended basic training requirements for fire investigators, the training is inconsistent, and in some cases, not available for Local Assistants. The result is that qualified investigators are not available in a timely manner in communities around the province. Few Local Assistants perform fire investigations.

Fire Inspections

Because the *Fire Services Act* only stipulates that fire inspections are required in municipalities, many public buildings in unincorporated areas in B.C. don't receive life safety or code inspections by a qualified fire inspector.

Additionally, the act does not provide the Office of the Fire Commissioner with the authority to ensure that Local Assistants to the Fire Commissioner, or others who undertake fire inspections, have the necessary training and experience to be effective inspectors.

Not all Local Assistants conduct inspections, and there is an inconsistency between communities in how inspections are conducted.

Joint Study

The study should address:

- Improvements to the Local Assistant to the Fire Commissioner system, to ensure it is effective and efficient province-wide.
- Requirements for minimum standards and training to qualify as a fire investigator or inspector.
- Risk management-based approaches to focusing inspection and investigation resources.
- Life safety and code inspection standards and procedures.
- Ensuring all public buildings are inspected.
- Ensuring fire inspections and investigations occur across the province.
- Options for delivery of inspection and investigation services in small/remote communities, including regional services.
- Liability protection for local governments, fire departments and fire inspectors (where established competency standards are met).
- Options to fund inspections, such as user fees.

Initial priorities should be:

- Extending life safety fire inspections to all schools, hospitals and other public buildings in B.C., and
- Ensuring fire investigations of suspicious fires requested by police are carried out to a high standard.

Supporting Evidence

- Section 36, *Fire Services Act*
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Survey of BC Fire Departments*, Fire Services Liaison Group Fire Inspection Task Force
- *Analysis of Fire/rescue Service Gaps in BC*, Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 6: IDENTIFY AND FILL GAPS IN SERVICE COVERAGE

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General immediately undertake the following initiatives in order to identify and fill service gaps in fire/rescue coverage in B.C.:

- Initiate a study to clarify services and identify gaps in coverage for fire/rescue services in B.C., through the Office of the Fire Commissioner.
- Develop a joint strategy between the fire/rescue service and the Emergency and Health Services Commission to address gaps in medical first responder coverage.
- Make legislative changes that enable local governments to enact fire or building bylaws intended to improve public safety.
- Implement a province-wide public fire education strategy through the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

Problem

Some of the gaps in fire, rescue and emergency coverage that currently exist in B.C. can be prevented by greater cooperation and alternative strategies.

Key Issues

- There is a lack of clarity about what fire, rescue and emergency services are available in different areas of the province, and who is responsible for them.
- There are significant coverage gaps in medical first responder services around B.C., but no province-wide strategy to address the fire/rescue service's role as first responders.
- Fire mitigation strategies such as sprinkler systems can help improve fire protection in areas with limited or no fire/rescue coverage. However, local governments do not have the authority to adopt the necessary fire and building bylaws without provincial approval.
- Public fire education is an effective fire prevention tool, particularly in areas with limited or no fire/rescue coverage. A fire education strategy has been developed but not implemented.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Reduces gaps in fire, rescue and emergency services to British Columbians and encourages the efficient use of public funds.
- Improves the safety of British Columbians in areas without fire departments.

Background

Some gaps in fire, rescue and emergency services are unavoidable in British Columbia, given the considerations of geography, demographics and the variety of service providers. However, many existing gaps may be addressed through cooperation and alternative strategies.

Fire/Rescue Services

While the fire/rescue service provides structural fire suppression services to most British Columbians, there are many areas where services or response times are inadequate or uncertain, including fire investigation and fire inspection services, hazardous materials response and technical rescue services, and road rescue and extraction services in remote areas. The fact that a variety of organizations share responsibility for fire, rescue and emergency services in British Columbia adds to the complexity of this issue (see Appendix F).

In order to identify gaps in coverage, the Office of the Fire Commissioner should collect and publish information on fire/rescue service coverage from local, provincial and federal agencies, as well as other service providers such as road rescue agencies. Ideally this will result in a searchable database for use by the public as well as agencies that provide these services.

Medical First Responders

Emergency medical calls make up the largest category of responses for many B.C. fire departments. A survey of fire departments found that 70 per cent of all departments provide first responder emergency medical service (59 per cent if only volunteer departments are considered). However, there is no province-wide mandate or strategy for the fire/rescue service's role as first responders.

A significant finding of the 2007 report *First Responders: Fire Services and Pre-hospital Emergency Care in British Columbia* – also known as the Cameron Report – found significant coverage gaps in medical first responder services around the province. The report recommended more proactive effort to try to close this gap. The Fire Services Liaison Group supports the Cameron Report and supports the actions of the Emergency and Health Services Commission (EHSC) to put the recommendations into action.

The fire/rescue service (through the Office of the Fire Commissioner and the Fire Services Advisory Board) should work with the EHSC to develop a province-wide medical first responder strategy to fill gaps and promote greater cooperation. This strategy must address appropriate provincial financial support for training and equipment when fire departments deliver these services.

Local Fire Bylaws

While it is not possible to provide fire suppression services to everywhere in B.C. that people live, work and travel, it is possible to improve protection through mitigation strategies (such as sprinkler systems) introduced through local bylaws. However, while many local governments provide fire/rescue services, they lack the authority to enact certain fire or building code bylaws without provincial approval.

The provincial government should make legislative changes that allow local governments to implement sprinkler and other local bylaws intended to improve fire detection, prevention and mitigation in their communities. However, these bylaws should be in addition to the provincial standard, and not detract from the National Fire Code of Canada 2005 standard adopted by regulation under the *Fire Services Act*.

Public Education Strategy

Public education regarding fire risks, prevention and mitigation is a proven mechanism for improving public safety, and can help address gaps in coverage. However, although effective materials have been developed by the Office of the Fire Commissioner and the B.C. Fire and Life Safety (BCFLS) Education Advisory Committee, public education programs are not delivered consistently throughout the province.

The Fire Services Liaison Group strongly endorses the implementation of a province-wide public fire education strategy. The BCFLS education advisory committee has developed a strategic plan for province-wide public education (see Appendix F). This plan should be reviewed by the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board, revised as necessary, and implemented and funded as soon as possible.

Supporting Evidence

- *First Responders: Fire Services and Pre-hospital Emergency Care in British Columbia*, 2007
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Analysis of Fire / Rescue Service Gaps in BC*, Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008
- *Legislation: Fire Services Act, Local Government Act, Community Charter*
- *An Issue Paper Supporting the Automatic Sprinklering of All New Commercial, Residential, Institutional and Industrial Construction*, Fire Chiefs' Association of British Columbia
- *Review of CMHC Report on Costs and Benefits to Municipalities of Mandatory Residential Fire Sprinklers*, Fire Chiefs' Association of British Columbia
- British Columbia Public Fire & Life Safety Education Advisory Committee, Public Education Strategic Plan Update minutes, July 29, 2008

Additional Information

- Appendix F – Support Materials for Recommendation 6

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government, as the level of government in charge of fire departments, clearly has a role to play in improving the fire/rescue service in B.C. These recommendations are specific to local government (which includes municipalities and regional government), although in some cases the need for provincial assistance is noted.

RECOMMENDATION 7: INVESTIGATE LOCAL AND REGIONAL EFFICIENCIES

Recommendation

That local governments and fire departments in B.C. initiate reviews of their operations and services with the goal of achieving efficiencies.

Problem

Local governments and fire departments are facing a variety of significant challenges, most related to fiscal restraints, while demand for service is increasing.

Key Issues

- The fire/rescue service in B.C. must seek regional efficiencies and revisit business models to review services and service levels, in order to cope with fiscal restraints and improve service delivery.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Creates more efficient delivery of fire/rescue services, increasing service-delivery capacity.

Background

Local governments and fire departments of all sizes are facing some significant challenges, among them training, cost control, staffing, “scope creep” and increasing public expectation for service. Additional challenges include lack of usable performance measures and, in some cases, entrenched views about fire department operations and services. Given the ever-increasing fiscal constraints facing local governments and fire departments, it is critical that the fire/rescue service commits itself to seeking efficiencies, both at the department and regional levels.

Most B.C. departments fit within one of three main categories: major metropolitan areas (Vancouver, Victoria), other urban/suburban areas, and rural/smaller communities. Issues and opportunities will differ based on category, location and other considerations.

Potential regional efficiencies to be investigated in all areas should include:

- Automatic aid
- Interoperability
- Shared services (i.e. regional specialty rescue teams)
- Shared resources (i.e. regional training facility)
- Shared support services (i.e. records management, report filing, administration)

The search for potential regional efficiencies should also extend to federal, industrial and First Nations fire services, to consider partnerships for training, resource-sharing, contract services and mutual aid.

At the local level, departments and governments should assess their business models to determine if changes are needed in what services are provided and how they are delivered. Issues could include:

- Changes to the range of fire, rescue and emergency services provided, or to service levels.
- Use of shared or stand-alone support services (i.e. communications and record-keeping).
- Rebalancing resources between fire suppression and fire prevention.
- Adapting department services to match internal competencies with mandated standards.
- Applying risk-management principles to identify areas where resources may need to be relocated.
- Evaluating costs, benefits and liabilities associated with services provided to the provincial government.

The Fire Services Advisory Board should identify opportunities for realizing regional and other efficiencies, as well as cost-containment opportunities, through the establishment of a working group. A grant program such as the Innovations in Fire Service Program could be an effective program to encourage efficiency initiatives.

Responsibility

- Local governments and their fire departments – finding and implementing efficiency improvements.
- Fire Services Advisory Board – work with representatives of local government and the fire/rescue service to identify potential projects.

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Large Fire/Rescue Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, March 2009
- *Identification of Potential Efficiencies and Revenue Enhancements*, J. Gordon Routley, June 2008



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 8: PROVIDE ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TO VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENTS

Recommendation

That local governments, with support from the Office of the Fire Commissioner, ensure volunteer departments within their jurisdiction have the necessary administrative and management support.

Problem

Smaller volunteer fire departments frequently do not have sufficient administration and management resources.

Key Issues

- Volunteer fire departments frequently lack administration and management resources, limiting their ability to effectively and efficiently deliver fire/rescue services.
- Opportunities exist for streamlining, simplifying and using technology to reduce the administrative burden on small departments.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Ensures volunteer departments can focus their efforts on providing fire and rescue services to their communities.

Background

Volunteer fire departments frequently lack administration and management resources, limiting their ability to effectively and efficiently deliver fire/rescue services. These departments make up the largest segment of the fire/rescue service and are under increasing stress. It is critical these departments have the resources and talents needed to be effective and meet their challenges.

Local governments, as the level of government responsible for fire/rescue services, need to provide resources as required. The Office of the Fire Commissioner should work with local governments to help them provide this support, and wherever possible, assist with streamlining, simplifying and promoting the use of technology to reduce the administrative burden.

Responsibility

- Local governments – provide resources to volunteer departments.
- Office of the Fire Commissioner – provide support to local governments.

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services*, 2007, US Fire Administration



Towards Transformation

The six recommendations in this section represent the longer-term work that is required to transform B.C.'s fire/rescue service. They build on the recommendations of the previous section.

This section is directed primarily to the provincial government, but in cases where action by another party is required that is not clearly stated in the recommendation, a Responsibilities section has been added.

As with the previous section, the recommendations are not prioritized. As well, some recommendations require legislative changes, and most will be counter-productive if attempted without additional financial resources from the provincial government.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 9: ESTABLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOR FIRE/ RESCUE SERVICES

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General undertake the following initiatives, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner, to improve accountability and oversight of the B.C. fire/rescue service:

- initiate a transition plan and make the necessary legislative changes to give local governments responsibility for all fire departments within their jurisdiction (except for industrial, federal and First Nation departments), and
- take steps to require local governments to file annual service plans for the fire departments within their jurisdiction.

Problem

Accountability for public safety is not certain in locations where local governments are not responsible for the fire/rescue service provided.

Key Issues

- Giving local governments responsibility for all fire departments will ensure that the fire/rescue service has the appropriate oversight, accountability, more consistent protection levels, and greater opportunities to achieve efficiencies.
- Local governments should file annual service plans and make them available to the public, to provide transparency and accountability about the decisions they make about fire/rescue services.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Ensures the fire/rescue service across B.C. is accountable and provides more consistent protection levels.
- Improves public awareness of services available in their jurisdiction and/or other areas of the province they visit.

Background

Several types of jurisdictions currently provide fire/rescue services in B.C., including local government (which include municipalities and regional districts), improvement districts, societies contracted to local government, and autonomous societies. *Industrial, federal and First Nation fire departments also provide services but are not included in this recommendation.*

In areas where the local government is not responsible for providing the service, issues can include: lack of interoperability, lack of accountability, funding uncertainties, varying protection levels, varying competencies, and lack of oversight. To address these issues, the Fire Services Liaison Group recommends that – after a transition period of at least five years – local governments assume responsibility for all fire departments within their jurisdiction.

The largest impact of this recommendation will be to autonomous societies and improvement district departments that currently provide fire/rescue services. Local governments will exercise their authority and determine what, if any, services they choose to provide, and how those services are structured and organized. It is not necessary that the local governments take over the service; they may choose to contract the service from other jurisdictions, societies or First Nations departments. But ultimately, the local government will be responsible for the services of any fire department in its jurisdiction.

Implementation of this recommendation will require an amendment to the *Fire Services Act* and development of a transition plan to address the issues and challenges that will arise. It is recommended that the Office of the Fire Commissioner, with advice from the Fire Services Advisory Board, develop a transition plan that includes policies for dealing with unrecognized service providers after the transition period, or providers that don't meet provincially-mandated training or other standards.

A transition period of five years or more will be required to permit restructuring of improvement district and autonomous departments and upgrade the capabilities of departments that do not meet mandated standards.

Service Plans

It is recommended that local governments be required to annually publish service plans of the fire departments within their jurisdiction. Service plans improve the transparency of decisions by local governments regarding whether or not to provide fire and rescue services, and the level of service to be provided. They also ensure the public can access information about their fire department that will allow them to better evaluate if the service levels and capabilities are appropriate for their community.

Fire department service plans should be developed as a component of the local emergency response plans. Details such as services provided, service zones, response times, funding, major risks, interoperability measures and standards compliance will be included (see Appendix G for further details). It is recommended that the Office of the Fire Commissioner, with advice from the Fire Services Advisory Board, develop templates and checklists.

The public should have the opportunity to comment on the service plans as part of the local government's existing public process during the budgeting cycle. In addition, local governments should report on their performance against the service plans in an annual report, as contemplated by the *Community Charter*. The Office of the Fire Commissioner and the Fire Services Advisory Board should encourage methods that make these reports accessible to the public.

Responsibility

- Provincial government – mandating fire department responsibility to local governments.
- Office of the Fire Commissioner/Fire Services Advisory Board – developing a transition plan and service plan templates/checklists.

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Managing Changes to Local Government Structure in British Columbia: A Review and Program Guide*, Ministry of Community Development, October 2000
- *Improvement District Conversion Guide*, Ministry of Community Development, 2005
- *Report on Benchmarking*, Manitou Incorporated, June 2008
- *Audit Checklist*, Office of the Fire Commissioner

Additional Information

- Appendix G: Support Materials for Recommendation 9

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 10: UPDATE COMPENSATION AGREEMENTS FOR SERVICES TO PROVINCIAL AGENCIES

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund a joint study with local governments, the Local Government Management Association and the Union of B.C. Municipalities to review and update:

- the tariffs paid to fire departments for services provided to provincial agencies, and
- the requirement for fire departments to receive pre-authorization from the Provincial Emergency Program to be compensated for calls outside their service areas.

Problem

The current compensation structure for fire departments providing out-of-jurisdiction services to provincial agencies does not cover the full costs of providing these services, and also requires pre-authorization from the Provincial Emergency Program. This is a disincentive for departments to provide out-of-jurisdiction services.

Key Issues

- Fire departments are not being fully compensated for providing services to provincial agencies.
- The current requirement to receive pre-authorization from the Provincial Emergency Program increased fire departments response time.
- Registered and certified fire departments (see Recommendation 8), having met the provincially-required competency and training standards, should be considered “trusted service providers” and therefore should not be required to obtain pre-authorization to receive compensation for provincial calls.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Encourages fire departments to continue to provide, or even expand, protective services in areas under provincial jurisdiction.
- Helps improve response times.

Background

Fire departments provide services to a variety of provincial government agencies, including the Provincial Emergency Program, the Ministry of Forests and Range, the Emergency and Health Services Commission, and others. The provincial government compensates fire departments for providing some of these services using different tariffs depending on the service provided, the duration and the agency.

An inter-agency working group has updated the tariff for incidents when the Office of the Fire Commissioner deploys fire apparatus and crews in response to provincial emergencies. However, the tariffs for the Provincial Emergency Program or Ministry of Forests and Range have yet to be updated, and the current rates do not always cover fire department out-of-pocket costs. Further, they have not been structured to cover the full costs of providing the services – the full operating costs plus a contribution to the capital costs.

How compensation is triggered is another issue. Currently, the Provincial Emergency Program compensates fire departments for responding in areas of provincial jurisdiction for road rescue and other specified emergencies, but departments need pre-authorization before responding in order to be compensated. However, if fire departments are certified and registered (as recommended in Recommendation 8), they will have met the provincially required competency and training standards, and should be considered “trusted service providers” that do not require pre-authorization to receive compensation.

The joint study between the provincial government, local governments and Union of B.C. Municipalities should:

- Focus primarily on areas served by volunteer departments, which provide the majority of service to provincial government agencies (other than medical first responder service).
- Review and revise compensation levels to cover the full cost of providing the service.
- Consider if the provision of services to provincial agencies is contributing to the stress levels being experienced by the volunteer sector, and if so, how that can be alleviated.
- Consider how the fee structure may be used to encourage fire departments to provide expanded coverage where risk analysis indicates this is necessary.
- Consider removing the pre-authorization requirement through the Provincial Emergency Program for departments that are registered and certified.

The results of the joint study should form the basis for ensuring the relationships are appropriately beneficial to both parties for each service.

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Local Fire/rescue services Provided to Provincial Agencies*, Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 11: IMPROVE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate projects intended to improve access to firefighter training and to provide leadership training for the B.C. fire/rescue service. The Office of the Fire Commissioner should lead the projects.

Problem

Many B.C. fire departments, especially those in small communities, have significant problems accessing the training required to safely protect the public. Further, there is no systematic process to develop leadership and management skills in the fire/rescue service.

Key Issues

- B.C. fire departments and local governments have identified firefighter training as one of their top challenges. For volunteer departments, common issues include access, costs and lack of consistency of training across the province.
- At a time when the B.C. fire/rescue service is facing significant challenges – particularly in the volunteer sector – there is no systematic process in place to develop leadership and management skills.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Improves access by B.C. firefighters to training that enables them to competently provide fire and rescue services.
- Ensures fire departments have the leadership and management they require to address challenges and protect the public.

Background

In recent surveys, fire departments and local governments listed firefighter training as one of the two most important challenges facing the fire/rescue service, along with recruitment and retention. The survey indicated that 65 per cent of volunteer departments were concerned about access, costs, and the lack of consistency of training across the province.

Fire department training requirements became more stringent in 2002 with the provincial government's adoption of the National Fire Protection Association's NFPA 1001 – *Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications.* In addition, other standards have been instituted by various provincial government agencies for interface firefighting, medical first response and other services provided by the fire/rescue service. It is anticipated that fire training standards will continue to be raised in the coming years.

In order to improve training delivery around the province, the Fire Training Officers' Association of B.C. (jointly with the Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C., the Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C. and the Justice Institute) has developed a Basic Fire Fighting Certificate program. This is not a sustainable long-term solution, however, as the certification is not equal to the NFPA 1001's Fire Fighter I level for interior firefighting, and it is being delivered on a one-time basis.

The Fire Services Liaison Group strongly supports a project launched by the Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) to identify and define the problems of the fire/rescue training delivery system, specifically the impediments to access.

Building on this work, the OFC should undertake a joint project with the Fire Services Advisory Board and the Fire Training Officers' Association of B.C. to propose changes to the training delivery system, to:

- Ensure firefighters receive training that permits them to meet minimum competency standards established by the provincial government (see Recommendation 3 and 12).

- Reduce the per-trainee costs for training.
- Improve the accessibility across the province of training to meet mandated standards.

Leadership and Management

The issue of training extends to the management level. A number of U.S. studies, such as those by the U.S. Fire Administration and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, have found that developing leadership and management skills is a critical issue for small, volunteer departments.

In B.C., there is no systematic process to develop leadership and management skills in the fire/rescue service. This is a significant concern – particularly for smaller volunteer departments, which face additional challenges and have a smaller talent pool available to them.

The Fire Services Advisory Board should identify courses and programs needed to develop leadership and management skills for fire departments. This will assist in the development of in-house leadership – which tends to have a greater success record – and the skills necessary to deal with recruitment, retention, succession planning, records management and other challenges.

Potential sources for information include the NFPA Fire Officers program, fire officer training programs offered by provincial institutions, and the Australian Fire Authorities Council’s Fire Officer Program, Volunteer Fire Officer Leadership course and Executive Development Program.

Other considerations:

- Separate leadership development programs are needed for career and volunteer departments. For example, a focus on risk management for smaller departments is recommended. The BC Firefighter Training Officers’ Association has proposed a Risk Management Fire Officer Program for rural areas.
- “Train the trainer” models have proven success, improve access to training, and are cost-effective.
- Program delivery options should include all accredited training institutions in B.C. (i.e. ProBoard Fire Service Professional Qualifications System, International Fire Service Accreditation Congress).

The Fire Services Advisory Board should encourage firefighters interested in management and leadership positions to obtain the prescribed training, and local governments should provide funding for this purpose.

Supporting Evidence

- *Fire Services Liaison Group Diversity/Recruitment/Retention Task Group report, 2008*
- *Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services – Challenges and Solutions, US Fire Administration, May 2007*
- *The Blue Ribbon Report – Preserving and Improving the Future of the Volunteer Fire Service, International Association of Fire Chiefs, March 2004*
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008*
- *Report on Issues Facing Large Fire/Rescue Departments, Dugal Smith & Associates, March 2009*
- *Survey of fire/rescue departments and local governments, Fire Service Liaison Group*

Responsibility

- Office of the Fire Commissioner: identify problems of training delivery system.
- Fire Services Advisory Board: identify courses/programs needed to develop leadership and management skills.
- Local government: provide funding for firefighters interested in management and leadership training.

Additional Information

- Recommendation 4: Support Training and Recruitment for Volunteer Fire Departments

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 12: ENFORCE COMPETENCY, TRAINING & OPERATING STANDARDS

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate the development of a strategy for improving firefighter competencies over an extended transition period, including a deadline for all volunteer firefighters in B.C. to attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate, and mandatory fire department registration and certification. This work should be conducted by the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board. Voluntary registration and certification should also be offered to federal, private, First Nations and other fire services providers.

Problem

There are significant problems ensuring all B.C. fire departments meet the competency standards necessary to protect the safety of the public and firefighters.

Key Issues

- The fire/rescue service believes the minimum mandatory training standard for all firefighters in B.C. should eventually be the National Fire Protection Association 1001 standard's Fire Fighter I for interior firefighting, but imposing this policy now would create extreme hardship for many volunteer departments.
- It is vital that departments that cannot meet minimum competency standards be given the time and resources to develop the necessary competencies. Enforcement of competency standards must be accompanied by funding to assist volunteer departments in meeting the standards.
- Registration and certification can help ensure departments meet the necessary standards.
- Voluntary registration/certification by other fire services providers – such as federal (i.e. airport, Department of National Defense), First Nations and private (i.e. industrial) – would help provide a network of resources in areas of the province that lack the resources to address specific emergency situations (i.e. working more closely with industrial hazardous materials teams and First Nations wildland firefighters).

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Ensures firefighters have the training, leadership and equipment necessary to provide competent fire and rescue services to British Columbians.
- Enables partnerships with First Nations and other fire service providers that would improve fire services in areas of the province with more limited fire service capabilities.

Background

The fire/rescue service believes the minimum mandatory training standard for all firefighters in B.C. should eventually be the National Fire Protection Association 1001 standard's Fire Fighter I for interior firefighting. However, it recognizes that imposing this policy would create extreme hardship for volunteer departments and exacerbate their recruitment/retention problems.

A more immediate goal is for all volunteer firefighters in B.C. to attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate. The Office of the Fire Commissioner and the Fire Services Advisory Board should be tasked with developing a strategy for improving firefighter competencies over an extended transition period, including a deadline for all volunteer firefighters in B.C. to attain the Basic Fire Fighting Certificate and mandatory fire department registration and certification. Any deadline would need to take into account the availability of funding and the impediments to accessing training faced by volunteer departments.

Over time, the fire/rescue service expects that volunteer departments will train increasing portions of their firefighters to the full Fire Fighter I standard.

To achieve the envisioned quality of service, the Fire Services Liaison Group proposes that over the long term, a set of training and operating standards should be developed and enforced for fire and rescue services. This specifically would cover minimum standards for four core services: exterior firefighting, interior firefighting, emergency medical first responder and road rescue/automobile extrication. Please see Appendix H for the expected format to be used to specify competency standards.

The Fire Services Liaison Group expects that, over time, standards for other fire and rescue services will be developed and implemented, based on the recommendations of the Fire Commissioner working with the Fire Services Advisory Board.

It is vital that departments that cannot meet minimum competency standards be given the time and resources to develop the necessary competencies. In particular, the volunteer departments need support to ensure firefighters and incident commanders have the necessary skills to safely and effectively operate. Without this leadership, implementing any mandatory standard could force departments to curtail services or even cease operations. In the interim, fire departments may have to revisit the service levels provided in their communities to avoid liability and ensure firefighter safety.

Mandatory competency standards should not be implemented until it can be demonstrated that the needed improvements in training and competencies in fire departments across the province have taken effect, and a solid fire/rescue system foundation is effectively in place.

Enforcement

Enforcement of standards should be the responsibility of either the Office of the Fire Commissioner, or an independent authority established by the provincial government. Given that some departments may not be willing or able to meet the mandated standards, policies must be defined to determine what actions should be followed with respect to non-compliant departments.

However, enforcement should not be implemented if new resources are not provided to ensure that small departments can meet the standards. In fact, without funding for and access to training to meet the standards, this recommendation should *not* be implemented.

The transition to these standards will require a number of years to achieve and must not be enforced until properly funded remediation training has been completed. The result, however, will be improved competency and public safety.

Registration and Certification

Registration and certification of departments will assist with ensuring adherence to standards. In the short-term, all B.C. departments (excluding First Nations, industrial and federal departments) should be required to register with the Office of the Fire Commissioner. Methods to encourage registration and to discourage non-compliance should be developed, including potential incentives for voluntary registration. Voluntary registration by First Nations, industrial and federal departments should be encouraged to enable partnerships and opportunities for services and support in areas of B.C. with limited fire services.

Details required for initial registration should include a list of the fire, rescue and other emergency services provided by the department, information about firefighters and their level of training, an inventory of major equipment and apparatus, and contact information.

When the fire/rescue service transitions to mandatory competency standards, all B.C. departments should be required to obtain and maintain certification by the Office of the Fire Commissioner or a standards enforcement authority. Please see Appendix H for certification details. It is important to note that local government will be responsible for ensuring that a fire department meets the minimum competency standards to obtain certification. As well, a reasonable period must be provided for departments to make any changes needed for certification.

Supporting Evidence

- *Report on Benchmarking*, Manitou Incorporated, June 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008

Additional Information

- Appendix H – Support Materials for Recommendation 12
- Recommendation 3 – Standardize Competencies and Training Standards



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 13: RESEARCH AND DEVELOP BEST PRACTICES

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General direct the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board to research trends and issues, and to develop, publish and promote best practices guidelines for fire and rescue services, including information specific to volunteer departments.

Problem

No organization is tasked with researching fire, emergency and rescue trends, issues and best practices, or with developing a fact-base for effective decision-making, and there is no systematic process to share best practices in the B.C. fire/rescue service. Further, small departments lack the capacity to effectively address the demographic, technical and other trends affecting their services.

Key Issues

- No fact-base of trends, issues and best practices exists to assist local governments and the fire/rescue service, particularly small departments, in effective decision-making.
- No quantitative risk-evaluation model exists to guide decisions on priorities and service levels.
- The volunteer sector, which makes up approximately 75 per cent of B.C.'s fire/rescue service, requires support to address the trends and issues that affect its services.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Ensures local governments and fire departments of all sizes are aware of trends, best practices and other issues to support effective decision-making and improved service delivery.

Background

No organization is currently tasked with researching fire and fire-related trends and issues to develop a fact-base for effective decision-making, and there is no process for sharing best practices between departments in the B.C. fire/rescue service. In particular, volunteer departments face unique challenges and lack the resources to effectively address the demographic, technical and other trends affecting their services.

The Office of the Fire Commissioner and the Fire Services Advisory Board should identify topics to research and develop best practice guidelines for the fire/rescue service. It should also identify existing sources of best practices information, such as the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, the Institute of Fire Engineering – Canada, the Volunteer and Combined Officers Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Fire Protection Association, or the U.S. Fire Administration.

Priorities should include:

- Identification of a risk assessment/risk management methodology, to work towards development of a quantitative risk-evaluation model to guide decisions on priorities and service levels.
- Identification and tracking of issues and best practices specific to volunteer departments, in particular, recruitment and retention.

Supporting Evidence

- *Survey of fire/rescue departments and local governments*, Fire Service Liaison Group
- Section 3, *Fire Services Act*
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION 14: IMPROVE INTEROPERABILITY IN THE FIRE/RESCUE SERVICE

Recommendation

That the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General initiate and fund, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board, initiatives to promote greater interoperability within the fire/rescue service.

Problem

A number of barriers limit the ability of B.C. fire departments to act cooperatively.

Key Issues

- With approximately 350 departments that each operate as a stand-alone entity, the B.C. fire/rescue service currently has limited interoperability, coordination and information-sharing.
- The fire/rescue service needs to fully embrace the need to improve interoperability.
- A variety of interoperability opportunities should be studied, including recommended practices for small- and medium-sized departments, the sharing of fire service information, improved communications and information management, liability coverage for out-of-jurisdiction work, and joint purchasing.

How this Recommendation Improves Public Safety

- Greater interoperability will allow fire departments to act cooperatively to protect lives and property, and to effectively support the Provincial Emergency Program during regional or provincial emergencies.

Background

British Columbia's approximately 350 fire departments each operate as a stand-alone entity in regard to services, policies, standards, equipment and performance. The result is a fragmented system with limited interoperability, coordination and information-sharing.

Commonly cited barriers to interoperability are listed to the right. The understanding of these impediments is based on anecdotal information. The Fire Services Advisory Board should, with the support of the Office of the Fire Commissioner, undertake a project to define, characterize and assess the main barriers to improving interoperability within the fire/rescue service, and between the fire/rescue service and other emergency service providers.

More generally, the fire/rescue service needs to fully embrace the need to improve interoperability. The Fire Services Advisory Board needs to provide leadership in this area, and, beyond the identification of barriers, should also explore opportunities for greater interoperability.

Working groups can be struck to conduct research and develop recommendations on opportunities such as:

- **Recommended practices for small- and medium-sized departments** – including standard operating procedures, incident command, equipment and apparatus, and firefighter training. Currently, no such recommended practices exist.

Commonly cited barriers to interoperability:

- Incompatible equipment and apparatus
- Inconsistent operating procedures
- Lack of confidence in the competency standards of other departments
- Lack of clearly defined incident command procedures
- Incompatible communications systems
- Liability concerns for service provided outside a department's service area
- Liability concerns relating to reduced service levels within the service area if personnel and equipment are dispatched to support another department
- Labour relations considerations
- Policies of local governments
- Lack of understanding of the need for interoperability by government bodies
- Lack of consistent funding for fire departments
- Additional costs to provide mutual aid

- **Fire service information** – improving the provision, availability and exchange of reliable data about fire resources and activities around the province. Inconsistent reporting by B.C. departments means that no reliable data is currently available about fire incidents, equipment inventory or non-fire services. Opportunities to improve timeliness, completeness and accuracy of information should be explored, and further, the FSAB should work to educate departments on the benefits of providing information.
- **Communications and information management** – including improved communications between departments and with other emergency services providers via Computer Aided Dispatch, radio, a common Records Management System and dispatch. Over time, radio systems should migrate to require interoperability within the fire/rescue service and with police agencies, the B.C. Ambulance Service, and B.C. Forest Service. (See Appendix I for more details.)
- **Equipment standardization and joint purchasing** – including development of a recommended practice for standard equipment for smaller departments that local governments can refer to when making equipment acquisitions. The Fire Services Liaison Group believes there are significant opportunities to achieve per-unit cost reductions if fire departments pooled their purchasing power. A cooperative (or alternative legal entity) could be established to negotiate large-volume purchases for departments regionally or province-wide. The focus on a joint-purchasing initiative should be on small- to medium-sized departments, where the need for savings is most urgent, and where there may be more opportunities to standardize equipment.
- **Improved liability protection** – to ensure that fire departments, their personnel, and local government should be protected against liability claims or actions arising from good faith performance of their functions, duties or powers, particularly when providing out-of-jurisdiction services. Currently, liability concerns are limiting the willingness of local governments and fire departments to provide fire, rescue and other emergency services outside of their service areas. Liability protection should be restructured to encourage mutual aid and interoperability and to reduce coverage gaps. (See Appendix I for more details.)

Based on the results of this analysis, the Fire Commissioner and the Fire Services Advisory Board should encourage local governments and fire departments to undertake interoperability projects that have substantial potential benefits based on the effort required, and a high probability of success.

Supporting Evidence

- *Communications Issues Review*, Dave Mitchell & Associates, 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Small Fire Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, April 2008
- *Identification of Potential Efficiencies and Revenue Enhancements*, J. Gordon Routley, June 2008
- *Report on Issues Facing Large Fire/Rescue Departments*, Dugal Smith & Associates, March 2009
- *Analysis of Fire/Rescue Service Gaps in B.C.*, Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008
- *Firestorm 2003 Provincial Review*, the Honourable Gary Filmon P.C., O.M.
- *Fire Loss Reporting Manual*, Office of the Fire Commissioner
- *Report on Fire and Emergency Services Liability*, Dugal Smith & Associates, August 2008
- *Report on Benchmarking*, Manitou Incorporated, June 2008

Additional Information

- Appendix I – Support Materials for Recommendation 14

Conclusion

It will not be an easy task to transform B.C.'s fire/rescue service. The fragmented manner in which the service has evolved has contributed to many of the challenges it faces today, and will continue to be an obstacle in the face of any changes. Attitudes and practices are entrenched, resources are limited and cooperation is poor. Further, the success of the fire/rescue service to date makes the case for change more difficult.

But transformation must happen. The world is not the same place it was when these departments began, one by one, to provide services to their communities; the traditional approaches and tactics are simply not adequate to address the challenges and demands of today and tomorrow. There is no question that without change, the level of protection the fire/rescue service can provide to British Columbians will erode.

Transformation will require a commitment from the provincial government, from local governments and from fire departments. All parties involved must now take responsibility for their role in revitalizing a public safety resource that is of vital importance to all British Columbians.



Appendix

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APPENDIX A: FIRE DEPARTMENTS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

A. Fire Departments by Type

| Type | Ownership | Direction | Funding | Estimated Number (1) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Large municipal fire department (career staff) | Incorporated local government (population over 25,000) | CAO/Council | Local taxes | 27 |
| 2. Medium municipal fire department (career/volunteer staff) | Incorporated local government (population 4,000 to 24,199) | CAO/Council | Local taxes | 57 |
| 3. Small municipal fire department (volunteer staff) | Incorporated local government (pop. under 4,000) | CAO/Council | Local taxes | 76 |
| 4. Regional district fire department (i.e. RDKB Fire Dept.) | Regional District | CAO/Regional District Board | Local taxes set by Regional District | 20 (2) |
| 5. Unincorporated community fire department (i.e. Fanny Bay Fire Dept.) | Society which contracts services to the Regional District | CAO/Regional District Board | Local taxes set by Regional District and society | 50 (2) |
| 6. Unincorporated community fire department (Likely fire and rescue service) | Society/Resort (e.g., Sun Peaks) | Society/Resort | Local fundraising, grants and possibly Regional District grants in aid | 67 (2) |
| 7. Local fire improvement district (i.e. Union Bay Fire Department) | Improvement District | Improvement District/Electoral Area Directors (Independent of Regional District) | Local taxes set by Improvement District | 40 (2) |
| 8. First Nations | First Nations | First Nations | Band Council | 82 (3) |
| 9. Airport/Canadian Forces Base (i.e. CFB Comox) | Federal or local government | Federal or local government | Federal or local government | 6 |
| 10. Industrial fire dept. (i.e. Fording Coal) | Corporation | Corporation | Corporation | 20 |
| 11. Unincorporated community fire dept. (not operational, seasonal or below standard) | Society | Society | Local fundraising and grants | 15 (2) |
| | | | Total | 460 |

(1) There is no reliable data on the number of B.C. fire departments. (2) Estimated by the consultant.

(3) Approximately 40% of B.C. First Nations have fire departments. The research did not address how well equipped these departments are.

B. Number of Fire Departments by Category (4)

The B.C. fire service is comprised of the following components:

| Category | Estimated Number |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| Medium to large urban departments (5) | 84 |
| Small community departments (6) | 268 |
| Subtotal | 352 |
| First Nations departments | 82 |
| Airport fire departments | 6 |
| Industrial fire departments | 20 |
| Total | 460 |

(4) There is no exact count of the number of fire departments in B.C. These numbers are estimated based on research conducted in early 2008 using department listings developed by the Office of the Fire Commissioner, Union of B.C. Municipalities and Fire Services Liaison Group member associations

(5) Categories 1 and 2 from Table A

(6) Categories 3 to 7 and 11 from Table A

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The following financial and statistical data has been used to calculate the numbers used in this report.

| Financial and Demographic Information and Analysis | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| B.C. population (2006 census) | 4,113,500 |
| Office of the Fire Commissioner annual budget | \$2.5 million |
| Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) payments to fire departments in 2007/2008 (1) | \$235,000 |
| Ministry of Forests and Range (MOF) payments to fire departments in 2007/2008 (2) | \$15,000 |
| Fire departments in B.C. (3) | 350 |
| Provincial insurance premium tax revenues | \$375 million |
| B.C. Ambulance budget, 2007/2008 | \$283 million |
| Calculations | |
| Office of the Fire Commissioner annual budget per capita | \$0.61 |
| Office of the Fire Commissioner annual budget per fire department | \$7,143 |
| PEP and MOF payments per fire department per year | \$714 |
| PEP and MOF payments for fire/rescue services per capita | \$0.06 |
| Provincial insurance premium tax revenue per capita | \$91.17 |
| B.C. Ambulance budget per capita | \$68.79 |

(1) PEP paid \$350,000 to fire departments and to highway rescue societies. It has been assumed fire departments received two-thirds of these payments.

(2) This is a rough estimate. MOF has not been able to provide data. Many fire departments do not bill MOF for their services.

(3) Refer to Appendix A. Number is approximate.

APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL FIRE/RESCUE SERVICE BACKGROUND

B.C.'s Fire/Rescue Service

There are approximately 350 community-based fire departments throughout B.C. (see Appendix A) that collectively employ about 4,000 career firefighters and 10,000 volunteer firefighters. (This count excludes 108 airport, First Nations and industrial fire departments). About 180 of these fire departments are based in municipalities and regional districts.

The remaining 170 fire departments operate in small, unincorporated communities under the direction of improvement districts and societies. There is no mandatory legislative requirement for a community to have a fire department, and essentially all decisions relating to fire service operations are made at the community level.

Most of the province is covered by small volunteer fire departments. Their funding is frequently tight and these departments find it challenging to deliver required training. Most small fire departments are also finding it difficult to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. This is caused by many factors including: declining volunteerism, call-out and training time demands, growing requirements for volunteers to work out of town, declining employment in resource-dependent communities, and the significant risks and responsibilities required of firefighters.

Each volunteer firefighter saves the local community and the provincial government significant costs each year. This means that residents, community leaders, administrators and the provincial government should pay close attention to the needs and issues facing volunteers.

The provincial government utilizes highway rescue, first responder and interface fire services provided by fire departments across the province. Fire departments frequently operate outside their specified area at the request of the Provincial Emergency Program, the Ministry of Forests and Range, the B.C. Ambulance Service and the RCMP. The Provincial Emergency Program and Ministry of Forests and Range provide compensation for call responses that they authorize. The provincial government has also built fire/rescue resources into its planning for large-scale emergency events, but with limited consultation with local government and no funding to improve local fire service resources and interoperability.

Fire services come under the umbrella of the Office of the Fire Commissioner, which is part of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. The Ministry's vision is to make the province the safest place to live in Canada. The fire/rescue service's vision is fully aligned with that of the Ministry. The primary roles of the Office of the Fire Commissioner are to oversee fire safety legislation, fire investigations and fire inspections, to collect fire incident data and to coordinate major fire emergency response. The Office of the Fire Commissioner has very limited field operations.

In regard to emergency responses (i.e. excluding fire prevention and investigation activities), fire departments generally deal with 10 per cent fire calls, 50 per cent or more first responder and rescue calls, and 40 per cent other requests. The Office of the Fire Commissioner deals solely with fire issues – a small proportion of what fire/rescue departments do – thus has a limited role related to operations within the B.C. fire/rescue service.

Essentially, all costs of fire/rescue services are borne by local residents either through tax funding or donations. The provincial government collects approximately \$375 million annually from the Insurance Premium Tax, a tax on property and other insurance premiums and this money goes to general revenues. Originally, some of this tax was intended to support the fire/rescue service. Today, the provincial government spends approximately 67¢ per capita on the Office of the Fire Commissioner and the fire/rescue service (See Attachment 2). In comparison, the provincial government spends \$68.79 per capita for the provincial ambulance service.

Views from B.C. Communities

The Fire Services Liaison Group undertook a survey of both local governments and fire departments to identify and prioritize their key issues. Completed questionnaires were received from more than 175 fire departments

and 67 local governments, a greater than 35 per cent response rate for both groups. The three aspects consistently seen as challenges above all other issues are listed to the right.

Strikingly, municipalities and regional districts completely agree with fire departments in identifying these as the “big 3” challenges facing the fire/rescue service.

Other issues the fire/rescue service also considered to be important:

- Increasing demand for services/growing call volumes
- Lack of support from the provincial government/underfunding of the Office of the Fire Commissioner
- Unrealized opportunities for regional efficiencies, cooperation, partnering, sharing of resources, interoperability
- Service gaps/coverage gaps
- Provision of services that are the responsibility of other agencies
- Issues related to liability and legal requirements

The survey also identified these important issues:

- Inadequate capital funding/equipment replacement, high cost of capital equipment
- Code enforcement/investigations
- Outdated/inadequate legislation
- Issues related to medical first responder/specialty rescue
- Interface fires/wildfires

This survey clearly demonstrates that both local governments and fire departments agree that there are significant issues facing the fire/rescue service and that changes are needed to ensure that public safety is protected.

Challenges

To clarify and more tightly define the problems that need to be addressed, the Fire Services Liaison Group created a number of task groups composed of fire/rescue service and local government stakeholders from around the province to define the problems and identify potential solutions. This “bottom-up” analysis was complemented by several directed studies by experts from around North America in critical aspects of fire/rescue service operations and management. This work identified eight key areas that must be addressed, listed to the right.

The following sections explain these issues in more detail.

1. Responsibility for Fire and Rescue Services

There are 350 independent fire departments in B.C. that are directed and funded by their respective communities. Each department operates as a stand-alone entity in regard to services, policies, standards, equipment and performance.

The types and levels of fire/rescue services provided are decided at the local level by the elected representatives of the residents who pay for the services. There are no specific, clear, objective guidelines that stipulate what services are needed to protect lives and property. As a result, some very small communities provide no services at all, some

Top issues for B.C. fire departments

- 1. Training:** Many departments, but particularly those that are small and staffed by volunteers, are experiencing significant difficulty getting affordable and accessible training at consistent standards for firefighters.
- 2. Volunteer staffing:** Recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters was a significant problem for every small- and medium-sized department surveyed.
- 3. Funding:** Many factors are increasing the costs of fire/rescue services and creating budget pressures on fire departments. Many communities are experiencing funding pressures and are having difficulties meeting these cost pressures and maintaining fire service resources at needed levels.

Eight key areas to be addressed for B.C.'s fire/rescue service

1. Responsibility for fire and rescue services
2. The need to improve governance of B.C.'s fire/rescue service
3. Fire/rescue service gaps
4. The challenge of province-wide competency standards
5. Inadequate fire/rescue service information for effective decision-making
6. Operational implications of independent fire departments
7. Budget pressures
8. Heavy stress on the volunteer sector

communities provide basic services, and others provide a broad range of fire and rescue services. However, there are no accepted guidelines about what services to provide and what service levels are appropriate.

This situation has arisen, mainly, because fire and rescue services are community-based. Each community has determined what services it wants, or can afford, based on local needs and priorities. Contributing to this situation is the ongoing expansion of the role of fire departments. Traditionally, “fire departments” put out fires, investigated fires and performed fire inspections, but over time, departments began to provide more rescue and emergency services.

There are certain consequences that result from the lack of clarity about what services fire departments should provide. The fire/rescue service as a whole does not provide consistent protection levels around the province. There is no assurance that, when comparing communities, similar service levels or protection are provided even if the same service is provided. In view of this, the Fire Services Liaison Group considered if there should be guidelines or even requirements regarding the specific fire/rescue services that should be provided. The Fire Services Liaison Group concluded that fire departments must continue to be responsible to local community priorities and needs. This community-driven decision-making, combined with the fact that fire departments are funded by their communities, means that decisions about the types and levels of services must rest with the community.

However, it must be recognized that although the decision to provide or not provide a particular service should remain “permissive”, once a community has decided to provide a service, compliance with the specific mandatory standards associated with that service is not optional. In considering this, the Fire Services Liaison Group concluded there needs to be greater transparency regarding decisions to provide, or not provide, fire and rescue services. Community members need to be able to easily access information and understand decisions regarding the services provided and the basis on which decisions have been made.

Other consequences that result from community-level decision-making about types and levels of services include gaps in service provision and limitations on joint action between departments. These aspects are covered later in this section.

2. The Need to Improve Governance of B.C.’s Fire/rescue Service

While individual fire departments have a clear chain-of-command with clearly defined decision-making, B.C.’s fire/rescue service does not have any means of collectively addressing province-wide issues.

The *Fire Services Act* creates a “Fire Commissioner” with a province-wide mandate, but this mandate is restricted to the traditional services of fire prevention, inspection, investigation, and suppression, and only in specific areas related to major fire emergencies and provision of advice to local governments. The Fire Commissioner does not have a mandate relating to the rescue and emergency services that now represent the majority of responses by many departments.

There is also no mechanism for the fire/rescue service, local governments, and the provincial government to work together to address province-wide issues and challenges. The *Fire Services Act* provides for a “Fire Services Advisory Board” that could play this role, but the board has not been active for a number of years.

Two specific governance problems exist. First, the expansion of services beyond traditional fire services has not been matched by any province-wide oversight or tracking of those services. The other problem is the lack of any province-wide governance structure or decision-making forum to address common challenges and needs.

Governance deficiencies contribute to some significant problems, including:

- Several different provincial government agencies make individual decisions that affect the fire/rescue service. These include: WorkSafe BC, which makes decisions affecting firefighter safety; the Ministry of Forests and Range, which makes decisions regarding interface firefighting; and the Emergency Health Services Commission, which makes decisions regarding first responder services. However, there is no mechanism for B.C.’s fire/rescue service as a whole to consult with and coordinate decisions with these various bodies.

- The fire/rescue service is not a single entity with central authority and responsibility ultimately vested in one organization. As a result, the fire/rescue service lacks the processes and structures needed for harmonized decision-making and coordination for the whole system.
- The fire/rescue service also lacks a forum and mechanisms to identify emerging issues and pressures that may impact it, and to proactively and strategically decide how to deal with them.

There are important elements and aspects that will benefit from province-wide consultation, planning and action.

3. Fire/Rescue Service Gaps

There are some major gaps in the fire and rescue services provided in B.C. today, but the absence of comprehensive information about fire departments across the province makes it difficult to quantify the problem.

The key service gaps include:

| Description | Size/Scope |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gaps in 911 emergency calling services | Northern Rockies Regional District; Kitimat Stikine Regional District |
| Absence of fire inspections of public buildings in electoral areas | About 150 of 165 electoral areas in B.C. have no regular fire inspections of public buildings |
| Absence of building plan and/or on-site inspection services to ensure compliance with fire and building codes | Many electoral areas have no or limited plan and/or on-site inspection services to enforce fire prevention standards in new or renovated buildings |
| Emergency service coverage on major highways outside of fire protection areas | Limited coverage for highway rescue services is available through nearby fire departments or search and rescue societies |
| Long highway rescue response times on isolated roads | Northern B.C. |
| Fire/ rescue societies operating at below acceptable performance and safety standards | There are a few fire departments that are operating below acceptable standards |
| Absence of vehicle fire suppression coverage | No coverage outside of fire protection areas unless the fire threatens Crown forests |
| Absence of proactive province-wide public education for fire prevention | No coordinated provincial program for public education exists (although a strategic approach for delivery is being developed by the B.C. Public Fire and Life Safety Education Advisory Committee) |

If a fire starts outside the approved service area of a department, no firefighters may respond. There are examples where this has led to significant and costly wildfires. If a traffic accident occurs on the highway where a nearby fire department does not provide road rescue service, the response time may be long.

Service gaps arise from the decentralized nature of fire and rescue services in the province. Each department has been created to protect its particular service area. Local decisions have appropriately been made by local governments regarding what services are to be provided, what area is to be protected, and what service levels are to be achieved. In addition, liability concerns about responding out of their coverage area reduce the willingness of departments to “fill in the gaps”.

These liability concerns relate both to providing out-of-area services and the fact that protection within the community is reduced while firefighters are out of town. It is to the credit of many local governments that they have authorized their fire departments to respond to rescue, emergency and interface fire incidents beyond their boundaries. However, despite this, there are still gaps in some areas and in some types of fire/rescue services.

Two other important gaps in fire services are related to fire inspections and fire investigations. Regular fire inspections of public buildings are only mandated for those located in municipalities. However, there is no similar requirement for public buildings in unincorporated areas. The fire investigation system also has significant problems. In many locations, qualified fire investigators are not available. This reduces the ability of the fire/rescue service to prevent, respond to, and mitigate the consequences of fires and to investigate suspicious fires. Given the size of British Columbia and the fact that most people are concentrated in a few regions, some service gaps are inevitable. It is impractical to be able to provide fire and rescue services everywhere. However, the service gaps are more extensive than they should be.

4. The Challenge of Province-wide Competency Standards

Competency standards play a critical role in the delivery of fire and rescue services. These standards establish what firefighters need to know, how they need to be equipped and what they need to do to provide safe and effective fire/rescue services. It is important to appreciate the difference between “recommended practices” and “standards”. A recommended practice (sometimes called a guideline) is a set of recommendations regarding the competencies, equipment and management of fire and rescue services. A standard has the same content, but when formally adopted, it is mandatory. This implies that there is some mechanism for ensuring that the standard is met.

Currently, a variety of mandatory standards apply to the fire/rescue service. These include:

- WorkSafe BC regulations concerning equipment and competencies regarding operating procedures in the provision of certain fire suppression services.
- Ministry of Forests and Range standards for fighting wildfires and interface fires.
- Emergency and Health Services Commission standards for the provision of first responder services.
- Motor Vehicle Act standards for licensing and driving vehicles.
- The provincial government has stipulated that the training standards for fire service personnel in British Columbia are those published by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). This is central to both life safety and the effective operation of a fire department.



There are a number of critical issues regarding the British Columbia Training Standard that are covered later in this section.

There are a number of important issues relating to standards in general. Currently, many smaller fire departments are not able to meet NFPA training standards. Recently, a Basic Fire Fighting Certificate Program was launched to improve volunteer firefighter training in B.C. However, this initiative does not bring trainees up to the NFPA Firefighter I level, the minimum implied standard for British Columbia, although it does contain the essential core elements from the program.

Another issue arises because there is no mechanism for ensuring that fire departments are competent and comply with standards. There may be “after the fact” enforcement or liability if a standard is not met and a negative outcome results, but nothing in the current model ensures regular checking of competency and standards compliance.

Finally, a variety of agencies set competency requirements for fire and rescue services. But there is no mechanism for the fire/rescue service to coordinate the impact of, or the system-wide response to, those standards on departments. More importantly, no organization is charged with establishing standards specific to fire and rescue services.

Because the enforcement of standards is weak, there is no certainty that fire departments meet minimum

competency and safety standards. Weak standards and weak standards enforcement create a public safety risk and may expose departments and local governments to liability for injuries to people or damage to property.

Training standards are a critical issue because they are directly related to life safety. The pertinent facts about training standards:

- At present, as directed by Minister's Order dated December 18, 2002, the British Columbia Training Standard for firefighters in B.C. is the National Fire Protection Association's NFPA 1001 – Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications, which "... identifies the minimum job performance requirements for career and volunteer fire fighters whose duties are primarily structural in nature."
- Since the minimum standard for firefighter training in NFPA 1001 is Fire Fighter I, a reasonable assumption would be that Fire Fighter I is the minimum competency standard for firefighters in the province. However, this is not the case. Apparently, the Minister's Order has been interpreted to mean that fire departments must train to NFPA 1001 – which means they must employ this training material but are not required to attain any particular competency standard (including Fire Fighter I).
- Fire Fighter I is generally accepted as the minimum competency level required for fire fighters to undertake an interior attack in a burning structure, although this has not been formally specified.
- A Basic Firefighter Certification Program is being offered across the province to improve volunteer firefighter training. The program contents are based on NFPA Fire Fighter I but the course only covers a portion of the training modules (the core elements). As a result, it does not bring course participants to Fire Fighter I level competencies. Additional training and evaluations (via a bridging program) are required for individuals to achieve Firefighter I certification.
- A small proportion of volunteer firefighters have completed Fire Fighter I (estimated at 10 per cent). Excluding the recently added hazardous materials operations element, it requires approximately 250 hours of training to attain Fire Fighter I certification (which translates into a training period of three years if this training takes place only once per week)
- The Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C. states that the two major impediments to volunteers training to Fire Fighter I are the high cost, and limited volunteer time availability. They also believe there would be mass volunteer firefighter resignations if the Fire Fighter I competency was mandated at this time.

It is essential that the misunderstandings and inconsistencies in training standards for firefighters be dealt with quickly and directly.

5. Inadequate Fire/Rescue Service Information for Effective Decision-making

An important consequence of the decentralized nature of the fire/rescue service is the lack of comprehensive, timely, accurate information about the province-wide service. A specific example of this lack of information is the fact that it is not possible to identify every fire department in British Columbia. Also, there is no information that identifies what fire and rescue services are provided across the province and where the gaps exist.

Each department maintains records to meet its own needs or those of its Authority Having Jurisdiction, and/or that reflect its administrative capabilities. Some keep very good records; others, especially very small departments, focus their resources on delivering service and not on administration.

Fire departments are supposed to report fire incident data to the Office of the Fire Commissioner, to allow the Fire Commissioner to prepare province-wide statistics on fire incidents and to provide a foundation for fact-based policy development and decision-making. However, compliance with this requirement is low and the available information is incomplete and thus of limited use. Inadequate information makes it impossible to determine quantitatively if the fire/rescue service is effectively and efficiently delivering on its mandate of protecting the public. The ability of government officials to make rational decisions to allocate resources to fire and rescue services is undercut.

All of the consultants retained by the Fire Services Liaison Group to carry out studies for this project reported they were hampered by lack of basic fire/rescue service data. Improving the quality of information is an important building block for improving fire/rescue service decision-making and governance.

6. Operational Implications of Independent Fire Departments

Fire/rescue services are provided by hundreds of different, independent fire departments around the province. As a result, fire departments in British Columbia are frequently limited in their capability to cooperate effectively with other departments.

Some of the operational challenges resulting from this structure are:

- Operating procedures of different departments can differ in important aspects. This makes it difficult for departments to work together, and can produce confusion and disruption on a joint response.
- When service gaps occur in and between communities, it is not clear how they should be resolved. This has created a “patchwork quilt” of coverage.
- There is little focus on interoperability to enable departments to effectively jointly operate to deal with big, unusual or multiple incidents.
- There are no formal mechanisms to proactively pursue or promote opportunities for regional efficiencies.
- There are no formal processes for quickly sharing essential operating information, ideas, innovations and lessons learned among all departments (i.e. dealing with a new type of drug lab).
- Individual fire departments have limited bargaining power in negotiating the terms and conditions of their work with provincial agencies such as the Provincial Emergency Program and Emergency Health Services Commission.
- There are substantial unrealized benefits that could be generated through collaboration, teamwork, partnering and sharing.
- Equipment and apparatus may be incompatible. For example, the Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus used by one department may be incompatible with those in neighbouring jurisdictions.
- Firefighter training may differ between departments with resultant differences in how tasks are performed.
- Policies may not permit a department to go out of its service area to assist another.

These issues arise because each department is autonomous, because common standards are not in place and because decisions are made locally, driven by local needs. Also, interoperability and cooperative action has generally not been encouraged. This limited ability to undertake fully coordinated or integrated cooperative action has important consequences for public safety and the taxpayer. For example, the ability of the fire/rescue service to respond to regional or provincial emergencies is compromised as a result of this problem.

The fire/rescue service needs to overcome negative consequences of independent operations and improve cooperation and interoperability between departments.

7. Budget Pressures

Fire departments and local governments across the province have significant concerns about costs. This problem is most pronounced in smaller communities, where funding is limited, but it is also a concern for larger centres, especially in the longer term.

Benefits from working together

From a taxpayer perspective, improving interoperability and cooperation can create efficiencies and savings, such as:

- Joining forces to purchase equipment and apparatus may generate savings through increased leverage with vendors while at the same time promoting standardization.
- In urban areas that have several fire departments, department specialization in specific areas of technical rescue services may be more effective and reduce overall costs (for example, one department might provide high angle rescue while another focuses on confined space rescue).
- The costs (capital and operating) of support services such as communications, records management, and dispatch systems could be shared by several departments.
- Additional mutual aid agreements between departments could improve protection levels.

Costs to provide fire and rescue services are increasing. However, the ability to pay for these services is constrained. In larger urban departments, fire departments must compete with other demands for municipal services. Many smaller communities are affected by closures of mills, mines and other businesses, which in turn are reducing the tax base and the availability of suitable firefighter candidates. In these communities, maintaining existing fire/rescue budgets is a challenge.

In addition to departments that are funded by municipalities, improvement districts, or regional districts, there are about 80 departments operated by societies that are dependent on fundraising or grants. These departments have limited funding and limited ability to increase budgets. Interviews with fire chiefs from small communities revealed that some of these departments may be forced to reduce their service area, cut services, or even shut down if funding does not improve.

8. Heavy Stress on the Volunteer Sector

The volunteer sector of the fire/rescue service is vital to public safety. While career departments protect more people, volunteer departments protect more communities. If a fire or accident occurs outside a major urban centre, the firefighters that respond will almost certainly be volunteers.

Volunteer departments are being affected by external forces that are straining their capacity to protect public safety, including:

- Economic forces are reducing the economic base that supports many of these departments. Small fire departments have always struggled to raise the operating and capital funds required to deliver desired services at appropriate competency levels, but economic pressures are increasing the financial pressures on them. In the Fire Services Liaison Group survey, 76 per cent of responding fire departments serving populations of less than 5,000 identified “inadequate funding to support desired service levels and funding inconsistencies between jurisdictions” as an “extremely important” or “somewhat important” issue. Among their local authorities, 60 per cent rated this issue as important.
- In addition to creating budget pressures, business closures in smaller centres are reducing the pool of potential volunteer firefighters as people move away or work outside the community. The surveys of both fire departments and local governments found that challenges created by firefighter recruitment and retention problems were one of the top two most important issues facing fire departments in small and medium-sized communities across B.C.
- Training standards have become more stringent, but small departments have limited access to training resources. In addition to the costs of training, volunteers frequently need to pay out of their own pockets to travel to attend courses and/or forgo employment wages. In the survey of fire departments, every small- and medium-sized department listed “Deficiencies accessing/maintaining training; Lack of consistent training; High cost of training” in the top two most critical issues. Local governments rated this issue as being equally important.

Factors that are increasing pressures on department budgets

- **More stringent standards:** For example, training firefighters to the NFPA Firefighter I standard will improve firefighter safety, but significantly increase training costs.
- **Record-keeping obligations:** Fire departments are facing increasing obligations to maintain detailed records about equipment maintenance, training and other matters. This is increasing the administrative burden, particularly for smaller departments.
- **Expanding services:** While providing new services improves public safety, it also increases costs.
- **Increasing call volumes:** Many departments are experiencing increased call volumes for first responder, road rescue, and other non-suppression services. This is a particular problem for departments in small communities and rural areas adjacent to suburban areas.

- The growing number of first responder and rescue calls is placing a significant burden on the work and family life of volunteers. This has the potential to cause volunteers to reduce their involvement or even quit. In response, some fire departments have been forced to alter the number of firefighters available for shifts to avoid firefighter burnout.
- People with “urban expectations” about services are moving to areas subject to interface fire risks. At the same time, the pine beetle problem is increasing the potential for interface and wildfires fires in infected areas.

While larger departments may face some of the same challenges as small departments, the pressures are much greater for volunteer departments. There is a developing tipping point in the volunteer sector. Without support to help attract, train and retain volunteer firefighters, public safety in smaller communities can be expected to suffer.



APPENDIX D: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 1 (ESTABLISH A FIRE SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD)

This report recommends that the provincial government establish a new Fire Services Advisory Board (FSAB). The board should be permanent, meet regularly and be appropriately funded.

Fire Services Advisory Board (FSAB) Role

The FSAB would provide critical, system-focused policy leadership for the province-wide fire/rescue system. The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General would retain policy-setting authority, while the FSAB would serve in an advisory capacity and undertake initiatives in agreed-upon areas. Specifically, the FSAB would:

- Advise the provincial government on matters affecting fire/rescue service, including seeking ways to build, integrate and sustain fire, rescue and emergency services in the province.
- Identify priorities for changes to the fire/rescue service.
- Advise the provincial government on standards or proposed standards that affect the fire/rescue service.
- Develop guidelines and best practices recommendations for fire/rescue departments and local government.
- Develop consistent responses to proposed changes by provincial agencies that affect the fire/rescue service, and develop common, consistent procedures for working with other emergency services providers.
- Make recommendations to the Minister about education and other matters related to sustaining necessary competencies.
- Make recommendations to the Minister about actions and policies to maintain province-wide system viability, sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Provide general advisory assistance to the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

Composition

The board should consist of representatives from:

- The Office of the Fire Commissioner, as the senior fire authority in the province regarding fire safety and prevention.
- The five associations whose members are directly involved in fire/rescue service delivery:
 - Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C.
 - Volunteer Firefighters' Association of B.C.
 - Fire Prevention Officers' Association of B.C.
 - B.C. Professional Fire Fighters Association
 - B.C. Fire Training Officers' Association
- The Union of B.C. Municipalities and the Local Government Association to represent the interests of local governments, which have jurisdiction over most fire departments.
- The board should be chaired by the Fire Commissioner.

Participation of Other Stakeholders

The FSAB should also work with, as issues arise, other agencies and organizations whose decisions and operations affect the fire/rescue service, such as the Provincial Emergency Program, Ministry of Forests and Range, WorkSafe BC, Ministry of Health Services, B.C. Ambulance Service, Emergency and Health Services Commission, training institutions, British Columbia Search and Rescue Association and others.

These other stakeholders should be invited to participate in FSAB meetings on an issue-by-issue basis. If, for example, the FSAB is addressing an issue where the B.C. Ambulance Service has an interest, the BCAS should be provided with background documents and invited to attend FSAB meetings, participate in FSAB task groups or subcommittees, and otherwise provide input and advice. The BCAS would not, however, be involved in any decisions the FSAB may make on the issue. The BCAS would, of course, be able to give its advice to government on the recommendations of the FSAB.

Defining the role of other stakeholders in this manner ensures that the FSAB has the benefit of the input of other stakeholders while preserving the independence of those other agencies.

Subcommittees

Standing and ad hoc subcommittees of the FSAB might include:

- Education
- Standards and regulations (including equipment standards for cooperative purchasing, sprinkler bylaws)
- Advice on amendments to the *Fire Services Act*
- Inspection and Audit Checklist Advisory Board (as proposed in the Bulletin from the Office of the Fire Commissioner)
- Firefighter recruitment and retention

The FSAB or a standing subcommittee should be tasked with overseeing and providing advice on fire/rescue training in B.C. This would include:

- Recommending training standards to the Minister.
- Assessing the implications of proposed training standards.
- Advising the Minister on the availability of training and adequacy of the training delivery system.
- Reviewing the training system to ensure that accredited training meets provincial and international training standards.
- Promoting transferability of training credits.



APPENDIX E: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 3 (STANDARDIZE COMPETENCIES AND TRAINING STANDARDS)

It is recommended that the provincial government immediately task this issue to the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Fire Services Advisory Board (or, in the short-term, appoint a working group of representatives of the fire/rescue service drawn from management of volunteer and career departments, training officers, local governments and the union).

While the training standards decisions are made, this group should also deal with important related matters, including:

- What will the training standards be?
- Will the mandatory aspect be deferred to allow departments to catch up?
- What assistance will be provided to departments to assist them to catch up? For volunteer departments, this would need to address both costs and time availability.
- Will the standards apply equally to volunteer and career departments?

The recognized minimum standard for interior attack is the NFPA 1001 Fire Fighter I. However, consultations undertaken by the Fire Services Liaison Group indicate that only a small proportion of volunteer firefighters meet this standard. Furthermore, the fire/rescue service does not have the ability to train large numbers of volunteers to the Fire Fighter I level.

An additional concern is the potential impact on volunteers and volunteer recruitment if new standards would require more personal sacrifices to be trained. On the one hand, to be safe and effective, volunteer firefighters should meet the Fire Fighter I standard. On the other hand, the fire/rescue service is not able to provide this training, and the personal sacrifices required could cause many volunteers to quit.

The issue of what standards should be in place and how competencies can be improved over time must be addressed on a system-wide basis.

Over time, the Fire Services Liaison Group expects that volunteer fire departments will train increasing portions of their firefighters to the full Fire Fighter I standard.

Funding is not the only problem associated with achieving volunteer training. Volunteers need to make significant personal sacrifices to obtain training (i.e. time away from work and family). It is very important that any changes in the volunteer training system minimize the impacts on the personal lives of volunteers around the province.

APPENDIX F: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 6 (IDENTIFY AND FILL GAPS IN SERVICE COVERAGE)

The following table, from the report *Analysis of Fire / Rescue Service Gaps in B.C.* (Dugal Smith & Associates, September 2008) summarizes emergency services and the organizations with responsibility for determining if and where those services are provided:

| Service | Mandated Responsibility |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wildfires on Crown land | Ministry of Forests and Range |
| Wildfires on private land | Ministry of Forests and Range (may bill for services) |
| Interface fires starting outside municipal boundaries | Ministry of Forests and Range |
| Interface fires starting within municipal boundaries | Municipalities (may call on Ministry of Forests for assistance) |
| Rural structure fires in unprotected areas | No coverage |
| Emergency medical services | Emergency and Health Services Commission |
| Local emergencies | Local government |
| Multiple jurisdiction emergencies (e.g., flooding) (non fire) | Provincial Emergency Program |
| Multiple jurisdiction fires | Provincial Emergency Program and/or mutual/automatic aid agreements |
| Highway crashes | No mandated responsibility/nearby fire department or highway rescue society |
| Vehicle fires in a community | Local fire department |
| Rural/highway vehicle fires in unincorporated areas | No mandated responsibility |
| Fire inspections in an incorporated community | Local government |
| Fire inspections in an unincorporated community or rural area | No mandated responsibility; in the absence of a fire inspector, the onus is on the building owner |
| Highway traffic control | Ministry of Highways contractor |
| Public fire education | No mandated responsibility |
| Emergency communications systems | Local government |

Medical First Responders

In 2007, the provincial government published a study *First Responders: Fire Services and Pre-hospital Emergency Care in British Columbia*, commonly referred to as the “Cameron Report”. A significant finding of this study was that there are significant coverage gaps in medical first responder services around British Columbia. The Cameron Report recommended that more proactive effort be put into seeking new first responder services.

Specifically, one of the recommendations was: “...if the [Emergency Health Services] Commission determines that there continues to be significant problems with availability of first responder services in parts of the province after actively seeking potential first responder agencies for under serviced areas, then the Commission should prepare a report to government with options and a recommendation for action.”

The Fire Services Liaison Group supports the Cameron Report and supports the actions of the Emergency Health Services Commission to put the recommendations into action.

Public Fire Education Strategy

Public fire education should be recognized as a very important component of the fire/rescue service. Elements such as public service announcements or school programs can be used to deliver public safety messages across a range of jurisdictions or to areas that do not have fire departments, without being constrained by the service gaps and jurisdictional boundaries that inhibit some of the other services. Public fire education should play an important role in achieving the vision to provide fire/rescue coverage to all residents of and visitors to the province.

The B.C. Fire and Life Safety Education Advisory Committee has developed a strategic plan for province-wide public education. The plan includes key initiatives involving:

- increased partnerships for program delivery,
- raising awareness of fire/life safety education,
- identification of funding sources, and
- ensuring sustainability and renewal of program initiatives.

The strategy envisions the education advisory committee playing an advisory role and employing the capabilities of the Fire Prevention Officers' Association of B.C. to deliver public education programs in regions around the province.



APPENDIX G: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 9 (ESTABLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY)

Service Plans

It is recommended that local governments be required to provide service plans for the fire departments within their jurisdiction.

A service plan should be a relatively straightforward document that includes the following:

- A description of the fire/rescue services to be provided.
- A description of the service zones within which those services are to be provided. Different services may be provided in different zones. For example, one zone may provide road rescue/extraction services, while another may only provide suppression services.
- Response time targets for fire/rescue services. Response time targets may differ by type of service and by service zone.
- A description of the funding provided by the local government responsible for the fire department (if any).
- An assessment of the major risks and risk reduction/mitigation plans.
- A description of the steps taken to cooperate with adjacent fire departments and to improve interoperability (if any).
- A statement from the local government as to whether the department meets recognized standards for fire/rescue services, including training standards. In the event that a department does not meet mandated standards, the service plan should present an action plan for achieving compliance.

The Fire Commissioner, with the advice of the Fire Services Advisory Board, should recommend standards for service plan formats to the Minister that are appropriate for the range of fire departments around the province. This will include simpler service plan requirements for smaller departments that have limited resources for plan development. A checklist/*pro forma* plan should be developed that local governments can use as a template for preparing service plans for their departments.

The public should have the opportunity to comment on proposed service plans as part of the existing process within the local government budgeting cycle. In addition, local governments should report on their performance against the fire department service plans in an annual report as contemplated by the *Community Charter*. The Office of the Fire Commissioner should encourage methods to make these reports accessible to the public.

This recommendation is intended to ensure that local government autonomy with respect to fire/rescue services is matched by appropriate public transparency and accountability for fire/rescue services, including decisions to not provide specific services or service levels.

APPENDIX H: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 12 (ENFORCE COMPETENCY, TRAINING AND OPERATING STANDARDS)

Training and Operating Standards

To achieve the envisioned quality of service, the fire/rescue service proposes that over the long term, a set of training and operating standards should be developed and enforced for fire and rescue services. This specifically would cover minimum standards for the four core services provided by the fire/rescue service:

- Exterior firefighting
- Interior firefighting
- Emergency medical first responder
- Road rescue/automobile extrication

When the minimum standards are put in place for the four core service areas, it is expected the format used to specify competency requirements will be similar to the following:

| Service | Requirements | Minimum Training Levels |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exterior Firefighting | <p>a. Personnel Required – 3</p> <p>b. Equipment – NFPA 1901 Initial Attack Apparatus</p> <p>c. Expectations – exterior or wildland fire attack capability, including exposure protection and outdoor firefighting</p> <p>d. Time – to provide flexibility, a target arrival time should be a component of the fire department service plan (<i>see Recommendation 9</i>). (The suggested target is: arrival within 15 minutes from notification, 80% of incidents within a response area to be specified by the department. If this cannot be attained, it could be stipulated as "Best Efforts".)</p> | <p>NFPA 1001 Selected Competencies incorporated in the BC Basic Fire Firefighter Certificate Curriculum</p> <p>ICS 100</p> |
| Interior Firefighting | <p>a. Personnel Required – 4 for initial attack; 2 more within 10 minutes</p> <p>b. Equipment – NFPA 1901 Initial Attack or Pumper Fire Apparatus</p> <p>c. Expectations – interior firefighting capability at initial attack level, at a minimum</p> <p>d. Time – to provide flexibility, a target arrival time should be a component of the fire department service plan (<i>see Recommendation 9</i>). (The suggested target is: Initial complement – 4 personnel plus pumping appliance, on scene in 10 minutes from notification, 90% of incidents within a response area to be specified by the department. If this cannot be attained, it could be stipulated as "Best Efforts".)</p> | <p>NFPA 1001 Firefighter I</p> <p>ICS 100</p> |
| Emergency Medical First Responder | <p>a. Personnel Required – 2</p> <p>b. Equipment – BLS Equipment</p> <p>c. Expectations – initial response or support to ambulance personnel</p> <p>d. Time - to provide flexibility a target arrival time should be a component of the fire department service plan (<i>see Recommendation 9</i>). (The suggested target is: 10 minutes from notification, 90% of time within a response area to be specified by the department. If this cannot be attained, it could be stipulated as "Best Efforts".)</p> | <p>Emergency Medical Assistant (FR) BC EMALB consistent with Cameron Report (2007)</p> <p>ICS 100</p> |

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| Road Rescue/ Extrication | <p>a. Personnel Required – 3</p> <p>b. Equipment – purpose-built vehicle, subject to inspection, capable of carrying crew and equipment. Powered rescue tools and equipment.</p> <p>c. Expectations – removal of occupants trapped in crashed vehicles; personnel would also meet requirements for Emergency Medical First Responders</p> <p>d. Time – to provide flexibility, a target arrival time should be a component of the fire department service plan (<i>see Recommendation 9</i>). (The suggested target is: 15 minutes from notification, 90% of incidents within a response area to be specified by the department. If this cannot be attained, it could be stipulated as "Best Efforts".)</p> | <p>NFPA 1006 Chapter 10 (Vehicle and Machinery) and Chapter 6 (Rope Rescue)</p> <p>ICS 100</p> |
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Registration and Certification

Registration and certification of B.C. fire departments will assist with ensuring adherence to standards. When the fire/rescue service transitions to mandatory competency standards in the future, all B.C. departments should be required to obtain and maintain certification by the Office of the Fire Commissioner or a standards enforcement authority.

Obtaining and maintaining certification should entail:

- Attestation by the responsible local government that the department meets minimum competency standards for the services it provides (where the Minister has established such standards).
- In those cases where a department does not meet a minimum mandated competency standard, the local government must develop a plan to achieve compliance within a reasonable period of time.
- Completion and submission by the local government responsible of a Volunteer Fire Department Audit and Inspection Checklist annually for volunteer departments. An equivalent checklist should be developed for career departments.
- Publishing of a fire/rescue service plan by the local government responsible (see Recommendation 9).

APPENDIX I: SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR RECOMMENDATION 14 (IMPROVE INTEROPERABILITY)

Communications and Information Management

Communications and information management systems include 9-1-1, radio, Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD), Records Management System (RMS), and dispatch. These are crucial processes that determine the ability of the fire/rescue service to receive and manage calls for assistance and effectively launch and manage emergency responses.

Issues include radio deficiencies (including lack of interoperability), incomplete 911 coverage, the need for properly functioning and consolidated CAD and RMS systems, and the coverage and functioning of dispatch systems. These areas are evolving rapidly, but the issues are extremely technical and are complicated by the need for integration and coordination across the fire/rescue service and with other emergency responses agencies.

Radio Systems

Radio systems should migrate over time to require interoperability within the fire/rescue service as well as with police agencies, British Columbia Ambulance Service, and the B.C. Forest Service. Interoperability will increase firefighter safety and provide for more effective mutual aid when it is required. Where possible, new radio systems should be required to conform to the “Project 25” open system compliance standard.

- The Fire Commissioner should take a lead role in working with the various agencies to review existing fire radio systems to ensure their governance and operating models, as well as their frequency plans, allow them to be interfaced with other radio systems.
- The Fire Commissioner, working with existing fire/rescue radio system users, should review the existing body of knowledge with regard to third-party “black box” radio interface solutions and develop an implementation strategy.

Computer Aided Dispatch

CAD systems should form the basis for dispatch for all fire departments in British Columbia. The advantages of CAD systems are numerous, but their principal strengths lie with integrated GIS to shorten response time and eliminate duplicate responses. CAD also allows for the greatest amount of knowledge to be available to dispatcher and firefighters to make the best possible decisions. Fire/rescue CAD systems should also be fully interfaced with the British Columbia Ambulance Service.

Agencies providing dispatch for fire departments in British Columbia should be strongly encouraged to utilize a fire CAD either as a standalone system or by using a shared system similar to those being implemented in Metro Vancouver and other regions.

The opportunity to interface existing and future fire department CAD systems with the ambulance CAD system being deployed throughout the province by BCAS should be a priority. This interface would eliminate the additional time taken for the physical handoff of caller information from BCAS to fire departments. At the present time, the development of the interface to the ambulance CAD is at the option of the fire dispatch provider, however, the Fire Commissioner should take a lead role in developing provincial support for a standard interface that could provide required first responder response data directly into each fire department CAD system.

Fire department CAD systems should be required, at a minimum, to have the capability to transmit data to mobile workstations in fire department apparatus in real time to ensure that the most appropriate and up-to-date information regarding properties, usage, pre-plans, building construction etc. is available for incident commanders.

Records Management Systems

RMS should be available for all fire departments to allow them to track and manage their personnel, their physical assets and the properties within their response jurisdiction. The implementation of a searchable database

of fire/rescue service assets was recommended by the Filmon Report, which addressed the Kelowna firestorm in 2003.

- The Fire Commissioner should recommend the deployment of a provincial fire/rescue service RMS as a hosted system to afford smaller and medium-sized fire departments the opportunity to participate. The model for this system is the police RMS (BC Prime), which was supported by the Solicitor General. A similar model (Project FIRES) is now being implemented by the Delta, Richmond, Vancouver, Port Moody and New Westminster Fire Departments and is contemplated as being expandable for the entire province.
- The RMS used by any fire department should have an interface to their CAD system that will provide for an upload of all relevant property and other information at the time units are dispatched.

Options for a **common and linked regional records management system** should be explored. Benefits include:

- Fire department access to incident records, training and personnel records, equipment maintenance, inventory, budgets and financial records, and other important data.
- The local government would have the information needed for effective management, and be able to assess their departments against comparable departments to better identify best practices and problem performance.
- The Office of the Fire Commissioner would have detailed, correct, comprehensive information on which to base decision-making, would be better able to identify “best practices” and would be able to conduct rapid online searches for needed resources for major emergencies.

Dispatch

Dispatch service for fire departments should be provided by competent, dedicated personnel who are trained, managed and mentored to achieve the call management standards outlined in NFPA 1221 and meet the professional qualifications in NFPA 1061.

- Fire department dispatch providers for any fire department in B.C. should be required to report on their ability to meet the call management standards specified in NFPA 1221 and to ensure that their dispatch personnel at a minimum are compliant with NFPA 1061.

Improved Liability Protection

WorkSafe BC and public liability protection for local governments and fire departments only cover services in a specified community area. The services and area must be formally approved through local bylaws and regulation. However, liability coverage does follow departments out of the area when they respond under formal mutual aid agreements with other communities. Fire departments also have liability protection for services delivered outside their service area when they are given a Provincial Emergency Program task number prior to responding to an incident. In these cases, they must only provide services for which they are qualified.

Liability is a concern because many unforeseen situations can impede a local fire department response (i.e. delayed call-out, slow firefighter response, poor road or weather conditions). In any case of loss or injury, there are always retrospective opportunities to spread blame and costs of loss among the participants. For example, departments and local governments have increased risks and potential liability because local protective services are reduced when crews and equipment are dispatched out of the coverage area.

Fire departments working under the authority of an improvement district or local society have the same WorkSafe BC and liability issues. However, they are finding it difficult to find and afford insurance coverage. Their choice is to operate without insurance, close their doors, or attempt to have their operations taken over by the regional district.

Liability protection could be restructured legislatively to encourage local governments to enter mutual aid agreements, respond to out-of-area services, and reduce area fire, rescue and emergency service gaps. In addition, liability protection could be linked, as in Nova Scotia, to departments meeting provincial standards, including fire department registration and firefighter training certification.

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A Report by the Fire Services Liaison Group
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