

Premier Gordon Campbell
Address to the 2003 Emergency Preparedness Conference
October 25, 2003

Check Against Delivery

If you think back to the beginning of 2003, less than a year ago, most of us would never have imagined that we'd be struck by the letters BSE or SARS. We certainly would not have anticipated that we would have the worst forest fire season in the province for the last fifty years and probably on record.

We wouldn't have expected that we were going to face forest fires, followed by severe drought, followed by severe flooding. We certainly wouldn't have expected that we would have severe flooding in the north eastern part of the province at the same time we were suffering from drought and the worst forest fire season in the southern part of the province, only to be followed by more floods in the western part of the province and now unfortunately, we have severe flooding in the north western part of the province.

Just think back over this year alone. Today we still have about 240 fires burning in the Province of British Columbia. There were 254,000 hectares burnt. There are more people today who know what a hectare is than there were last July. That's over 500,000 acres of forestland that was burnt. For me, the scale of that natural catastrophe is huge.

It moves far faster than you'll ever imagine. The first time I flew over the McClure fire the most impressive thing to me was how small we are all in dealing with that. As I flew over those fires there were tiny little specks of people from the forest fire service with tiny pieces of equipment. They were the people putting themselves in harms way so they could protect us.

A couple of the fires were moving at 300 metres a minute with flames that were 250 to 350 feet high. We had fires that raced through towns and wiped them out, like Louis Creek. We had fires that acted totally erratically.

There were 50,000 people directly affected. There are great stories and great heroes that emerged. There are people that stand forward and say, what can we do to help someone else. They put themselves at risk to do that. Some of the firefighters in Kelowna actually lost their homes and they were out within hours trying to protect others' homes. There's the story of the firefighters who were trapped in Barriere only to have other firefighters and RCMP go out and provide the guidance that they needed to get out of that fire.

I arrived at the evacuation centre in Kamloops and I was talking with two women from Barriere who had to leave their homes, and it was right at a time when they really wanted to get back home. They couldn't believe they were still not allowed back because of the danger.

That uncertainty must be huge for people. They were talking to volunteers on the other side of the table that were trying to help them through the forms or making sure they had the support they needed.

I sat down and said, "I know that things are difficult, but I want you to know we're going to do everything we can to make sure you get through this." And you know the first question they asked me? "Are you going to come to the Barriere Rodeo on September 1st." I would've thought there'd be something else on their mind.

There's the story of the couple who were given the emergency alert and told they may have to get out of their home so they got ready to get out, then they were given the message you have to get out of your home.

So the wife had her box of stuff, she got it out and put it in the back seat of the car and waited for her husband to come out. She waited and finally her husband comes out and she says to him, what were you thinking? He's got his snowmobile suit on his lap.

He looks down at the snowmobile suits and says you're right, and he jumps out and runs back into the house, there for a few minutes and comes back. He had forgotten his helmet.

People pick different things that are important to them, but they get through this because of literally thousands and thousands of volunteers that help. We had volunteers coming from every single part of this province.

From Burnaby to the Kootenays, from Prince George to Kamloops, from Vancouver Island to Kelowna. We had volunteers who helped at McClure and then went to help with the Okanagan Mountain fire.

We had people that dedicated their summer to taking care of others. We carried out the second largest evacuation in the history of Canada. You know what people told me, they couldn't have been treated better – by people like you, by their neighbours. 50,000 had to leave their homes and I believe that they all knew there were 4.1 million British Columbians that wanted to be their neighbours and give them a helping hand.

That was because of you and what you do, it's because of the preparations that you make, it's because of your excellence and your professionalism. To all of you, I say thank you for that.

Our federal government was incredibly responsive to the needs of British Columbians. The first call came from the Prime Minister and he asked how are people doing, what can we do to help?

We said we need this, they said we'll get it there as quickly as we can. There were 2,200 members of the armed forces working here side by side. We had first nations firefighters from across the province. When I landed in McClure, the first group of people that came

from the armed forces and the Coast Salish firefighting unit was landing and unpacking. In all, we had 7,600 people involved in actually fighting these fires.

Then we had over 3,000 volunteers involved, and our emergency services and provincial emergency preparedness programs all worked in concert.

It's pretty exceptional when you think of the efforts that were put in by the North-Thompson Regional District, Central Okanagan Regional District, when you think of the local governments, when you think that for the first time in the history of our province we had a province wide property protection fire brigade – equipment and people from 61 different communities – coming together and working in concert in an organized, thoughtful, protective capacity.

When you think of what's taken place with the floods up the Pemberton Valley and realize that just a week after bridges were washed out, communication and transportation has been restored. That's a phenomenal response.

Our health services and emergency program, our human resources program, they all worked in concert. We saw people from throughout government coming and providing the support that was needed.

We recognize that, when you get up in the morning and spend your day thinking about what will need to be done if disaster strikes, it's probably a pretty lonely job because most of the rest of us think to ourselves that it won't happen. But someday it will happen. The work that you put in, the time and effort that you put in is an invaluable service to your fellow citizens, the people of your province and the people of your country.

I've established, for the purposes of British Columbia, a review of the entire forest fire season. It's a review that we're putting in place because there is no experience we can go through where we can't learn.

But I can tell you I've already learned a number of things from the forest fire season and the disasters that we've been struck with in this province over the last year. Number one is the spirit of British Columbians is unbreakable. Number two is our emergency response systems in British Columbia are unbeatable. Number three is the people who plan, implement and coordinate those systems are unstoppable. They will not flinch in the face of disaster.

It is your strength, it is your commitment, it is your love, it is the comfort that you provide that gives people the opportunity not to just respond but to recover from the traumas and the personal pain that they carry with them as they go through these experience.

It is because of you that British Columbians can take great pride in our response to the disasters that struck us throughout the year. I want to thank you for being here again this year. I want to thank you for continuing to reinforce one another's efforts, for continuing

to think about “what if” and how we can respond in a way that reinforces our values as Canadians and British Columbians.

I want to thank you for your incredible energy and I want to thank you for your hearts, for giving us yourself and for making the communities that we live in stronger, more vital and safer places for all of us to live. Thank you.