

Date: 25/09/2024

To: Chair and Directors, Emergency Preparedness Committee

And To: Murray Daly, Chief Administrative Officer

From: Gerald Pinchbeck, Manager of Communications

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Short Summary:

EOC Communications for 2024 Wildfires & Chilcotin River Landslide

Background:

This memo seeks to provide an overview of the CRD's Public Information efforts during the response to wildfires in our region and the Chilcotin River Landslide.

Goals & Objectives

In support of the BCERMS response priorities for the CRD EOC, the Information Section aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Inform the public about risks to life, safety, and health from emergencies and disasters in the CRD.
2. Keep the public informed about the CRD's response to emergencies and disasters.
3. Provide information about emergency programs, services, and supports.
4. Promote action by Cariboo residents to prepare themselves for emergencies.
5. Recruit and maintain subscribers for the CRD's communications channels, including the Emergency Notification System.

As part of this framework, the CRD EOC Information Section aimed to maintain itself as the single source of information about CRD issued evacuations, emergency information, and emergency supports. This was concentrated around ensuring that select spokespersons delivered messaging on behalf of the EOC based on the level of response and the type of information being provided.

Staffing

The Information Section received sufficient support from the Cariboo Regional District. For a majority of the season, only one Information Officer was required to staff the section. During peak activity times, the section saw up to three staff working in the section. A continuing strain and future risk area is social media monitoring and moderation, which can occupy the full attention of one or more section personnel. Media relations continues to be important despite the decline of traditional media due to the high profile nature of our responses.

A key need for the future is backfilling the Section Chief position (Public Information Officer). The number of staff available to fill the position is extremely limited due to the specialized skillsets required. At present, two staff can perform the full scope of duties while up to three other staff could perform part of the duties. A training program would be required to build further in-house experience in this role. Alternatively, formal contract arrangements would be required to backfill this critical role. The tactic necessary to address this is subject to funding.

Emergency Notification System

Voyent Alert is the CRD's public emergency notification system, replacing the previous Everbridge system. The system provides several features which add value not provided by the CRD's former software, including improved mapping capabilities, improved ability for users to self-manage their information, and a mobile app.

Since the launch of Voyent Alert in March 2024:

- There are 28,506 total subscribers.
- There has been a net increase of 2,312 new subscribers since launch.
- Among the subscribers, 63,726 contact points are registered:
 - 593 Android App Users
 - 976 iOS App Users
 - 14,359 SMS numbers
 - 15,201 Email addresses
 - 32,597 Phone Call numbers

Excluding the initial tests conducted in March, Voyent Alert was used to issue 86 notifications (21 critical and 65 informational) which were sent to 8,690 contact points. 35.8% of these were through SMS message, 28.4% were through email, and 20.0% were through voice call.

Some end-user challenges were experienced during the response season. These challenges can be addressed through continued public education, including:

- Users need to specify locations to be notified about. If a user has not pinned a location for a place they wish to receive notifications for, they will not be notified.
- The ENS is not a general information system. Users are only notified if a pinned location is included in a notification area.

- Notifications can still be received through landlines and emails. A mobile data connection is not necessary.
- The notification system is used only for CRD emergency notifications. Information about wildfires, health hazards, or other events where provincial notification is provided are not broadcast through the ENS.
- Notifications are reliant on the capacity of telecommunications infrastructure in a given area. A large number of notifications, particularly phone calls, will take time to work through an area.
- Repeat calls where user acknowledgement has not been received are conducted at varying levels. Critical notifications use a faster call-back rate than informational notifications.

Provincial Broadcast Intrusive Alert System

This response season also saw the Province make its new Broadcast Intrusive Alerts system available for use. This system's function is vastly different from Voyent Alert:

- Notifications are broadcast to an entire area covered within the range of a cell, radio, or television broadcasting station.
- Anyone in the area, regardless of residency status, will receive the notification – no subscription or management is necessary.
- Notifications cannot be geo-targeted. The broadcast area is tied to cell-towers and can include areas that are not impacted by a response action.
- The CRD cannot determine when or how to use the system and must process a notification through a Provincial approval process.

The system was used in two incidents during this season – once to communicate the Wells/Barkerville/Bowron Area Evacuation Orders, and multiple times during the Chilcotin River Landslide Response.

The BIA system was utilized by the CRD EOC to broadcast the evacuation orders for the District of Wells, Barkerville Area, and Bowron Lake Area. This was done for two reasons. First, the EOC sought to gain operational experience with deploying a provincial notification tool to better understand how it would work within an emergency operation. Second, the EOC identified the area as having many tourists who would not receive notifications from Voyent Alert and could benefit from a more intrusive notification tool.

During the Chilcotin River Landslide response the system was used by the Province to notify communities along the Fraser River. Notably, this BIA was broadcast into communities further away from the river, including Williams Lake and areas around 100 Mile House. The CRD's EOC was not consulted on the BIA or notification areas for it.

The BIA offers an additional notification tool; however, it is not a tool ideal for all scenarios due to how notifications are delivered. Voyent Alert remains a more suitable notification tool for

CRD evacuation orders and alerts, along with other emergencies. The CRD EOC will maintain an independent ENS as a primary notification tool and may use the BIA on a case by case basis.

Social Media

The activation saw continued notifications being issued through the CRD's social media channels. For emergency operations, these consisted of Facebook and X / Twitter. As usual, the EOC's social media saw high levels of user engagement and reach during the response phases, and low levels of engagement during the preparedness phase.

- Over 536,600 people were reached between April 1, 2024 and August 31, 2024.
- EOC content generated over 40,800 likes, shares, comments, and other engagements.
- 1,093 net new followers were gained during the same time frame, for a total of over 25,600 followers.
- 108 messaging conversations were started during this period.

The top five posts for reach included:

- April 10 – Preparedness – BC River Forecast Centre update (255,500 reach, 195 reactions, 133 comments, 1,200 shares)
- July 21 – Response – Barkerville Area Evacuation Order (106,900 reach, 143 reactions, 16 comments, 657 shares)
- August 2 – Response – Seiko Found (95,100 reach, 1,300 reactions, 179 comments, 978 shares)
- July 10 – Response – Cornish Mountain Fire Area Evacuation Alert (92,600 reach, 193 reactions, 15 comments, 647 shares)
- April 21 – Response – Burgess Creek Area Evacuation Alert (68,400 reach, 134 reactions, 28 comments, 294 shares)

Audience Demographics are:

- 73.5% of all followers are women.
- Audience age is:
 - 1.3% are aged under 25.
 - 14.2% are aged 25-34.
 - 23.9% are aged 35-44.
 - 23.6% are aged 45-54.
 - 19.4% are aged 55-64.
 - 17.6 are aged 65+.
- 45% of all followers are from the Cariboo RD communities.

Emergency Information Line

283 phone calls were received through the Emergency Information Line from April 1 to August 31. Nearly all calls occurred in July (167) or August (98), which coincides with the CRD EOC's active response phase to wildfires and the Chilcotin River Landslide. Major call trends continued

to relate to information readily available online and outside the CRD's jurisdiction to manage, including road conditions and events (Drive BC), wildfire locations (BC Wildfire App), and wildfire sizes and growth (BC Wildfire App). Several calls were also handled for callers trying to obtain access permits, identify if they are in an order or alert area, and sign up for notifications.

Website Analytics

Between April 1 and August 31, web traffic to the CRD's emergency operations pages consisted of 27,465 total views, 15,610 active users, 1.76 views per user, and an average engagement time of 14 seconds. The top three pages visited were pages for Fire Information, Evacuation Orders and Alerts, and the Emergency Notification System. Together, these accounted for nearly all views, users, and events on the website during this time.

Conclusion

The CRD EOC overall achieved positive results with its public information efforts during the response season. Continued improvements can be made, including increasing audio-visual capabilities and content, expanded preparedness marketing, and continued staff development.

Attachments:

None.