

## **FIRESTORM 2003 – PROVINCIAL REVIEW**

Public Meetings

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003 – Barriere

Missing Segment 7:00-8:20 p.m.

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John McAllister

Well I sat here all afternoon pretty well and this evening and everything has been pretty serious and I thought I would lighten things up a little bit, Mr. Filmon. I haven't been in Barriere very long, a little over a year, but through the volunteers I met a lot of people. In this area of the North Thompson are very resilient people. Independent – they have a lot of backbone. I found that out. The people that lost the most want the least. I want to throw a little bit of humour into it. I was at an appreciation dinner the other day and asked to comment and I said well, people in the area of Barriere remind me of an old Chinese restaurant owner we had in my home town – Loo Chow – with a heart of gold. And he used to say – his English wasn't very good. He used to say hey John, people pretty damn good, aye? But he'd get mixed up sometime and he'd say damn people good aye John? Like the B.C. Hydro he put the dam in the wrong place.

Thank you.

We have a CBC Reporter who would like to say a few words.

Gary Symons

Thank you very much, I wish I was that funny.

As you said, I work for CBC Radio – my name is Gary Symons, I covered this fire and pretty much most of the others around the province this year. I wasn't planning to speak tonight because we are doing a full submission to your panel later on in Kelowna, but I changed my mind because I talked to so many people during the break, your dinner break, and I felt that people here should hear from a reporter what happened in Kamloops regarding the information that was given to reporters who were trying to cover this story and how that differed from other fires.

I should mention a little of my own experience – before I was a reporter I worked in Forestry and I was a contract fire fighter so I had about three years experience doing that. I've been around a bit of fire – I wouldn't say I am as experienced as some of these folks here but I've done a bit. I've covered structural fires and forest fires for about fifteen years or so. I was called the general mayhem reporter when I worked in papers, so I have been around most kinds of fire. I think the biggest thing for me was that I had never seen communication around a fire like this before. I have had a few small incidents with local commanders who maybe didn't have a protocol in place with the media at a local level; I've had those problems before. But I have never seen what we called the big show like this go so badly awry on the communications front. That is why we had wanted to make our submission even before the Kelowna fire started.

What happened was day one, I came out here. This was on the Friday morning early – the fire had sort of taken off on the Thursday, there had been some evacuation orders out. I got out here probably about seven in the morning and started reporting them. When the fire took off, I called in to get some help because I knew this was going to require more than one reporter. That reporter went to the Emergency Operations Centre and was getting the information from the people there.

Right from the beginning there was an attitude that they didn't really want to give us information, particularly about damage to houses; you know exactly where fires were and that sort of thing – but particularly damage to structures. That became more and more of a problem as more media showed up through the ensuing 24 hours, we had these – you probably saw them on television – you had the big panel of experts and officials – sort of like that except they did more talking and we did less. In any case, the frustrating thing was there was precious little information about what was actually happening and I was – we had divided up. I was sort of the fly guy who ran around to the different fires and then David French was the one who went to the panel – we also brought in national reporters later. After the Raley(?) fire had been sort of covered, sorry, I should say the Strawberry Hill fire that went around Raley and we were

focusing on what had happened in Barriere, my understanding is that an RCMP official had told some media that the town of Barriere had been destroyed. That was reported on their media and from there – and I should mention that the process is usually that local media outlets then feed to what we call the wire – the Canadian Press and Broadcast News – so that information was given to the wire and from there it transmits all over the world. I got a call the morning of Saturday saying that they wanted me to report that Barriere had been destroyed, and of course I had no such knowledge so I said well I can't really report that. All I can report is that yes, it is on the wire, but we have no verification of it. So that's essentially what we reported. I went to all of the emergency officials that I had numbers for and I won't even try to go through all the conversations, but I will give you one of them –

I got very frustrated because nobody would tell me what was going on. They just wouldn't. And finally I said, is that because you can't or because you won't. And they said both. If we knew we wouldn't tell you anyway. So I was, in two words, pissed off. I had a credit card with a big limit on it, so I went down and got a helicopter – but I didn't phone my wife first, because – you know. She said specifically that I couldn't rent a helicopter. But anyway, because it takes me like a month or two months to get my expenses back, etc., you can understand. So anyhow I went down there. There was a problem with the no fly zone, they wouldn't let us take off and eventually I said, well – you know I was interested in this whole thing about Clearwater losing power – there was an interesting story – so I said well we are going to Clearwater and they said fine. We flew up to Clearwater, I borrowed a truck from a fellow I know up there and went into Barriere. That in the end was how we found out that Barriere actually was still standing.

But there was another disturbing thing there as well. Now we had been told all along after repeated questioning that they didn't know about the damage. They couldn't give us an assessment. And it came back as a could not or would not. So, when I went into Barriere, I went straight to the person in charge for the RCMP, he was in charge of security for the town and I asked him – I guess you don't have any idea of the damage? He said of course have an idea of the damage, we have been here the whole time and he gave me a complete breakdown of what had been destroyed to date. And that is what I found the most disturbing. Why could the RCMP in Barriere tell me exactly what had been destroyed and where but the people in Kamloops could not or would not.

You know I should mention as an illustration we had people who didn't just come up to us on the street in Kamloops or in Clearwater, and that happened constantly, but we had people that actually sought us out – who would actually leave their hotels where they had been billeted and then drive to where the media had set up – this was at the Emergency Operations Centre – we had rented some rooms for our equipment and that sort of thing. But they

would drive up there and demand to be put on the air because they were angry. They wanted to know what was going on in their town and nobody would tell them and we couldn't. I think that is something that has to change and it did change in Kelowna, but it changed in Kelowna because the City of Kelowna and the Regional District had an emergency plan in place where all of their media people were professionals. They were all broadcasters or newspaper people with a lot of experience in emergency broadcasting. And I should mention CBC is the Emergency Broadcaster in Canada and despite that we did not get timely evacuation alerts. That was another problem which I will go into in more depth later, but this was a case where local officials in Kelowna had a plan and they told the provincial officials – look just stay out of our way, we know what we are doing, we are going to deal with the media and we will get them into that area as quickly as possible. And they did and they did it safely, whereas in Kamloops we were put in danger – I wasn't – I knew what I was doing – but we had a reporter arrested – we had people trying to break lines because there were lines in unreasonable places. And those kinds of things, in my past experience, puts crews in danger, wastes resources and puts reporters in danger as well. Those things have to change and I think that whoever was in charge in Kamloops – I don't know if anybody was in charge in Kamloops, but whoever was in charge in Kamloops needs to learn the lesson from Kelowna.

And that's my submission for now.

GF I appreciate it very much, Gary, and from going through a couple of hundred pages of press scans know that there is a vast difference between how things were handled early on. And in this area it was one of the earliest major fires of the season and there is a tremendously different way in which the communications were done later, where there was the daily – in fact several times a day – availabilities of the key people, direct information, access for the reporters – I know that did not happen in this area or in the Kamloops area. So it is obviously something we are very interested in and concerned about and will form part of our report, I can assure you of that.

Communications is absolutely the lifeline that people need to know where they stand, to know whether or not they are at risk, to know whether or not their homes have been affected. All of those things have to be a part of a strategic plan on communication. So there are lessons that have to be learned from this experience and we have to do better next time.

GS Well I appreciate your chore and we are doing the same thing in our own organization where people other than myself made more than one mistake.

Thank you very much.

GF Did you buy the helicopter, incidentally? Or just rent it?

GS Well there was a really ugly story about a TV camera – but I really don't need to go into it.

GF Okay.

GF John, I want to share a story with you from a similar experience in my background. I was Premier in Manitoba when we had the worst flooding of the century back in 1997 on the Red River and every day for a month I went out to the various flood affected areas by helicopter. I know that you may think that was an unnecessary expense, but we did it in any case and we were trying to reassure people and make sure they knew that we were on the ground and aware of their needs and when we were evacuating Emerson, which is right out at the Border, it's just where the Red River crosses from North Dakota into Manitoba – I went at the time they were evacuating a seniors' personal care home and they – I walked in in my gumboots and leather jacket and saw these people there and they were obviously very upset and so I wanted to reassure some and I was going around from person to person, I walked up to this elderly gentleman in a wheelchair and I said – Sir, I put my hand on his arm, and said do you know who I am? And he looked up at me and said, no, but if you ask the nurse over there she'll tell you.

Sir.

My name is Keith Willis

There are just a couple of things I wanted to say. Firstly my understanding is that the Forestry was informed in 2001 that this situation was going to happen if they didn't do anything about it and obviously they didn't and it happened. Secondly, I don't know how many people in Barriere here that were informed about evacuation, but I know personally myself I was never informed of an evacuation. When my power went out, if I hadn't gone down to Ginty's and had enough cash to buy batteries, I wouldn't even have known that there was a notice, let alone an evacuation. Some friends of ours – they weren't notified in advance – they were already chased out of the fire – they had already gone or were getting ready to go to bed when they were notified, and not through the Forestry. Their neighbours above them were notified, but they weren't. There were a lot of people who that never got notification of any evacuation or notice that there was any threat of a fire.

To me, like somebody here said earlier that maybe evacuation wasn't necessary but to me it is a higher priority to err on the side of caution than take the chance that maybe somebody might get hurt or might not get hurt. There was a lot of – if you drive around the Barriere area you will see the opportunities that this fire had to jump and in many cases it did and it was stopped thanks to the locals. Barriere could have been gone and as we were notified when we were in Kamloops Friday night that it was gone, which was a really hard thing to take – in my case we had just been through a fire 3-1/2 years ago – one fire is enough, two is too many.

The communication system in this whole situation was really poor on the part of the radio system – whatever, the media – on the part of everybody. Like I work for Highways, I work for Argo and even in working with the situation to clean up this situation the communication sucked. Like we couldn't communicate between the flaggers, the guys that were blasting and the people that were cleaning the road – the whole thing was a total mess as far as communication is concerned. I think there should be a lot more radio overlap. I know there are a couple of guys here, like John who works for Telus there – when you are on the highway you have no communication with your flaggers, you have no communication with whatever else is going on. In the situation I was in – actually when they were knocking the rocks down on the side of the road, highways or the rock scalers were on one frequency, the flaggers are on another frequency and we are on another frequency and there is no communication between one or the other which is a hazard in itself. But I mean the whole fire situation was total lack of communication. There was – and the lack of utilization of the people that were available here in Barriere – there were loggers in Clearwater; they were sitting there waiting to be called. There were people in Barriere that were waiting to be called and they said well no we can't use you because you are not registered. Hey – you've got a fire. You take what's here and you use it. You don't wait and – oh, well, I have to have this registration because it costs so many dollars an hour to use this

piece of equipment. That's bull – you've got a fire – this is – like somebody said this is like fight a war. You use what's here, you use it now, you deal with the financial situation later. And they didn't do this, and if it wasn't for the locals in Barriere, it would be gone. Because the Forestry didn't help.

You know, once it jumped the river and back and forth and everything else – like you look at this place, I mean it went from one spot to another spot – it missed this spot, missed another spot – but if it wasn't for the locals in Barriere, Barriere wouldn't be here. The Forestry – well I mean I heard threats that the Forestry was going to sue certain individuals for fighting the fire against their policy. This is wrong. You know we have a situation here – we had a real serious situation here and there were people here willing to help and equipment willing to help and they said no – you've got to do this, you've got to do the other thing. Like let's utilize what's here and the forces that were available instead of playing political games. You know – like we said, this is a war. Deal with it now, you deal with the politics later. And that was the biggest problem with this whole situation is everybody was worried about politics. You've got to have permission from this guy and this guy and the other guy. And nobody is really leading anything. Everybody is just running around in circles. And nothing got done. And that's why Barriere is in the situation it is now. It should never have left McLure. There were people available to fight it before it left McLure. But they weren't utilized and the Forestry won't come in until the very last minute.

When I went through my fire up in South Lake, I called the Forestry; I got a five thousand liter tank of propane ready to burn. We are out of the fire district; I understand that – I phoned the Forestry, I said I've got a tank here that can roll if this gets out of hand. They said evacuate. We don't give a shit about it until the fire – the forest burns. That's a little too little too late. You know where's your response time?

You know I mean they have to deal with a situation not wait until it has already happened. Deal with it in advance. You know they are just not heeding the warnings. Like people have been warning the Forestry since 2001. We have to burn this underbrush, we have to do this, and we have to do that. Nobody listens. Our government – what did they do, the cut \$40M out of the budget for Forestry. That really helped our situation and we know we are going to have the same situation next year because the forecast is for the same dry summer again. So what are we going to do now? Are we just going to sit back and wait until something burns before we protect us?

Okay, that's all I got to say.

GF Thank you. Okay, thank you very much everyone. If there aren't any others who wish to – okay, please come forward.  
The RCMP also did not have very good communications. The setup going here in town, we were at the roadblock in Little Fort and asked about what was happening back here in Barriere. They said we don't know because we cannot get in touch with our members in Barriere. So –

That's because Kamloops took out their own repeater up at Fishtrap Peter Station. They removed that during the fire because they were afraid of losing their equipment.

Well it was two things; actually, they also didn't energize their satellite phones.

But there was a lack of communications there too.

GF Thank you.

The main reason was they lost the power, number one.

I realize that but by the same token because we didn't have any power; there was probably a lack of communication.

Hello, I spoke this afternoon – just to add to this communication situation, it was brought to my attention when the media was allowed in to the community. They were very, very frustrated and one of the fellows – I don't know if he was from CTV or CBC but he was with a sound truck and a camera crew and he said – he expressed how frustrated the media had been about not being allowed into the community and said – he made the statement – maybe just a broad statement, but he said it was easier to get into Iraq than into Barriere. Now I don't know, you know, I don't know if that was true, but that was the feeling and they were very sincere about it.

GF A little tougher to get out, though.

Yeah, it might be tougher to get out of Iraq.

But he also said – we all recognize that communication and broadcasting was a problem from the get go and he pointed out his sound truck and said there is the very reason that we should have been in here. He said those sound trucks can send a signal to the moon. And here were we out here claiming that we couldn't get a message from Little Fort to Barriere. And we also have the Rocky Mountain Rangers in Kamloops, which is a regiment of the Army, and I am sure that they have two-way communications if they are every expected to go out of the country and fight a way. I am sure they don't use the local phones to communicate. So I believe we had resources here and I don't understand yet why everybody was so reluctant to utilize technology that was available to us. And I feel especially sorry for those people – I am thinking of a typical situation where my mother lives in Montreal and she heard that the town of Barriere burned and went through hours of turmoil and of course we can't communicate because phones are out, etc., but to my knowledge I never heard a rebuttal – the media that did cover that story never came on and said sorry, folks, we gave you bad information – Barriere is fine. The local station got it straight eventually, but it seems to me if an error of that magnitude is made the least our networks could do is to set the record straight once an error has been discovered.

GF But that also is a consequence of them not getting access, so what happens is they then put out rumours instead of fact. If you don't give them the facts then they pick up the story somewhere else and they get it wrong. So it is a consequence of restricting their access. So it has to be dealt with.

Right.

GF Thank you.

I am Sandra Jaillet

I don't know all what's been said today but my ...

Tape ended