Slave Lake Recovery:
Whole-of-Government Disaster Response

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Abstract

The case study has been pulled together by IPAC from various sources to share learnings about cross-jurisdictional and horizontal leadership. This case study has been reviewed by Government of Alberta officials involved in the Slave Lake Recovery Task Force for inaccuracies, but is an IPAC document.

The disastrous fires in Slave Lake, Alberta in 2011 held the challenges of the immediate, life-threatening situation demanding immediate action, but also the equally dangerous community-threatening aftermath of rebuilding. The way in which the Government of Alberta organized a collective public sector response is rife with many lessons. Events of this kind are common across government. This case adds to the body of knowledge on horizontal management, integrated response and single points of accountability.

This case was based on a submission to IPAC by the Alberta Government for its Leadership Award Program. It has been extensively modified by the author and updated by the Alberta Ministry.

Learning Objectives

The case is of interest to those who are interested in horizontal and vertical collaboration of governments and collaboration between governments and non-governmental agencies. It intends to illustrate, from a provincial government's point of view, the complexity in planning and implementing disaster-recovery initiatives and to encourage readers to think critically about possible tradeoffs in designing the initiatives. It points to new models of integrated responses to highly disruptive events.

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Background

Over a mid-spring weekend in May 2011, in forests a 3-hour-drive north of Edmonton, Alberta, three wildfires were detected. Fulled by winds gusting at over 100 kilometers an hour, the wildfires quickly moved towards communities on the Southern Shore of Slave Lake, the Town of Slave Lake and the Sawridge First Nation. States of Local Emergency (SOLE) was declared in the Town of Slave Lake and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River on May 14, 2011. Despite heroic efforts of firefighters and volunteers, flames moved into the town and residential neighbourhoods in the municipal district. Residents were ordered to evacuate to communities outside the fire zone

The SOLE declarations were in effect for 17 days. The wildfires had caused massive damages: over 700 households lost their homes; almost a third of the Town of Slave Lake was destroyed; 433 properties were destroyed; 84 properties damaged; and, the town hall, which housed municipal offices, a local library, and the provincial offices in the region, burned down.. The disaster's magnitude was unprecedented in Alberta's history. The evacuation was one of the largest in Canadian history, as almost 15,000 people reported to evacuation centers in 10 municipalities.

At the peak of the disaster response, more than 1500 emergency personnel worked tirelessly. This included the Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service, provincial forestry workers, and emergency responders from across Alberta and Canada. The evacuation order remained in place for almost two weeks for reasons of safety and to establish baseline environmental data to assist in the understanding of potential health impacts of fires of this scale. The re-entry of residents took place in phases, through a prioritization system, to ensure that essential series and utilities were in place to support a returning population. The States of Local Emergency ended on 1 June, 2011.

Recovery Response

In the past, following a natural disaster, the Government of Alberta (GoA)'s normal approach to recovery would be to establish a temporary Disaster-Recovery Program administered by the Alberta Emergency Management Agency to allow municipalities to cover the costs of responding to and cleaning up from the disaster. There was generally no need for much long-term recovery support. However, in light of the magnitude of the wildfires' damage, the GoA recognized that the past approach was inappropriate. No single ministry had the breadth of responsibility or the capacity to plan, coordinate, and implement the provincial response and recovery efforts nor to adequately support the local governments as they undertook all the tasks at hand (i.e. rebuilding local infrastructure, building new residential and commercial buildings, re-establishing the local economy and social programs, revitalizing the local natural environment, and improving preparedness and mitigation efforts). The GoA believed that, in the current case, a successful recovery required collaboration among stakeholders from all levels of government and outside of governments, and a locally driven planning and implementing process supplemented by provincial resources and oversight.

As recognized by the GoA, the issue at hand was complex. The scale of the disaster was large, crossing local jurisdictional boundaries. Moreover, the recovery was expected to be long and costly, outstripping the local jurisdiction's resources to recover on their own.Many staff and elected officials lost their own homes.

Addressing the issues involved many policy areas and crossed departmental boundaries, and the amount of funding committed for response and recovery efforts would draw public attention to accountability for public

spending, putting pressure on the GoA to be transparent. In sum, the GoA needed to design a structure that would satisfactorily involve the stakeholders, ensure the necessary coordination, and assure accountability. The Alberta government needed to achieve the following:

a) Interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration.

b) Provincial-municipal cooperation and collaboration;

c) Regional cooperation between two municipalities and a First Nation.

d) Public-private (including both for-profit and non-profit organizations) cooperation and collaboration;

e) Adequate and timely support provided to individual residents; and

f) Efficient, effective, innovative, and accountable use of public fund.

On May 17, the Premier toured the area and promised a full response. He appointed his own Deputy Minister to create a Task Force of Assistant Deputy Ministers to oversee recovery in the Lesser Slave Lake Region. The members of the Task Force represented a core group of Alberta ministries with support from others as required. Very quickly a governance framework emerged that was vital to getting this done. The governance rules in play that enabled quick action were:

- Task force members had to have the authority from their own ministries to make decisions,

- Policy and implementation adjustments had to happen quickly and seamlessly,

- There had to be a strong and effective connection with needs identified locally and the provincial support to them,

- Task force members faced a time intensity – meeting daily – that would enable decisions and respect the urgency of many matters they faced, and

- Funding authority for up to $50 million was quickly secured with a realization that there would need for more funds as longer term requirements were understood.

Two examples showcase the complexity that the GoA faced when making decisions:

1. **Emergency and Interim Housing**

With regard to providing emergency and interim housings for those who lost their residences due to the wildfires, the GoA needed to make series of decisions:

a. Where should the houses be built?

b. Who should receive the housing (e.g. essential workers only or some or all of the displaced residents)?

c. Who (ministry(s), department(s), or municipalities) should administer the housing assistance?

d. Who (government or private sector) was better positioned to provide the housing?

e. If the government was deemed better positioned, which ministry(s) or department(s) should be involved in the purchasing and the building of the houses?

f.   If the private sector was deemed more appropriate, what should the tendering process be and how should the GoA monitors the construction?

g.   Should the housing be provided for free or rent/utilities charged?

2. Addressing the Needs

To be successful, recovery must be locally-led. The GoA needed to support the local jurisdictions' assessment of their needs, while ensuring that any supports provided to address these would position them well for the future. For example:

a.   Should support and funding be provided to the local jurisdictions individually or regionally? Should it be linked to the degree of impact they had?

b.   How could the GOA provide capacity support for the recovery period but not create a local dependency on these additional resources for the longer-term?

c.   How could grant processes be expedited and maximum flexibility be previded in funding uses while ensuring that provincial accountability for taxpayer dollars is upheld?

d.   How far should the GOA go about providing the financial and capacity support the region identified as needed for recovery, while ensuring that the additional support provided did not unfairly disadvantage other municipalities?

Stakeholders

The GoA identified seven stakeholders in its recovery plan. The situation faced by each stakeholder is described below.

Individuals and Families

People were the highest priority of the response and recovery efforts.. As the evacuees returned home, many of them found their homes destroyed or damaged by the wildfires. Prior to the wildfires, housing was expensive and the rental market tight in the Lesser Slave Lake region, and the nearest municipalities are an hour away. This led to two inter-connected issues: immediate accommodation and rebuilding. Real estate properties represent significant investments for many individuals and families. Even if one had the financial resources for going through it, the expensive process of rebuilding or repairing the affected properties would take years. Thus, finding affordable, short-term housing was an immediate concern for many individuals and families. In addition to the housing issues, the affected residents needed to re-establish their life. This means finding employment, placing one's children back into school, and accessing services and consumables needed for every-day living (e.g. buying groceries and other household consumables).

Local Governments

The local governments affected, which included the Town of Slave Lake, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, and the Sawridge First Nation, played central roles in the recovery. Local governments provide various important services to their residents (e.g. issue building permits, operate libraries, etc.). The wildfires, which destroyed various government buildings and records, had negatively affected the local governments' capacity to carry out their normal duties. In addition to resuming their normal roles, the governments also needed to lead and plan the recovery initiatives within their respective communities while working together with other governments to achieve long-term recovery for the region.

Businesses

While not many local businesses lost their premises, those who did needed to rebuild lost properties, and all had to recuperate from the business interruption caused by the evacuation and community disruption. They also needed to re-connect with suppliers and customers to re-establish their presence in the community and access information on private and governmental financial assistance, such as the loans offered by Agriculture Financial Services Corporation.

Non-government Organizations (NGOs)
Governmental departments and agencies are often limited by their resources and mandates. In disaster recovery, there are roles that could be better fulfilled by NGOs. As noted by the GoA, the Alberta NGO Council actively participated in the wildfire response and recovery planning. Moreover, individual NGOs in the region delivered many needed supports, through volunteers, to local communities. For example, the Red Cross was contracted by the GoA to work with municipal and provincial governments to support residents transitioning from temporary accommodation to longer-term solutions.

Federal Government

The federal government provided financial assistance through Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangement administered by Public Safety Canada.

Government of Alberta

The GoA played the key enabling and support role in the recovery process. It appointed the Slave Lake Regional Recovery Task Force to coordinate departmental support to the region and facilitate the recovery process. See the Governance Model section below for more information on the GoA's roles.

Regional Recovery Governance Model

The GoA used a recovery governance model that was locally led and fully supported by provincial ministries. The responsibilities of the recovery were shared between the provincial government and the local governments, with the responsibilities of the GoA diminishing as the local governments' capacity recovered.

Provincial Side

The GoA's primary responsibilities were to oversee government coordination and responses, set priorities, make decisions related to funding, and support local governments by providing information to residents, and communicating government programs to the region. To assist the political executives in fulfilling the responsibilities, the Lesser Slave Lake Recovery Task Force was established.

The Task Force makes recommendations regarding recovery initiatives, develops policy and planning content in key areas, manages issues and provides guidance locally where needed. It sought appropriate policy and financial approvals from Cabinet and Treasury Board or the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, worked in partnership with local governments or other non-governmental agencies, and horizontally across up to 18 provincial ministries. The Task Force was supported by a cross-ministry working group made up of represented ministries.

Regional Side

At the local level, leadership for recovery is provided by the Regional Tri-Council, consisting of all the elected representatives from the Town of Slave Lake, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 and the Sawridge First Nation. The Tri-Council establishes regional objectives and priorities, oversees the planning and implementation of the recovery projects, , provides regional coordination, and communicates recovery information to residents.

The Tri-Council is supported by the Chief Administrative Office Secretariat, who ensure that the Tri-Council's decisions are implemented, and advises and keeps the Tri-Council informed on the progress of the recovery plan.

A Regional Recovery Coordination Group was established to augment the capacity of the local governments to undertake recovery projects. The Group takes direction from the CAO Secretariat and works with staff from local authorities, the Task Force ministries and contractors in order to implement the recovery plan.

What Constitutes Success

In order to ensure accountability and effectiveness of any initiative, governments need to decide on criteria of success. These criteria guide the allocation of funding for programs and projects and how they are implemented and monitored. Impacts of a large-scale wildfire have multiple dimension; thus, the recovery from the wildfire also should be assessed on multiple dimensions. In the case of Slave Lake, four dimensions, or pillars of recovery, – people, environment, reconstruction, and economy – were identified in the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Wildfire Recovery Plan. In broad term, the goal of recovery was " to return the region to its pre-disaster state, while ensuring that its communities are not socially, environmentally or economically disadvantage by the wildfire event and are well-positioned for future growth" (GoA, 2011, p. 10).

More specifically, multiple goals were identified under each of the dimensions. In the people dimension, safety, health and social well-being were identified as important aspects. Residents of the affected region should have access to fire and police services, comprehensive health care services, social activities, property that are safe and clean, and other essential services (e.g., water and sewage).

In the environment dimension, the goals were to manage the changes in both natural and urban environments. The management of the natural environment included monitoring the air, water and soil quality and making the necessary actions to ensure that the wildfire did not have any long-term adverse impacts. The management of the urban environment included re-establishing or enhancing amenities (e.g., recreational facilities) and managing waste, particularly landfills, to protect human health and enhance the natural environment.

In the reconstruction dimension, the goal was to re-establish a viable, attractive, and sustainable community when rebuilding residential, commercial, and public buildings. The tasks of rebuilding included the following: establishing what was covered by insurance, rebuilding the insured assets, establishing architectural controls, re-surveying of property lines, taking steps to reduce the risk of recurrence of similar disasters (e.g., becoming a model a FireSmart community) and proactively providing information related to rebuilding (e.g., through information fairs) to the affected home and business owners.

In the economy dimension, the goal was to ensure that people, business and industry, infrastructure and government in the region were well-supported to return to normal. To rebuild the economy, several tasks' completion were necessary, including the following: providing individuals the access to insurance adjusters and emergency financial services, career counseling and employment assistance; providing business with loans, temporary office space and advice on how to re-establish their presence within the community; restoring communications, infrastructure and transportation links; and supporting local government in the Lesser Slave Lake region in achieving their recovery goals.

Moreover, the GoA emphasized that the region should return to the pre-disaster state measured in terms of its trajectory rather than static number in the dimensions identified. For example, in the *people* dimension, a population target was set for 2015 calculated based 2010 census data and historical and current growth rate in Alberta. In the *economy* dimension, the region's target employment rate in 2015 was also set to be consistent with the affected region's historical data and the current provincial data.

Lessons Learned

a.   Decide on Measurable Recovery Goals Early

A disaster recovery plan can take many directions and involve different stakeholders at different levels depending on its goal(s). For example, decision makers may be satisfied with restoring or rebuilding only what was lost (i.e. same level of services and physical infrastructures at the same location). Alternatively and more ambitiously, they may wish to adopt changes (e.g. a new clinic at a new location or a bigger school at a old location) in hope of achieving goals such as higher future growth or better service quality. In other words, the goal(s) of a recovery plan has great impacts on recovery outcome; thus, choose it early and make it measurable.

b.   Identify and Engage Critical Stakeholders

Due to the magnitude of the disaster, large sum of funding and human resources were needed for recovery. Consequently, it was difficult for a single level of government, not to mention a single ministry, to solely manage the recovery. Moreover, there were limitations (e.g. jurisdictions, amount of resources and expertise, proximity to individuals affected, etc.) on what any ministry, department, or level of government could do. In conclusion, working with partners in this case was not only necessary, but also beneficial. In particular, the GoA identified the local governments as the critical stakeholders as it assessed the situation, and engaged them ing developing

the recovery plan, and establishing a structure and process that secured their continuous commitment to implementing the plan.

It should be noted that critical stakeholders are not limited to other levels of government or government departments. In the Slave Lake case, Alberta's NGO Council and Red Cross were identified as critical partners in mobilizing volunteers, managing donations and helping evacuees who were directed to nearby municipalities.

c.   Establish a Clear, Well-Understood Command Structure

Having a command structure was important, given the enormous amount of human, physical, and financial resources needed to respond to large-scale disasters and the level of coordination needed to use them effectively. The coordination can be achieved by having a structure that is clear and well understood among all stakeholders. This structure should include clearly defined roles, accountabilities and levels of decision-making power for the parties involved. Without the structure, there may be duplicated efforts thus wasting resources, or the resources may not be directed to the needed areas because of concerns over jurisdictional boundaries or simply not knowing what others are doing or not doing.

With so many provincial departments involved and the regional focus of recovery, having a governance model that coordinated recovery efforts both provincially and locally and, which facilitates mutual understanding and communication, it has been possible to ensure accountability for provincial funding and responsibilities while ensuring that the recovery is locally led.

A clear governance model, as was developed in the Slave Lake case, can serve as a basis for other jurisdictions to develop their large-magnitude-disaster-recovery plan; however, it should be noted that because each area is different and each disaster is different, the plan should be customized to the uniqueness of the locality.

References

The lessons learned and practices employed in response and recovery to the Lesser Slave Lake wildfires of 2011 have be adapted to address a much larger scale disaster in 2013, the Southern Alberta Floods.

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Teaching Questions

Devolution of responsibility may lead to better responsiveness, but it could come at the price of difficulty in assigning accountability and hamper coordination. Given the Government of Alberta's goal to remain accountable to the taxpayers while effectively responding to the local needs, what are some of the tradeoffs that you might need to make? How do you justify the tradeoffs? Please give three examples.

Recovery is not merely rebuilding the lost infrastructures and injecting money into regional economy. There needs to be a vision and principles that bind and guide the stakeholders during and beyond the recovery. Knowing the complexity of the stakeholders involved at Slave Lake, what would be your vision and principles for the recovery initiative? What reactions do you anticipate from different stakeholders?

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