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Wildland Urban Interface Symposium 2004 Penticton, BC

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**Address by the Auditor General of British
Columbia
Wayne Strelieff, FCA**

Introduction

Good morning and thank you for the kind introduction.

It is an honour to be here among you today. You are here because you know the great risks our communities face when interface fire threatens. All of us need to work together to help do more about it—to reduce those risks.

I believe the window of opportunity for meaningful action is now about as wide open as it is going to get while the devastation of last summer's interface fires is still fresh in everyone's mind.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about what work my office is doing to promote better management of interface fire risks in our province. Much has happened since I spoke to you two years ago.

I would also like to take this opportunity to advise you that we will follow-up on the implementation of recommendations from the Firestorm 2003 Provincial review carried out by the Honourable Gary Filmon. We will do this in conjunction with our continued follow-up on our own 2001 report.

After my comments, I will try my best to answer any questions you may have.

Before I deal with our reports, I want to tell you a little about the work of my Office and me. This may sound familiar to those of you that were at the 2002 Symposium, but I always like to take the opportunity to explain our work so that you can better assess what we do and what we should do.

About four years ago, an all party committee of legislators appointed me Auditor General of British Columbia.

Prior to that, I had the same job in Saskatchewan for nearly ten years. I am a chartered accountant.

As the Auditor General, I am an officer of the Legislative Assembly. My reports—which are public—are automatically referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

This eleven person Committee of legislators is chaired by a member of the opposition and has the responsibility to deal with my reports in meetings open to the public.

In general, my job is to help all legislators and, thus, all citizens, hold the government of the day accountable for its use of public resources and for its management of the considerable responsibilities we entrust to government.

I have a relatively small Office of about 80 people with a wide range of professional credentials and experience. We have access to all parts of government, to all types of information, and we decide what to examine and when, and what to report. And, our reports are public. You can find them on our website at bcauditor.com.

We have three lines of business:

- First, we examine government financial statements to ensure they present reliable measures of such key items as surplus or deficit.
 - In this area, our most complex and important responsibility pertains to the government's overall consolidated financial statements. Those statements will include the financial results of about 160 organizations, and report on such issues as to whether the government actually balances its budget.
- Second, we review the quality of performance information published by government organizations in their service plans and annual reports:
 - Yesterday, I signed off on the quality of the overall performance report on the Workers Compensation Board.
 - Later this month, I will report on the quality of performance information reported by about 40 government organizations.
 - Our objective over the long term is to see that legislators and the public receive the best information possible for assessing the performance of the provincial government.
- Our third line of business is to assess how well government manages the key risks it faces in achieving its planned results.

Our recent risk work focused on subject matters such as:

- The usefulness of the performance agreements put in place between the Minister of Health and each of the province's six health authorities. We concluded those agreements were a good start but required much better focus.
- We examined the adequacy of the due diligence carried out in support of BC's Olympic bid—and found the government did a good job in preparing the bid.
- We examined how government manages a program referred to as the alternative payments program designed to pay doctors. We concluded this \$300 million program was poorly managed.
- And, last month we reported on how well the government managed its review of eligibility for disability assistance.
 - Currently, we examining:
 - The government's management of wild salmon stocks, and
 - Its management of chronic disease focusing on diabetes

And, of course, the subject of this symposium—nearly three years ago, we examined the degree to which we are prepared for major interface fires.

About our Interface Fire Audit

In our initial planning of this audit, we looked at the broad topic of forest fire suppression but after several interviews with key stakeholders, we quickly decided that managing interface fire risks should be examined.

Audit Focus

The purpose of our audit was to assess the degree to which governments in British Columbia are prepared for major interface fires.

Following consultations with numerous stakeholders, we focused on 4 questions.

- First, are the responsibilities clearly assigned through legislation or otherwise?
- Second, is enough being done to prevent interface fires and mitigate their effects if they occur?
- Third, is the province adequately prepared to respond to and recover?
- And fourth, is the right information gathered to know the magnitude of the risk, to raise awareness, to plan appropriate actions, and to report on preparedness?

Audit Evidence and Approach

As you would expect, our work is evidenced based.

We obtain evidence from three main sources: interviews, surveys and document reviews.

Our **interviews** focused on staff in the Ministry of Forests, Office of the Fire Commissioner, Provincial Emergency Program and local governments throughout the province including Bob Hickey and Dennis Gaudrey, your symposium coordinators.

We **surveyed** all chief administrative officers, fire chiefs, development/planning directors, and emergency coordinators to obtain their assessments of interface fire risks and how well risks are being managed.

We also analyzed more than 200 documents from a variety of jurisdictions containing research results and other information about the management of interface fire risks.

Project Team and Advisory Committee

Our project team included several experienced professionals within my Office including Kathy Crawley who is with us here today and will also be attending the full symposium.

Kathy is also a long-time member of the Willis Point Volunteer Fire Department. We also contracted with a risk management expert who had interface fire experience.

In addition, we established an external advisory committee with 3 private citizens. One had extensive experience as a local government official, one was a former fire chief; and one was a past leader of a provincial fire protection agency.

Together, our advisory group helped to ensure that our audit approach, findings and conclusions were reasonable. We establish advisory groups for most of our risk audits.

Conclusions, Findings and Recommendations

We concluded that governments in British Columbia had much to do to be well-prepared for major interface fires.

In reaching our conclusion, we focused our work on the four questions I stated earlier.

Roles and responsibilities

The first question was whether the roles and responsibilities of provincial agencies and local governments were clearly spelled out.

Clarity is needed to ensure there are no gaps in managing risks.

We found that roles and responsibilities were relatively clear about responding to an interface fire but less clear about who was responsible for prevention, preparedness and recovery planning.

In addition, clarity of roles and responsibilities for managing fire risks on first Nations lands was particularly weak.

We think a lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities leads to other weaknesses we found and to the limited attention given to interface fire risks by both levels of government.

Prevention

Our second question focused on what was being done to prevent interface fires and to limit their effects when they do occur.

All of us know that preventing problems is a whole lot easier and less costly than dealing with them once they occur.

Prevention involves ensuring local governments and residents are aware of the risks of wildfires and how to take actions to reduce those risks.

We found that provincial agencies, for example, the Protection Branch in the Ministry of Forests, work hard each year to promote prevention work in communities.

Our evidence, however, suggested that community awareness levels and efforts to reduce risks were still not good.

For example, many communities did not do risk assessments and many made limited use of techniques available to control risks such as requiring fire resistant materials be used in new construction or initiating controlled burns.

Preparing to respond and recover

Our third question focused on whether communities were prepared to respond to and recover.

Preparation means taking action ahead of time to ensure that all those involved are adequately prepared to react effectively when a fire emergency takes place.

We found that many aspects of response planning were done well in the province. No doubt, this has helped limit the number of major interface fires.

For example, our wild land fire service is well trained and equipped and many communities have excellent structural firefighting and emergency response services.

Also, regional organizations such as the Thompson Okanagan Interagency Committee and the Kootenay Interface Steering Team do excellent work to help deal with interface fire risks.

But, despite many strengths, we thought there was much room for improvement.

We think a key priority should be to improve the state of local emergency planning.

Many jurisdictions lacked emergency plans, and even when plans existed the plans didn't deal adequately with interface fires or recovery.

Some jurisdictions tested their ability to respond to a significant fire, but many did not.

We found that both local firefighters and emergency responders knew they need to improve their training and equipment, and both groups believed their communities were poorly prepared to deal with major evacuations.

We also found that much needed to be done to find ways to reduce risks in small communities that did not have structural fire services or only have small but valuable groups of volunteers.

Information Gathering

Our fourth and final question focused on the importance of gathering sound information about the interface fires that take place in BC.

We found that the term 'interface fire' was not defined in a consistent manner. As a result, the information being gathered is likely to be unreliable.

In addition, the statistics collected by the Protection Branch and by the Fire Commissioner were never combined to provide a complete Provincial picture.

With incomplete and unreliable information, raising awareness and encouraging focused attention was even more difficult a task.

Recommendations

General

In our public report to the Legislative Assembly, we made 38 recommendations. The Public Accounts Committee endorsed all 38 recommendations.

Since then we have carried out two follow-up reviews to determine the degree to which our recommendations have been implemented. As of last November, 27 of the 38 recommendations had been implemented.

One key recommendation was that the provincial government establish an Interface Fire Committee with representatives from the Provincial Emergency Program, the Ministry of Forests, and the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

This coordinating group is needed in order to clarify roles and responsibilities and to foster a province wide approach.

Eight of our recommendations were directed at this Interface Fire group which was set up in January of 2002. It has since clarified roles and responsibilities, worked to raise awareness of interface fire risks, encouraged organized areas to assess risks and improve training of emergency responders.

Many of you know that Merv Harrower is soon retiring. Merv has made a significant contribution to the province's emergency preparedness. I thank him for that contribution and wish him all the best in his next stage of life.

Now, however, his successor has big shoes to fill. Much work needs to continue, and four of our recommendations pertaining to the interface fire committee remain to be implemented regarding:

- encouraging the mitigation of risks,
- solutions to training & equipping local firefighters, and
- gathering information to determine the extent of interface fire risks.

Provincial Emergency Program

We directed 21 recommendations at the Provincial Emergency Program which is the provincial coordinating agency and leader in emergency management.

This agency has worked hard and succeeded in implementing 19 of those recommendations pertaining to:

- raising awareness of the risks among community emergency coordinators,
- completing a risk assessment model
- planning community emergency response,
- training fire fighters and other emergency responders,
- encouraging the annual testing of emergency radio communications
- planning to evacuate communities,
- testing the ability to respond to major interface fires and,
- assessing recovery planning

The two recommendations that remain to be implemented are:

- the provision of advisory support to communities with emergency preparedness deficiencies and,
- development and distribution of guidelines for recovery planning.

Ministry of Forests Protection Branch

We think the Ministry of Forests Protection Branch has played a key role in managing interface fire risks. In our public report, we commended the people in this Branch for their significant efforts.

We did, however, direct five recommendations to the attention of the Protection Branch.

We thought that the Branch's response priorities should be set out in legislation because when firefighters focus on protecting human life and property, they can be criticized for not protecting forests.

However, we also said the Branch needs to:

- formalize its plans to continue to have a role in raising community awareness,
- complete hazard mapping,
- resolve community concerns about working arrangements between the Protection Branch and local fire departments, and
- improve the application of the unified command.

At the time of our last follow-up, formalization of its legislation and completion of hazard mapping still remained outstanding. We understand the proposed Wildfire Act will be dealt with during the current session of the Legislative Assembly.

Office of the Fire Commissioner

With a small staff, the Office of the Fire Commissioner was to enforce fire safety laws, investigate fires, inform the public about fire safety, and certify firefighters.

The Commissioner also responds to major emergencies.

In our report, we asked this Office:

- to help find practical solutions to situations where local governments are not willing to let their fire departments respond to fires outside their boundaries because of legal liability concerns.
- We asked the Commissioner to help establish mutual aid agreements among fire departments located close to each other.
- And also to find ways to help improve public safety in areas that lack fire department services.

I understand the Commissioner has not been able to implement these recommendations. This office is moving away from activities involving local government operational fire service issues and toward fire prevention and public fire safety awareness.

Now, in summary, although many of our recommendations are implemented, that is not the end of it.

Areas such as risk assessment, community support, training, co-operation between agencies, and information gathering all need ongoing effort by all to be effective.

Many of our recommendations provide a framework that will require continuous work and attention by the Provincial Emergency Program, the Forest Protection Branch and the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

Independent Review of the Province's Interface Fire Response

In October, my staff met with Mr. Gary Filmon to discuss our interface fire audit. In looking at his report—that I understand will be the topic of a plenary session later this morning—we found that it includes many of our recommendations, expands some and includes new ones in a number of areas.

In general, the Filmon report is more detailed, and with more of a focus on specific operational recommendations resulting from the experiences of last summer's firestorms.

For example, where we recommended the Interface Fire Committee encourage communities to take practical steps to mitigate interface fire risks, Filmon endorses the undertaking of prescribed burns.

Public awareness of the importance of managing interface fire risk has risen substantially as a result of the catastrophic fires that took place this summer. This window of opportunity provides fertile ground for the further implementation of our recommendations and those of the Firestorm 2003 review.

As part of my continuing follow-up work on Managing Interface Fire Risks, I intend to provide the Legislative Assembly with an assessment of the province's implementation of the applicable Firestorm

2003 review recommendations. The form and extent of our assessment will depend on the extent that the province reports on the implementation status of those recommendations.

I think a key question to ask and focus on is who in government is responsible for dealing with the recommendations made by Mr. Filmon and will there be the required financial support—particularly for a stronger approach to prevention.

Now that ends my formal presentation, I will try my best to answer any questions you have at this time.

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