

BRAZEAU COUNTY & THE TOWN OF DRAYTON VALLEY, AB

BUCK CREEK WILDFIRE RCU005

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW

FINAL REPORT
DECEMBER 2023



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A: METHODOLOGY

As part of their continuous improvement approach, Brazeau County and the Town of Drayton Valley contracted Transitional Solutions Inc. (TSI) to complete an After-Action Review and report of the event. At the time of this report, the wildfire response has shifted to recovery. The primary objective of this wildfire after-action review is to conduct a thorough and impartial assessment of the incident response within the municipalities of Brazeau County and the Town of Drayton Valley, emphasizing a holistic approach aimed at learning, improving future responses, and fostering a culture of continuous enhancement within its firefighting and emergency management practices.

The After-Action Report/Improvement Plan (AAR/IP) is produced based on post-event debriefs, post-incident surveys, interviews, and review of incident documents. It intends to identify and celebrate successes and determine key recommendations that address crucial capability gaps in response to the above incident. This AAR proposes actionable and achievable improvements that will benefit existing and future systems, processes, and subsequent responses.



24 KEY STAKEHOLDER
INTERVIEWS



63 SURVEY
RESPONSES



SITE TOUR OF
IMPACTED AREAS



75+ DOCUMENTS
REVIEWED

TSI utilized best practices from Alberta, British Columbia, and the United States Department of Homeland Security's Exercise Evaluation Program in developing this After-Action Report and Improvement Plan. Key activities, processes and documents used by the Incident Command Post (ICP), Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) and Emergency Social Services (ESS) teams were reviewed and analyzed. Interviews and survey feedback, including elected official feedback, provided valuable insight into the incident and emergency management processes. TSI relied heavily on the feedback provided by those directly and indirectly involved in the response; interested and affected parties were candid and willingly shared. TSI is grateful for the comments and feedback provided by the participants throughout the after-action review process.



The report includes a summary of each response section, highlighting strengths, primary recommendations along with supporting actions, and areas for improvement. For quick reference, the primary recommendations have been summarized in Appendix 1. This table allows the municipalities to confirm, assign and track the completion of recommendations, if desired, as part of its continual improvement process.

B: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The After-Action Report details the aftermath and response to a Type 3+ emergency management event as a result of a Head Fire Intensity Level Six (6) out of control wildfire, formally identified as the Buck Creek RCU005 Wildfire. A Level Six (6) fire is the most extreme category on this rating scale. It is noted that Brazeau County and Drayton Valley use the Incident Command System (ICS) approach to large-scale emergency incidents as required by the Alberta Emergency Management Act.

It is imperative to emphasize the pivotal role played by municipal staff, first responders, and supporting agencies, who demonstrated collective cooperation, unwavering commitment to problem-solving, and relentless dedication. They supported the triumphant resolution of this unparalleled wildfire event. The success achieved in managing this crisis was inherently linked to the collaborative efforts and tireless determination demonstrated by responders, underscoring the significance of their integrated approach amidst some challenging circumstances.

The report highlights strengths and weaknesses in the [ECC activation](#). Communication challenges, delays in system setup, and role confusion hindered efficiency. Recommendations focus on improving communication during ECC activation, enhancing training, reviewing equipment, and ensuring readiness of the ECC.

[ECC functionality](#) strengths include a well-set staging area and effective management, while challenges revolve around overlapping functions between the ECC and ICP, freelancing, and command chain issues. Proposed solutions entail comprehensive training and adherence to ICS principles.

[ECC staffing issues](#) centered around role confusion, lack of ICS and EM training, and fatigue impairments. Challenges included freelancing firefighters and the absence of accountability in the initial days. However, the willingness to help and desire to protect the community by staff was evident throughout the activation. Potential solutions suggest incorporating fatigue management into the MEP and emphasizing clearer role definitions.

The report assesses [Unified Command's strengths in agency integration](#) and highlights challenges in ECC structure, command clarity, and transfer issues. Recommendations focus on improved planning with assisting agencies and training with the RCMP for coordinated strategies.

[Summary of Objectives and Tactics](#) emphasizes the successes in meeting tactical objectives but highlights challenges in grasping the overall picture, resource competition, and the struggle with ECC versus ICP objectives. The need for better planning and coordination emerges as a key solution.

The report assesses the [Emergency Management Plan's](#) strengths in mental health support but outlines challenges in ICS training, critical infrastructure mapping, and cost tracking. Solutions revolve around GIS mapping for critical infrastructure and proactive crisis communication planning.

[Emergency Alerts](#) are acknowledged for accuracy but face challenges with staff access and frequent updates leading to confusion. Solutions emphasize regular credential testing and expanding the buffer zone for evacuation alerts.

Evacuation plans commend the re-entry process but flag issues around evacuations, roadblocks, and security issues. Solutions focus on clarity in evacuation policies and securing evacuated areas.

Emergency Social Services success lies in an in-house registration system, while challenges center on the lack of processes and communication at reception centers and in the call centres. Recommendations focus on simplifying registration and improving communication at centers.

Communications' strengths include intermunicipal collaboration, but challenges arise from political interference, inconsistent messaging, and system integration issues. Solutions emphasize structured crisis plans and elected official communication protocols.

Re-entry strengths were a well-planned process, but challenges arose from confusion in pass systems and security lapses. Solutions target consistent pass systems and securing evacuated areas.

Additional observations note successes in face-to-face communication, familiarity with staff, and resource redundancy. Considerations for future growth highlight the need for better training, clearer communication, and streamlined processes.

Major recommendations advocate for comprehensive training in ECC setup, improving systems and processes, refining emergency plans, and developing proactive crisis communication strategies.

Council, Administration, and staff would greatly benefit from further understanding and utilizing the Incident Command System (ICS) and how it applies in situations like a wildfire event. Both Brazeau County and the Town of Drayton Valley need to utilize the quieter winter months before the start of the 2024 wildfire season to ensure compliance with legislation and have systems, services, and personnel ready, willing and with capacity to respond.



Source 1 Staging Area [Buck Creek Wildfire Meeting Public Presentation (June 2023)]

C: TIMELINE

At first, the Buck Creek Wildfire (RCU005) began as a rekindling of a fire from April 2023. Responders were unaware that it would rapidly escalate into a much larger event beyond the capacity of the single resource initially deployed. Within 72 hours, this became an ICS Type 3 event that would require regional, provincial, and eventually national resources to save lives, protect property and safeguard critical infrastructure.



Unprecedented weather conditions fed wildfire behavior, posing danger to responders and residents living in the path of the fire. Due to the unparalleled and concurrent wildfire activity and behavior in Alberta, a provincial State of Emergency was declared on May 6, 2023, in part to help manage the shortage of available resources, included trained and experienced people to support incident management and fire suppression. The regional Incident Management Teams were on site for multiple weeks to support the Town and County’s response.

D: ACRONYMS

AAR	After Action Review
ACIPN	Alberta Critical Incident Peer Network
AEA	Alberta Emergency Alert
AEMA	Alberta Emergency Management Agency
CAO	Chief Administrative Officer
CISM	Critical Incident Stress Management
DDEM	Deputy Director Emergency Management
DEM	Director Emergency Management
ECC	Emergency Coordination Centre
EM	Emergency Management
ESS	Emergency Social Services
IAP	Incident Action Plan
ICP	Incident Command Post
ICS	Incident Command System
IMT	Incident Management Team
IP	Improvement Plan
LAEMR	Local Authority Emergency Management Regulations
MEP	Municipal Emergency Plan
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
SOLE	State of Local Emergency
SPU	Structural Protection Unit
TSI	Transitional Solutions Inc.
WUI	Wildland Urban Interface













E: INCIDENT OVERVIEW

Name	Buck Creek Wildfire RCU005
Start Date	May 3, 2023 @ 1500hrs
Threat / Hazard	Level 6 Out of Control Wildfire
Initial Incident Description	<p>On May 3, 2023, a previous fire, located in the southeast corner of the County, rekindled due to the dry, hot, and windy conditions that prevailed in the spring of 2023. The wildfire grew 140 hectares to the north and west, escalating rapidly, requiring additional resources and the activation of the Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC). All three regional fire stations were activated, as well as mutual aid support from the County of Wetaskiwin and Parkland County. Alberta Wildfire was providing air support; water haulers and dozers were providing ground support. A small evacuation zone was established as well.</p> <p>A chaotic first 48 hours was worsened by challenging winds; the fire was traveling 1.4km per hour by May 4, growing to 350 hectares. By 11:00pm the wildfire had reached and jumped the river towards the town, a key trigger to evacuate the Town and County. A nighttime whole-of-community evacuation took place under severely restricted egress routes due to wildfires occurring in other jurisdictions including Parkland County and Yellowhead County, both key corridors to get to the reception centre in Edmonton.</p> <p>The situation worsened on May 5 with unprecedented weather conditions that fed extreme wildfire behavior. Situational awareness was limited, one of many reasons why the initial response was treated as a Type 5 event.</p> <p>In total, five (5) residences were consumed during this wildfire event. A limited number of livestock (chickens and pigs) were lost. While there were no human casualties, there was one first responder injury and one contractor injury during the activation.</p>
Scope and Complexity of Incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classified as a Type One (1) event by Brazeau County and Drayton Valley • Over 7,000 residents to evacuate • \$2 Billion in infrastructure and property under threat • Fire area encompassed a perimeter area of 48.1km (12, 350 acres) • 21 other communities were also experiencing significant and simultaneous wildfire activity and evacuations, leading to a provincial State of Emergency. • Resources across the province are scarce due to the high demand for same resource types

<p>Summary of Primary Incident Objectives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life Safety • Critical Infrastructure protection • Residential dwellings protection • Business Continuity
<p>Focus Area(s) for the After-Action Review</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ECC Activation 2. ECC Staffing 3. ECC Functionality 4. Unified Command 5. Communications 6. Objectives Strategies & Tactics 7. Municipal Emergency Management Plan 8. Emergency Alerts 9. Evacuation & Re-Entry 10. Emergency Social Services (ESS)
<p>Assisting Organization(s)</p>	<p>The following organizations assisted with the response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brazeau County and Drayton Valley municipal staff and Fire Department • Clearwater County WUI and Structural Protection Unit • RCMP • Alberta Forestry and Parks • 35 Municipal Fire Services (responding through mutual aid agreements and contracts), one (1) Ontario team and one (1) US team • Regional All Hazards Incident Management Teams (North Central, Central) • Canadian Armed Forces • Over 190 local contractors
<p>Coordinating Organization(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA)
<p>Brazeau County Point of Contact</p>	<p>Kent Edney, P.Eng. KEdney@brazeau.ab.ca CAO, Brazeau County Tel:780-542-7777</p>
<p>Drayton Valley Point of Contact</p>	<p>Wally Ferris wferris@draytonvalley.ca CAO, Town of Drayton Valley Tel: 780-514-2202</p>

F: ANALYSIS OF CAPABILITIES

General areas and capabilities that form part of a large-scale response are listed below. The following summary is based on feedback and observations collected through engagement and documentation.

Area	Area of Strength	Area with Some Challenges	Area Needing Significant Improvement
1. ECC Activation			
2. ECC Staffing			
3. ECC Functionality			
4. Unified Command			
5. Communications			
6. Objectives Strategies & Tactics			
7. Municipal Emergency Plan			
8. Emergency Alerts			
9. Evacuation & Re-Entry			
10. Emergency Social Services (ESS)			

Rating Definitions:

Area of Strength (S): The response activities and tasks associated with the capability were executed in a manner that aligned with emergency plan(s), policies, emergency management best practices, and Incident Command System principles. These areas/capabilities provided a positive contribution to incident response. No, or minimal improvement is recommended.

Area with Some Challenges (C): The response activities and tasks associated with the capability supported some emergency plan(s), policies, emergency management best practices, or Incident Command System principles. These areas supported the achievement of incident objectives the objective(s); however, opportunities to enhance effectiveness and/or efficiency were identified.

Area Needing Significant Improvement (I): The response activities and tasks associated with the capability may have supported the completion of incident objective(s), but some or all of the following were observed: process/procedure/task had a negative impact on the performance of other activities; contributed to additional health and/or safety risks for the public or for emergency workers; and/or was not conducted per applicable plans, policies, best practices, procedures, regulations, and laws.

1 ECC ACTIVATION

The activation of the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) stands as a pivotal focus area within this comprehensive after-action report. Serving as the nerve center during crisis events, the ECC's role in orchestrating and coordinating response efforts is paramount. This section of the report meticulously examines the ECC's activation procedures and overall effectiveness in facilitating a cohesive and efficient response during the wildfire incident.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Initially the ECC was set up in a location thought to be away from the fire, where the ICP and ECC were treated as one entity in the same building.
- At first it was thought that having both the ICP and the ECC together would facilitate the ease of communications between the two groups and at first blush that seemed to be the case with information flowing freely between the Coordinators and the Command Post.
- As the event was slowing down the decision was made to have the Emergency Coordination Centre move back into the Town Office as it was determined that it was safe for workers to locate there and with the re-entry plan residents were likely to go to the Town office for support issues. Additionally, this would enable the workers to conduct their daytime tasks if or as necessary.

CHALLENGES

- It took three (3) days to set up the ECC and have it running smoothly.
- The dissemination of information regarding the activation of the ECC to everyone, including the fire suppression team, was incomplete. As a result, firefighters lacked early awareness that assistance was en route during the incident, contributing to independent actions by some fire suppression teams.
- As situational awareness was still in its infancy, the trigger point for safety zones was compromised almost immediately.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

1. **Conduct training specific to ECC Activation and standing up the ECC to familiarize staff with roles and responsibilities.**

Actions

- a. Update the Municipal Emergency Plan (Appendix H) to include County information for ECC activation.
- b. Update the Municipal Emergency Management Plan to include notifying AEMA of real or potential activations.
- c. Consider electronic contact distribution lists to activate the ECC; this could be through simple channels such as Microsoft Teams, SMS text group or the I Am Responding app.

COMMENTS:

Having a separate yet co-located ICP and ECC initially allowed for the ICP to be tactical without worrying about the ECC, which is more administrative, and planning based. However, the fire crossed the trigger

point quickly and the decision was made to move both the ICP and the ECC into a safer location, so it was relocated to the Community Hall which accommodated the ICP and ECC in the same room.

Given the complexity of the event, it took an inordinate amount of time (three days) to set up the ECC and have it running smoothly. It is imperative to understand that asking for help early on in an event this size is critical to the successful management of the incident. Initially communication breakdown was damaging in this event, with a stark lack of communication between the ECC being activated and the IC who either did not understand the ICS system or wasn't aware that the ECC had been stood up. This resulted in both the IC and the ECC fighting for resources on the same event.

Because the evacuation trigger point for the building used as an ECC had been crossed the decision to move both the ECC and ICP into the Community Hall was made. The working ECC was, by unintentional building design, open to anyone walking in the door of the Community Hall. This included local council members, the CAOs and people running for the provincial election (that was happening at the same time).

Understanding that it is necessary in these events to request assistance quickly, use the adage to “go big fast.” If the event ends up being smaller than anticipated, it is easier to stand down resources than it is to play catch up. Utilizing AEMA and the PECC early in the event to request provincial resources and coordinate the resource ordering, including mutual aid, would be beneficial and avoid confusion when many events are happening at the same time.



Source 2 [Initial Fire Call] Buck Creek Wildfire Public Meeting (June 2023)

2 ECC STAFFING

The focus on Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) staffing assumes critical importance. This segment delves into the core elements of ECC operations, scrutinizing staffing levels and roles during the wildfire incident. Examining the allocation of responsibilities and coordination between teams within the ECC's structure aims to highlight successful practices while proposing targeted improvements to fortify the ECC staff's pivotal role in future crisis responses.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Once the Incident Management Team was in place, supported with regional all hazards IMT members in key positions, the chain of command became clear; staff had clear roles and the ECC began actively moving forward.
- Staff were receptive to coaching and mentoring. Positive relationships formed as a result of the regional approach in the ECC.
- The CAOs supported the regional IMTs when it was suggested they take over key ECC roles midway through an operational period.

CHALLENGES

- Lack of training of the municipal staff made filling positions in the ECC difficult; to compensate, the regional IMTs were mentored or trained on the spot. While Town staff had more training than County staff, neither was sufficient for an activation of this scope or scale.
- Role confusion was significant at the onset of the emergency and, while reduced, continued to create challenges throughout the activation. Further training and exercising would clarify chain of command and roles in emergencies
- Span of control was challenged. This was most evident with the DEM also acting as the Incident Commander while also physically leading firefighting response in the field.
- Accountability was problematic, putting first responders and NGO workers at risk.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

2. **Ensure all staff and elected officials have the minimum legislated training requirements, and exercise accordingly to practice and retain skills, as per the Local Authority Emergency Management Regulations.**

Actions

- a. Consider assigning the DEM and/or DDEM roles to positions within the municipality that won't typically be required operationally or tactically in future emergencies.
- b. Complete functional exercises to practice the roles and command structure of an ECC. Physically test the notification system(s), activate responders, establish the ECC and staff all positions.
- c. Fill and utilize the Liaison Role early in the ECC activation; with the significant amount of industry and assisting agencies in a Type 3 event, this role is critical for collaboration.

COMMENTS:

Although some staff had taken their ICS 200 a year prior, ICS 300 is encouraged to be the minimum trained level allowing entry into the ECC.

The DEM must be keenly aware of when to escalate and delegate so that they can move into a strategic position within the ECC. This comes with training, experience, and mentorship. Ensure this role is provided the time, funding, and support to meet all legislated duties of a DEM, as well as time and resources to ensure the municipal emergency management program is meeting the minimum regulatory requirements so that both municipalities are in compliance with the provincial Emergency Management Act and Regulation(s).

Proper preplanning of any activation, coupled with training and exercising will assist with municipal staff organizing themselves into an effective team and developing a proper cadence providing proper, coordinated, assistive, and informed oversight and direction in the ECC.

The local Staging Area Manager was a willing learner who excelled under the mentorship of the regional IMT who provided education and guidance throughout the event to the Staging Area Manager.



Source 3 [Command Post] Buck Creek Wildfire Public Meeting (June 2023)

3 ECC FUNCTIONALITY

This section meticulously evaluates the ECC's operational dynamics, encompassing its decision-making processes, information flow, resource allocation, and overall adaptability during the wildfire incident. TSI aims offer actionable insights so the municipalities can optimize their responsiveness and efficacy in coordinating future emergency scenarios. This assessment endeavors to enhance the ECC's operational agility and effectiveness as a central hub for coordinated crisis management.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Staging area evolved to become well set up; new and experienced Staging Managers worked cohesively together to expand the space after moving it from Mr. Mikes to the Walmart parking lot.
- The media was buffered from the ECC which was appreciated by the IMTs. IMTs were able to perform duties without fear of misinformation being leaked.
- Staff embraced the mentorship provided by assisting and cooperating agencies.

CHALLENGES

- Chain of command wasn't being followed in the first 72 hours of ECC activation. While chain of command clarity was later mitigated from Day Four onwards, it was not entirely eradicated. Municipal staff would default to municipal roles and subsequent municipal chains of command when communication wasn't well-defined.
- The ECC and ICP were not controlled spaces; it appeared to be an open-door policy, challenging the IMTs ability to perform duties. Many unauthorized parties were privy to discussion and debate, hindering the ability to make and action decisions made at the ECC.
- Multiple ICS principles were not followed, likely because of limited capacity, capability, and maturity of the municipal emergency management programs (specifically unity of command, transfer of command, management by objective, span of control, personnel accountability, and comprehensive resources management).

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

- 3. Review the ECC physical location(s) and set ups to ensure it meets all logistical needs and overall suitability for a sustained activation (e.g. ECC handbooks, vests, position-specific bins, forms, breakout rooms).**

Actions

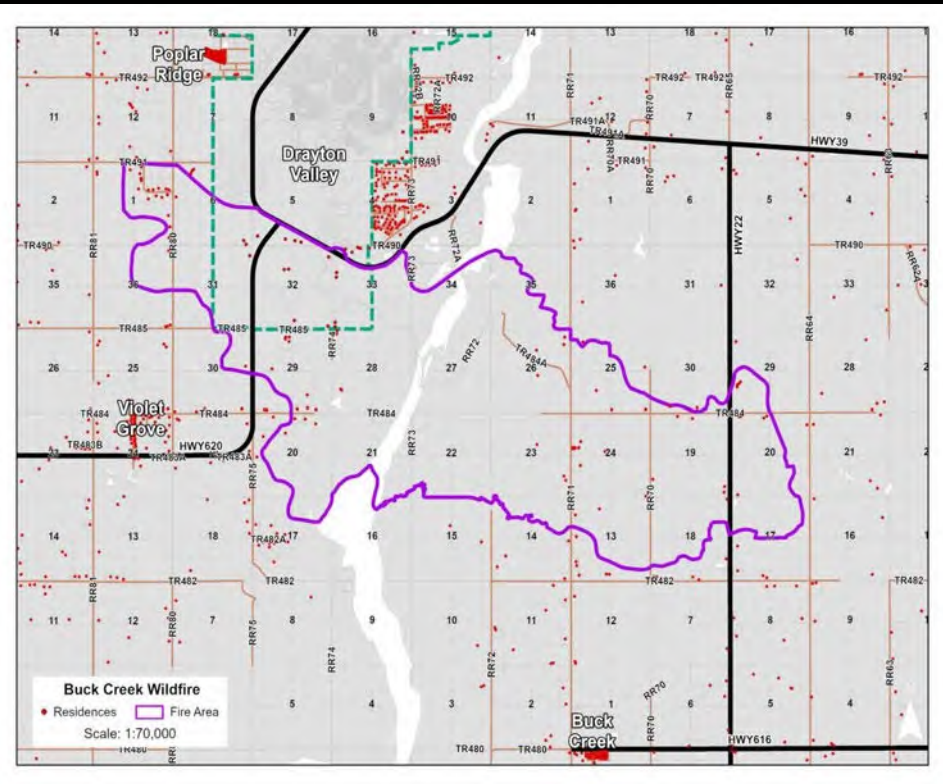
- Consideration should be given to have two separate places for the ICP and ECC set ups, with breakout rooms available to allow for planning work to be done and necessary private meetings to be completed.
- Complete targeting training in the Planning P cycle.

COMMENTS:

The tactical work of the ICP isn't necessarily the work that everyone needs to hear about, which leads people to want to help and could cause unnecessary chaos for the responders as unrequested resources show up on scene.

Having everyone in the same open room did not allow for proper planning meetings where ideas and solutions are considered. Instead, some of this discussion was acted on before being approved, simply because it was overheard in the discussion by well-meaning workers wanting to achieve the objectives prior to presentation and approval at a Planning meeting. This caused chaos as the decision wasn't an objective in an IAP, and often was not in alignment to what was eventually decided on.

Once the regional IMTs were on site to support municipal staff, they were able to help narrow down the scope of "saving the town" to specific and effective objectives, strategies, and tactics. The ICP was also able to begin operating with a plan after Day 3. Resources now allowed for redundancies so that objectives could be focused on. ICS positions were all filled and structured appropriately. More expertise immediately increased the organizational maturity and subsequent response.



Source 4 [Wildfire Area & Activity] Buck Creek Wildfire Public Meeting (June 2023)

4 UNIFIED COMMAND

This section delves into the collaborative framework of the Unified Command, assessing its coordination, communication, and decision-making processes among various agencies involved in the response. This will strengthen inter-agency collaboration and streamline decision-making for more efficient emergency management in future scenarios.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- One the ECC had all positions filled and support in place from the regional IMTs, the integration of multiple agencies began to flow smoothly.

CHALLENGES

- Design the ECC structure to include assisting agencies in the organization chart; consider Unified Command when there are shared problems with shared objectives.
- WUI team was left out and could have provided leadership and support in Unified Command
- Chain of command was not clear in the first 72 hours.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

- 4. Design Unified Command into the County and Town Municipal Emergency Management Plans.**

Actions

- a. Drayton Valley and Brazeau County must train and exercise Unified Command together on a regular interval, with objectives that specifically demand a unified approach to incident management.
- b. Consider Unified Command with Alberta Wildfire in future wildfire emergencies.

COMMENTS:

The Alberta Wildfire crew, operating under the WUI specialists, were able to corral the fire. This is how Unified Command, with assisting agencies, can have meaningful positive impact on the operations. All areas of the command structure are in place to support Operations; working under the same objectives is a key principle to engaging Unified Command.

With the significant amount of industry in the Town and County, the potential for a Type 3 or greater event is high, and therefore so too is the potential to require Unified Command with facility or product owners. Practicing Unified Command using the all-hazards approach will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of future incident management; it will also build relationships, which is the cornerstone of successful emergency management.

5 COMMUNICATIONS

The section on communications within the wildfire after-action review delves into the intricate web of messaging, information dissemination, and coordination strategies employed during the wildfire. This crucial segment scrutinizes the efficacy of communication channels utilized by various stakeholders, highlighting both strengths and areas necessitating improvement.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Intermunicipal collaboration was handled efficiently and effectively in communications, with a shared approach handled by the Town and County Communications Director jointly.
- Communications team members were used effectively in the ECC, with an appropriate level of involvement, and understood their roles well within the scope and structure of the ECC.
- Public communications were generally clear, appropriate to the message in question, and consistent.
- Face to face communications worked best in most scenarios

CHALLENGES

- Political interference resulted in a significant amount of confusion in communicating effectively with evacuees, and resulted in inefficiencies in how communications were developed throughout the crisis.
- Messaging released by municipal elected officials was, in some cases, inconsistent with the information being released through official municipal channels. This created numerous issues, including how evacuees were required to register.
- Due to how quickly the situation evolved in the first two to three days of the event, there was little opportunity for proactive risk communications. Evacuation notices acted as some of the first communications to be released to the public, which will naturally increase public anxieties with no forewarning in the risk phase.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation	Actions
<p>5. Develop a proactive Crisis Management (Communication) Plan that will help determine processes and key messages for future events.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Provide Council Members crisis communications training that includes an overview of how communications take place throughout a crisis, why they take place in this manner, and what the role of elected officials is during a crisis. b. Have formalized processes in place for additional crisis communications capacity to be added in the event of a large-scale emergent situation. c. Tabletop & live scenario training ahead of EM activation will increase all participant comfort with any potential activation.

COMMENTS:

Public communications were generally well received by residents. A high-level sentiment analysis of social media posts between the dates of May 3, 2023, and May 23, 2023, show a typical shift in resident sentiment. The initial days of a crisis tend to result in high-anxiety responses from residents (negative-neutral sentiment); once communications personnel found their operational rhythm, sentiment steadied (neutral-positive); and public sentiment worsened as the evacuation timeline extended (neutral-negative).

Updating the communication and awareness within the current Fire Chief Officers as to what the format is and who oversees the various types of EM activations would be of great value to the organization. For this event, Fire could have been Incident Command, the DEM could have been in the ECC directing its set up and assisting with the transition from on scene command to ICS command for the increasing size and scope of the event. This chain of command and subsequent integrated communication was not supported by Fire Service senior management, creating confusion, and impacting the mitigation of the wildfire.



6 OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES & TACTICS

This segment assesses the coherence between overarching objectives, the strategies devised to achieve them, and the tactical implementation on the ground. Through this examination, TSI aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the responding agency's planning and execution, warranting a more synchronized and effective approach going forward.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Groups felt they got enough information to be able to meet tactics.
- The DEM was coachable; with guidance from the regional IMTs, they were able to establish appropriate triggers for engaging strategies and tactics.
- Task management was done well. Small, simple tasks were handled effectively by municipal staff when existing skillsets were used intentionally and appropriately.
- By Day 3, the ECC had a solid handle on the objectives and assignments.
- The firefighting strategies deployed by the Clearwater County WUI team were extremely effective in protecting the Town and County assets, including a significant volume of residential properties.

CHALLENGES

- IAPs were challenging to create during the first three days of the event due to the major focus on the fire ground, leaving the ECC short-handed.
- ECC objectives and ICP objectives were not in alignment or supportive of one another; once the regional IMTs were embedded into the organization structure, this was resolved.
- Competing priorities led to unintentional competition for resources.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

6. Host ICS 300 training for all eligible County and Town staff who have a primary or backup role in the ECC.

Actions

- Complete ICS 300 certification to gain experience in ECC practices and protocols.
- Complete targeting training in PPOST (Problem, Priority, Objectives, Strategies & Tactics).
- Complete targeting training on completing and presenting Incident Action Plans (IAPs).

COMMENTS:

Incident Action Plans (IAPs) provide clarity and focus on emergencies, delivering a clear roadmap for objectives, priorities, strategies, and tactics. They help responders and stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities, ensuring a coordinated effort toward a common goal. IAPs also enhances communication channels, reduce confusion, and ensure everyone is working towards the same goals. They also promote efficiency, safety, and risk mitigation.

7 MUNICIPAL EMERGENCY PLAN (MEP)

This section meticulously scrutinizes the preparedness, implementation, and adaptability of these plans during the wildfire incident. The review seeks to fortify municipal emergency plans, ensuring they serve as agile frameworks capable of orchestrating effective responses to unforeseen challenges while prioritizing the safety and resilience of the community.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- While not formally documented in the MEP, mental health and access to ongoing supports were made available to municipal staff.
- SOLE process was clearly documented and easy to complete as per the MEP.

CHALLENGES

- While the information specific to Drayton Valley was included in the MEP, there were significant gaps related to Brazeau County.
- Critical infrastructure was not formally identified, prioritized, or mapped in the MEP.
- Processes in the MEP were challenging to understand and follow, in part due to lack of training on the MEP and in part due to the process itself. One example is the process authorizing order approvals and thresholds.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

7. Ensure that both Brazeau County and Drayton Valley update their MEP so that both municipalities meet or exceed the Local Authority Emergency Management Regulations.

Actions

- Complete a MEP orientation workshop; consider at least a half-day session for all municipal staff and at least an additional half-day for those with roles in the MEP.
- Utilize GIS to support development of critical infrastructure maps for the MEP.
- Pre-plan the staging area.

COMMENTS

It is TSI’s understanding, and a common theme heard throughout interviews, that both councils had opportunities to further prioritize the development of their respective MEPs, and there was potential for greater allocation of time and resources to support the DEM in effectively orienting and training all staff in accordance with the MEP. A copy of the MEP has yet to be filed with AEMA since the regulations came into effect in 2020. Of the 55 staff who participated in TSI’s survey, 76% stated they were not familiar with the MEP; 81% indicated they have not been trained on their MEP.

It was unclear if the MEP was available to everyone at times in the ECC, however it was noted by those who did see it that pages were missing, torn, or lost. A digital copy was not available to ESS staff nor was a hard copy available in the ESS kit.

The screenshot shows a web-based self-assessment tool with the following structure:

- Self-Assessment**
 - Status: In Progress (June 26, 2015)
 - Information Sharing
 - Sharing with Field Officers? No
- Risk Assessment**
 - Status: In Progress (June 26, 2015)
 - Information Sharing
 - Sharing with Field Officers? No
- Emergency Plan**
 - Status: In Progress (January 20, 2016)
 - Information Sharing
 - Sharing with Field Officers? No

Source 5 CEMP Results (AEMA, 2023) 21

8 EMERGENCY ALERTS

This section meticulously evaluates the timeliness, reach, clarity, and overall efficacy of emergency alert systems employed. The review seeks to enhance the precision and effectiveness of emergency alerts, ensuring swift and clear communication to maximize public safety and awareness during disasters.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- Communications staff felt they were well supported by Alberta Emergency Alerts throughout the wildfires.
- Alerts were accurate and timely.

CHALLENGES

- Staff access to Alberta Emergency Alerts was not working, despite login credentials having been provided previously. As such, AEA managed Brazeau/Drayton Valley alerts, with support from municipal staff.
- The constant expansion of evacuation boundaries meant that multiple alerts were issued over a short time span, which resulted in confusion and frustration amongst residents.
- The province lifted the Emergency Alert notification before the Town and County were prepared for re-entry, resulting in confusion and frustration amongst residents and staff.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

8. **Schedule regular crisis communications training to practice issuing alerts, reviewing key messages and practice social media posting.**

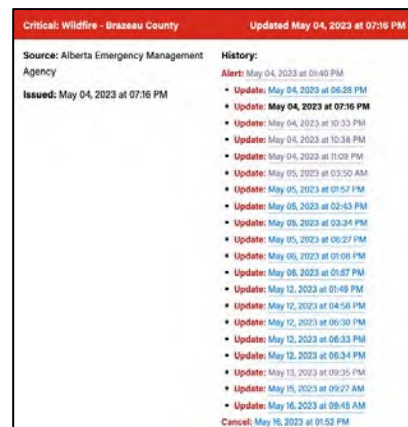
Actions

- a. Login credentials should be tested on a regular basis moving forward, to minimize the potential recurrence of login issues during an emergency.
- b. Expanding the “buffer zone” for Emergency Alerts related specifically to evacuation will result in fewer alerts being required as a fire expands, reducing any confusion and/or anxiety amongst residents who would otherwise receive frequent Alerts each time the boundary expands.

COMMENTS

Emergency Alerts were changing consistently with evacuation boundaries in response to the rapidly expanding fire; this created confusion and frustration amongst evacuees.

When AEA canceled the Town’s Emergency Alert before re-entry was allowed, it created issues for municipal communications teams dealing with questions from residents wanting to return.



Source 6 Alberta Emergency Management Agency

9 EVACUATION & RE-ENTRY

This section scrutinizes the planning, execution, and communication of evacuation orders, as well as the process and guidelines for safe re-entry. The review seeks to optimize evacuation protocols and re-entry strategies, ensuring a safer and more organized response to future evacuation scenarios while prioritizing the well-being of affected communities.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- The evacuation process was engaged in alignment with the pre-planned trigger.
- The re-entry plan was well thought out and executed at a manageable speed.
- The County and Town staff worked very well together, supporting a calm and orderly return. Residents noted there was no feeling of chaos when returning home.
- The pet retrieval and reunification process were effective and efficient.

CHALLENGES

- There was no evacuation plan initially; with help from the Provincial Emergency Coordination Centre and neighboring municipalities, a plan was drafted and implemented.
- Some liked the pass system to support gaining temporary access to the evacuation zone; others took advantage of it or didn't understand it. Ideally this would be a system designed by the province so there is a consistent methodology across borders.
- Back roads were challenging to manage - highways were closed, but, due to the many intersecting rural roads across the County and a lack of security resources, effectively closing or utilizing check points were not attainable. This resulted in active back road access.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

- 9. Utilize the ICS structure to gain advanced situational awareness so that triggers provide as much buffer time as practicable for future planning and evacuations/re-entry.**

Actions

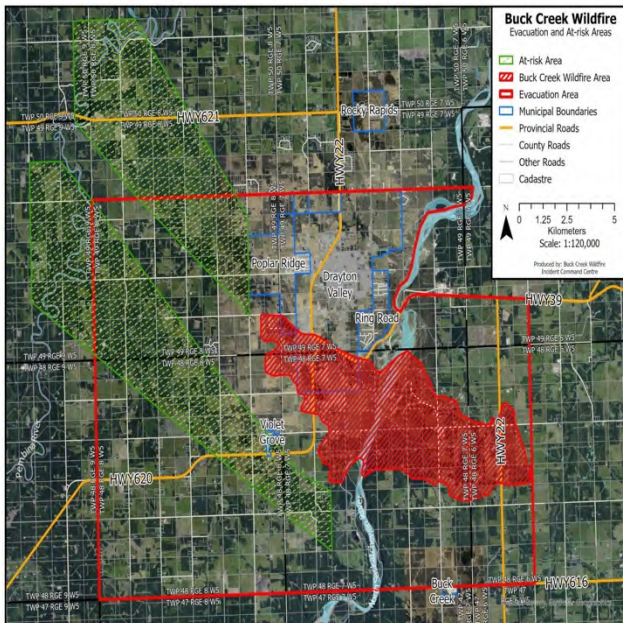
- Utilize the "go big fast" motto as a core tenet in all decision making, using modern situational awareness tools to best understand the risks at play.
- Train with assisting agencies on roadblocks and evacuation/re-entry plans. This will also help build relationships and pre-planning strategies and tactics for road closures and security.
- Early identification and communication of a "check in area," as a formal part of the staging area, would reduce confusion to those who are entering the evacuation area for work or as part of the permitting system. As an added value, costing may be more accurate because staff can confirm who is on scene, who is in staging and who has been released.

COMMENTS

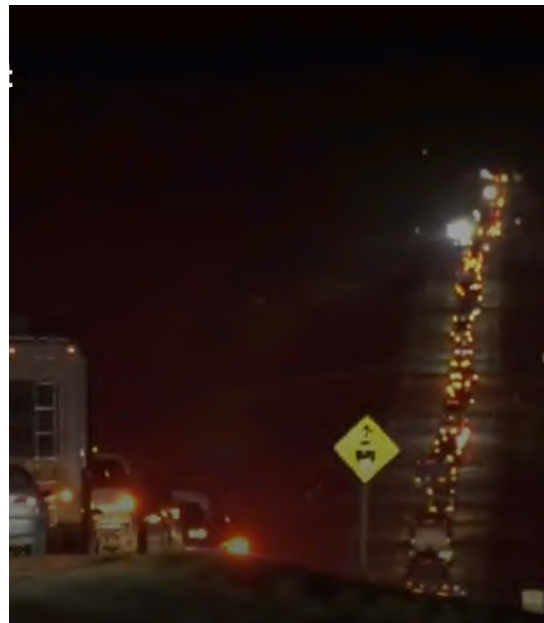
The permitting system and evacuation zone was complicated by the many access points into the County, creating the ability for non-permitted people to be within the evacuation zone without permission. Specific action items were required to be done, which opened specific re-entry allowances as per the below chart (from the 2023 re-entry plan):

Municipal Staff Return	TENT May 15th, 0800hrs
All in RED stage return	TENT May 16, 0800hrs
All in YELLOW stage return	TENT May 17 0800hrs
GREEN Even number addresses	TENT May 18 0800hrs-1400hrs
GREEN Odd number addresses	TENT May 18 1430hrs-2030hrs
Reset day for community	TENT May 19
Community Dinner and Information Sessions	TENT May 20

The Municipal Enforcement Officer improvised a pet retrieval and reunification process during the crisis. They utilized social media for people to register themselves, provide their addresses, and indicate the number of pets left behind. This information was then passed on to an RCMP Officer and other law enforcement personnel responsible for retrieving the pets and facilitating reunions with their owners. Pets were not housed, as reunifications were scheduled at specific times. This approach successfully managed hundreds of pets, resulting in all but one older/sick dog surviving the event. The registration process involved a live spreadsheet, where people's registrations appeared instantly, guiding law enforcement in pet retrieval and owner reunification.



Source 8 [Evacuation Zone] Buck Creek Wildfire Public Meeting (2023)



Source 7 Evacuation CTV News (2023)

10 EMERGENCY SOCIAL SERVICES (ESS)

This segment examines the effectiveness of services provided to affected individuals, including sheltering, mental health support, and basic necessities. The review endeavors to fortify emergency social service capabilities, ensuring a more comprehensive and supportive response in future crises, with a focus on addressing the diverse needs of those impacted.

STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

- The ESS was able to develop an in-house solution for a registration system for residents.
- The level of support from the Province and AEMA was unexpected and greatly appreciated by ESS staff
- Having an ESS team consisting of both Town and County staff brought different expertise and experiences. It also created a more robust team with some redundancy in staffing levels to support an extended activation.

CHALLENGES

- Communications at the reception centre was intermittent; key messages were not shared with the reception centre
- Staff supporting the call centre faced significant verbal abuse by some residents
- Communication between the ESS Call Centre and the ECC was lacking
- ESS staff felt unable to help (or were told they were not authorized) in any role at the Edmonton Expo reception centre.
- The toolbox and ESS resource list was either not available or went missing, leaving staff with limited communication tools or information to pass along to residents and evacuees. What was available for print materials was not maintained.

KEY RECOMMENDATION(S)

Recommendation

10. Develop a robust ESS Plan as part of the MEP and embed ESS into the organization either as its own section or under the Operations Section Chief.

Actions

- Provide key messages and training to anyone who will be providing front-line customer service in the ESS, including those taking calls if a dedicated call-line is engaged.
- Provide ESS training to all staff who are, or have the potential to, support key ESS functions including reception centre set up, site management, or volunteer management.

COMMENTS

The local evacuee registration portal worked effectively when utilized, in place of the provincial system which was not working at the time. When it was operational, staff identified that the provincial registration system from the province was cumbersome, complicated, and felt unmanageable to many in the ESS.

Leverage ESS wise practices from neighboring municipalities with proven ESS plans and through the Provincial ESS (PESS) working committees.

G: ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The below observations provide a holistic appreciation of general emergency management concepts applied during the response to the Buck Creek Wildfire:

AREA	SUCSESSES
RELATIONSHIPS	Both CAOs worked well together, specifically to delegate authority where recommended. This demonstrates strong inter-municipal collaboration in times of need. It was especially impressive given their relatively new experience in the role of CAOs and the communities they serve.
DEMOBIIIZATION	Demobilization process for boots-on-the-ground responders was well planned and executed.
DEMOBILIZATION	There was a full demobilization process for the Incident Management Teams, and, while not formalized, an effective demobilization process for responders.
COMMUNICATIONS	Communications parties between the two municipalities worked extremely effectively together.
COMMUNICATIONS	Media was handled by a dedicated resource who was compassionate yet in control to keep reporters from disrupting operations, specifically in the ECC.
COMMUNICATIONS	RCMP need to monitor their AFRRCS radio channel designated for the response to communicate with the IMT.
COMMUNICATIONS	Having a working call line for residents and a separate line for residents worked well.
OBJECTIVES	The ECC established an effective alternate to medical services by establishing Advanced Care Paramedics and Primary Care Paramedics in the community while the hospital was preparing to re-open during the re-entry phase.
ECC FUNCTIONALITY	It was a significant success to have the utilities companies in the ECC to help with planning.
OBJECTIVES	Specialized provincial teams stopped an HF6 wildfire in its track and prevented total loss of residential areas. The integration between the Structural Protection Units and WUI specialists was critical.
RESOURCES	The region is naturally well-equipped with resources, including heavy equipment due to the industrial makeup of Drayton Valley and Brazeau County. This can be capitalized on in future planning.
TRAINING	Continue to utilize the local workforce and resources in this heavy-industry region; consider bringing them into training with the municipalities.

H: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER GROWTH

The following areas are suggested to continue the excellent work already in progress by the Town of Drayton Valley and Brazeau County:

AREA	IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITY
FINANCES	It is imperative that all movement and costing is tracked, or the risk of the DRP funding expense repayment from the province could be at risk.
FINANCES	Develop an NGO program to manage third parties and volunteers during activations. Consider a ticketing system to help identify approved and activated NGOs, with established rates.
MEP	Identify critical triggers so that if any one position becomes overwhelmed, there is confidence in the processes to acknowledge and address it.
MEP	Develop an NGO resource list, including the vetting process to ensure any necessary certification, insurance and registration is valid. Identify NGO Leads who could be part of the ECC or ICP as Assisting Agencies, and train on ECC functionality with these NGOs incorporated into the exercise design.
TRAINING	Develop a three-year Training and Exercise Plan (TEP) that not only meets the LAEMR requirements but also meets the specific needs of each municipality.
TRAINING	Consider inviting AEMA field officers to the municipal Advisory Committee meetings. This will provide further opportunities to ask process questions and provide clarity in roles and responsibilities to ensure all legislated requirements are met or exceeded.
ECC FUNCTIONALITY	Utilize the Planning Section to ensure roadblocks are placed in priority order, starting with those under direct fire threat or that have active suppression activities underway. This will help when resources are limited, or the situation is still fluid.
ECC FUNCTIONALITY	Maintain span of control as per ICS principles to prevent unintentional freelancing. Responders will also clearly know who their direct leader is at all times.
ECC FUNCTIONALITY	Planning was reactive at first, creating disorganization and a lack of understanding of the day's objectives. Provide regularly scheduled updates from the Planning Section. Ensure the Planning Section is focusing on strategies for the next operational period, rather than the current one.
ECC FUNCTIONALITY	Continue to work with Alberta Wildfire to understand one another's level of service specific to wildfires and reduce hesitation to understand one another's capabilities and training.
COMMUNICATIONS	Any requests for communications from elected officials need to go through the CAO, who will bring that to the Communications team. Elected officials are not to contact communications personnel directly. It is then up to the designated crisis communications managers to determine whether the requested

	communications are necessary, how they should be framed, and when they should be disseminated.
STAFFING	Develop a Fatigue Management Program to support first responders and IMTs to prevent burnout, enhance safety and allow for pre-planning in scheduling.
STAFFING	Develop a Mental Health Program within the MEPs to support first responders, IMTs and supporting municipal staff both during and after an event. This will prioritize mental health wellbeing and support check-ins to ensure staff are fit for duty. First Responders have access to the Alberta Provincial Critical Incident Network (www.abcism.ca) during regular and emergency operations.
EVACUATION	When evacuating, ensure it is identified and communicated what essential staff are needed to remain in the evacuation zone.
GENERAL	Consider utilizing NAIT Disaster and Emergency Management co-op students and second-year students to support the implementation of the AAR recommendations, actions and improvement opportunities identified in this report to build capacity and capability into the current Emergency Management functions in both the Town and County.



Source 9 [Fire and Flood Water Cannons] Buck Creek Wildfire Public Meeting (June 2023)

I: CONCLUSION

Throughout this significant wildfire event, remarkable instances of teamwork emerged, fostering new relationships and the exchange of valuable ideas and expertise among diverse participants. Staff from the Town and County effectively pooled their resources and skills. By embracing the key recommendations and taking subsequent actions, Brazeau County and Drayton Valley are poised to enhance and fortify their municipalities, ensuring better community readiness for future disasters.

As weather-driven events in Alberta increase in frequency, size, complexity, and impact, emergency management preparedness within all municipalities is increasing in kind to meet the increasing demand for proper control of these large disasters. Focused Emergency Managers, Directors of Emergency Management, increased ICS-position specific training, enhanced mutual aid contracts, and training must all be in place to help prepare for any hazard.

Legislation requires municipalities to meet minimum position specific training and exercise commitments, in addition to having a Municipal Emergency Plan (MEP). The phrase “Plan for the worst and hope for the best” rings true with this legislation.

Unfortunately for this event, much of the above listed preparedness was not in place the day the wildfire erupted and surpassed the ability of the local Fire Service to mitigate it. It is hoped that this AAR not only shows what went well, but also provides practical and achievable areas for improvement ahead of any future wildfire.

In reflection upon this comprehensive after-action review, it is evident that the Town and County’s response faced numerous challenges. However, amidst these hurdles, it is crucial for staff to find strength and take pride in the core mission they upheld safeguarding life, protecting their community, and preserving property. Each challenge they encountered served as a catalyst for growth and learning, emphasizing the importance of the region’s commitment to continuous improvement. As you navigate through this report, TSI encourages both municipalities to carry forward the lessons learned, united by a shared dedication to your responsibilities. Together, by embracing this mission with unwavering pride and determination, Brazeau County and the Town of Drayton Valley reinforces its ability to better serve and protect those who depend on you in times of need.





J: APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recommendations Summary
Appendix B: Staff Survey Results (Quantitative Only)
Appendix C: Elected Officials Survey Results (Quantitative Only)

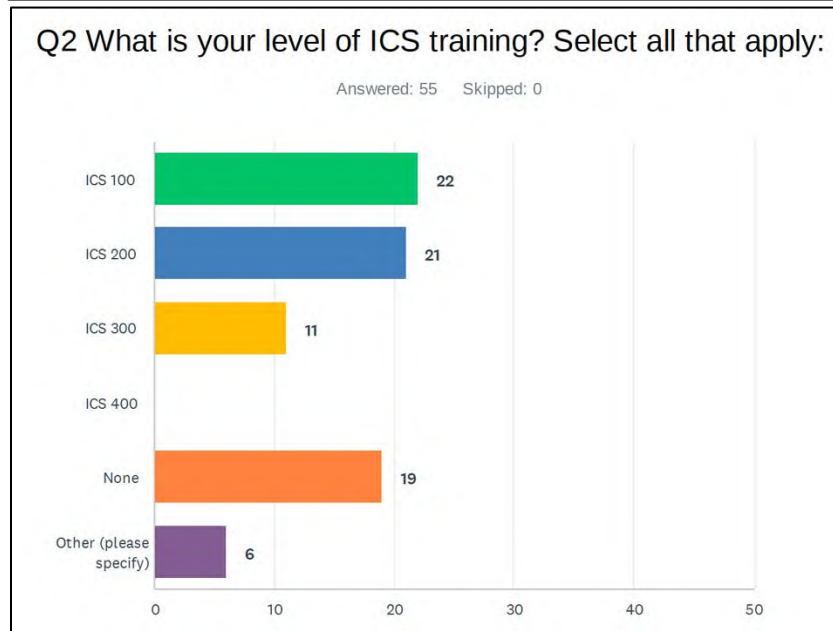
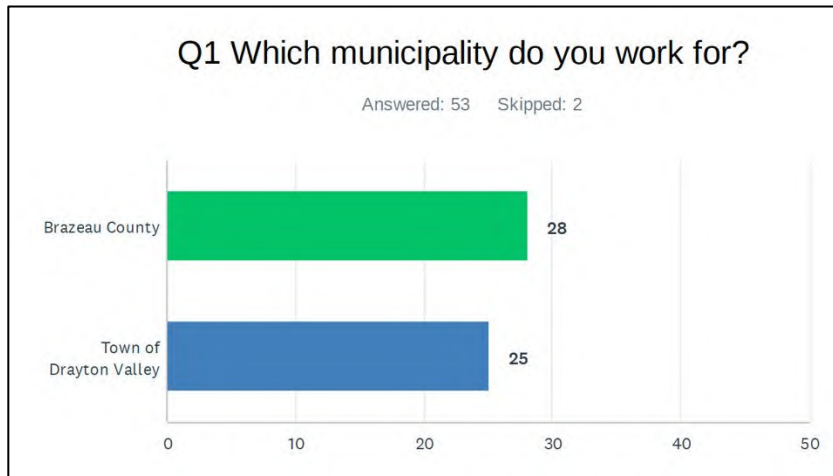
APPENDIX A: RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

AREA	ACTION	ASSIGNED TO	TIMELINE
ECC Activation	Conduct training specific to ECC activation and standing up the ECC to familiarize staff with roles and responsibilities.		
ECC Staffing	Ensure all staff and elected officials have the minimum legislated training requirements, and exercise accordingly to practice and retain skills, as per the Local Authority Emergency Management Regulations.		
ECC Functionality	Review the ECC physical location(s) and set ups to ensure it meets all logistical needs and overall suitability for a sustained activation (e.g. ECC handbooks, vests, position-specific bins, forms, breakout rooms).		
Unified Command	Design Unified Command into the County and Town Municipal Emergency Management Plans.		
Communications	Develop a proactive Crisis Management (Communication) Plan that will help determine processes and key messages for future events.		
Objectives & Tactics	Host ICS 300 training for all County and Town staff who have a primary or backup role in the ECC.		
MEP	Ensure that both Brazeau County and Drayton Valley update their MEP so that both municipalities meet or exceed the Local Authority Emergency Management Regulations.		
Emergency Alerts	Schedule regular crisis communications training to practice issuing alerts, reviewing key messages and practice social media posting.		
Evacuation & Re-Entry	Utilize the ICS structure to gain advanced situational awareness so that triggers provide as much buffer time as practicable for future planning and evacuations/re-entry.		
ESS	Develop a robust ESS Plan as part of the MEP and embed ESS into the organization either as its own section or under the Operations Section Chief.		

APPENDIX B: STAFF SURVEY RESULTS

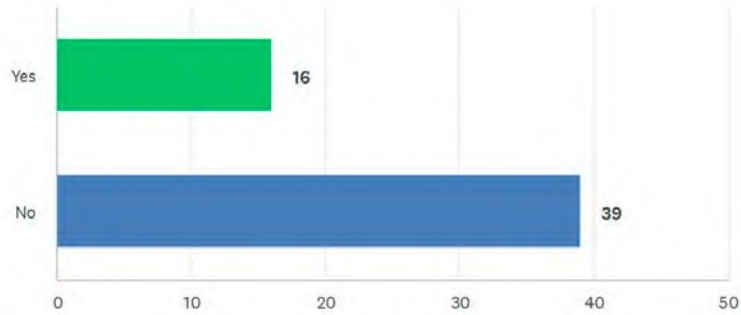
The qualitative survey results obtained from Municipal Staff offer an invaluable perspective on their experiences and insights during the recent events. These results provide a narrative-rich exploration into the challenges faced, successful strategies employed, and areas for potential improvement as witnessed and articulated by the individuals actively involved in the response and recovery efforts. The qualitative data gleaned from these surveys encapsulates the nuanced perspectives and firsthand accounts of the staff, offering a deeper understanding of their experiences and suggestions for enhancing future preparedness and response initiatives.

Fifty-five (55) staff from both Drayton Valley and Brazeau County participated in this survey. This is considered a good response rate. Only survey responses with qualitative data are provided to protect the privacy and confidentiality assured to participants.



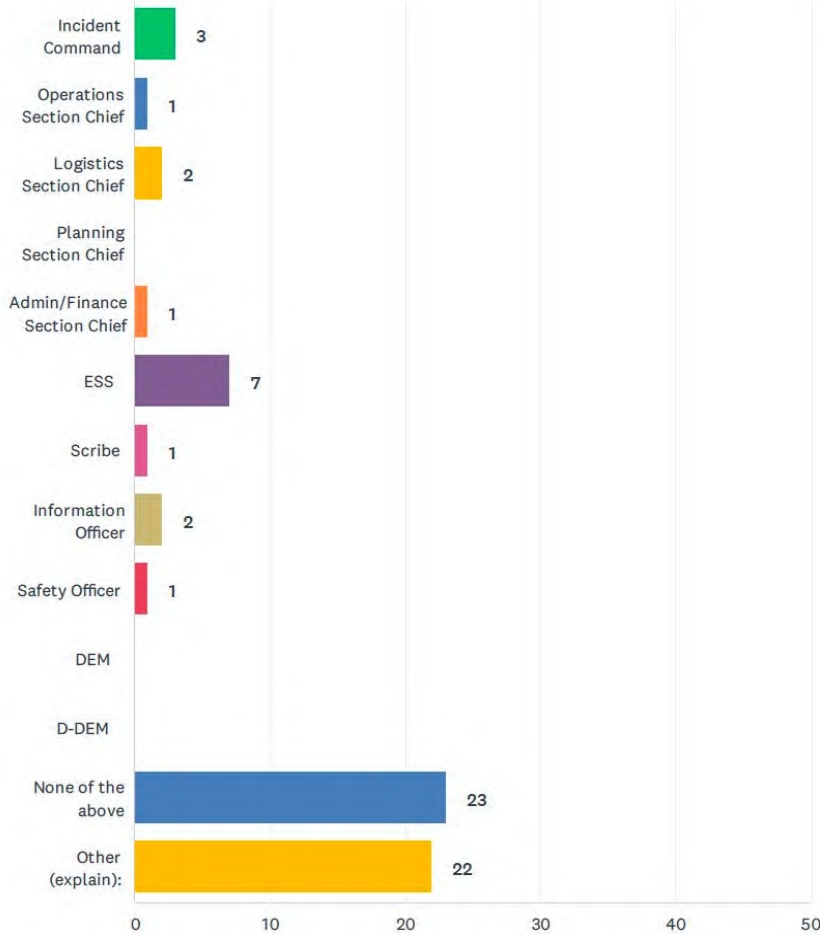
Q3 If you have been involved in any previous activations, please list them.

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



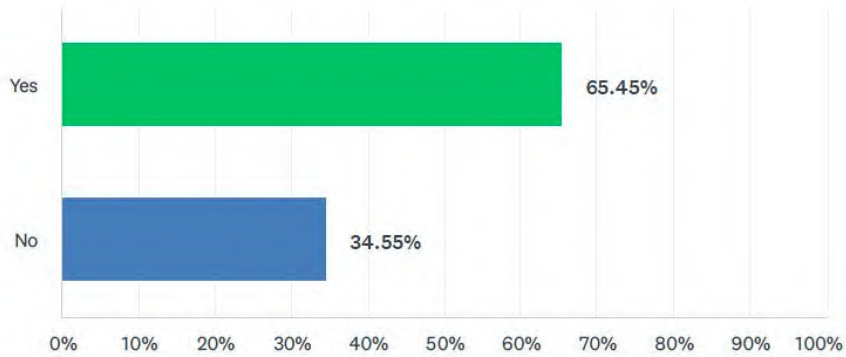
Q4 Were you part of the ECC? If so, select the position(s) you held. You can select more than one position.

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



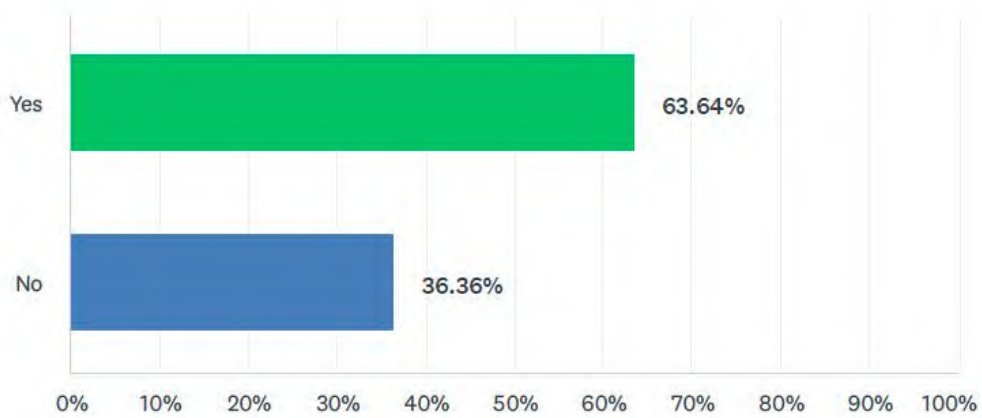
Q5 Was there a difference between what you expected and what occurred during the Wildfire Emergency?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



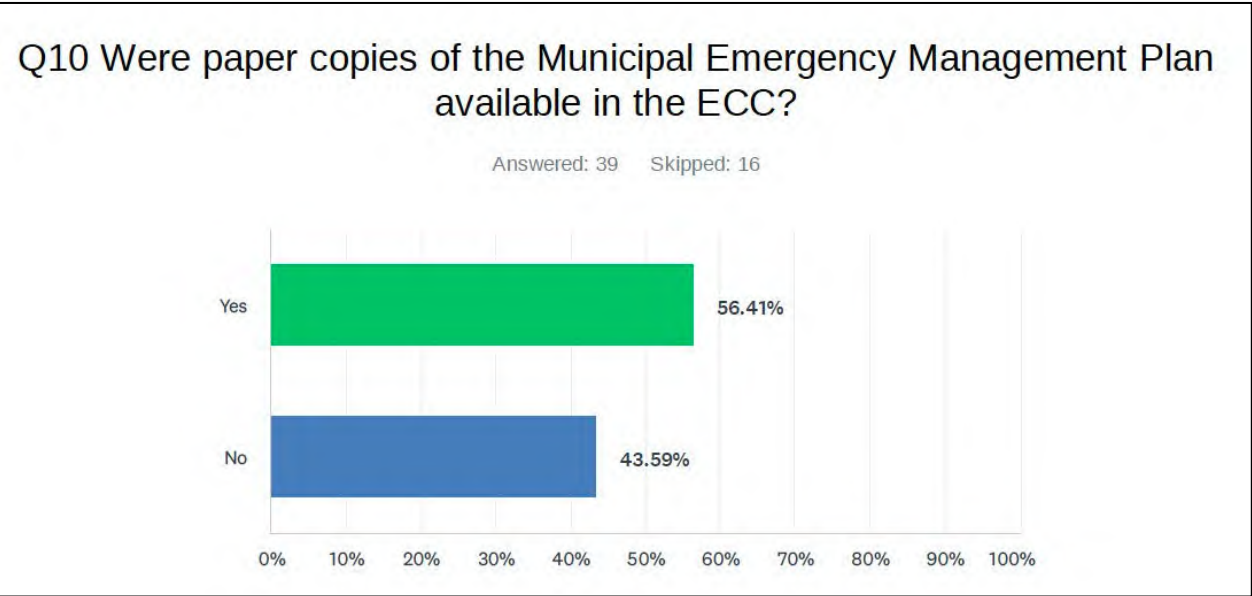
Q8 Did you have the proper resources to do your job during the emergency?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



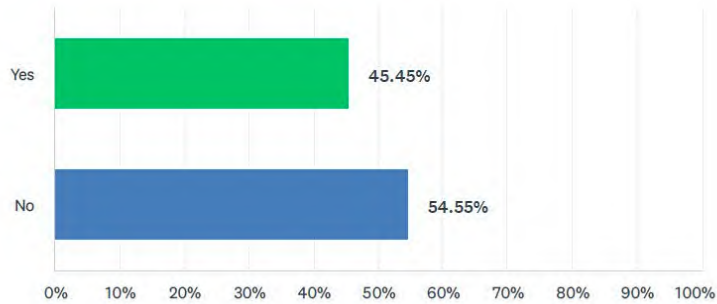
Q9 Please rate the ECC on the following:

	1 - POOR	2 - FAIR	3 - GOOD	4 - VERY GOOD	5 - EXCELLENT	N/A	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Preparedness	23.64% 13	21.82% 12	21.82% 12	14.55% 8	9.09% 5	9.09% 5	55	2.91
Suitability of space	3.64% 2	9.09% 5	49.09% 27	10.91% 6	12.73% 7	14.55% 8	55	3.64
Location	5.45% 3	20.00% 11	30.91% 17	20.00% 11	10.91% 6	12.73% 7	55	3.49
Phones	9.09% 5	18.18% 10	27.27% 15	16.36% 9	10.91% 6	18.18% 10	55	3.56
Laptops	7.27% 4	9.09% 5	29.09% 16	16.36% 9	12.73% 7	25.45% 14	55	3.95
Photocopier	7.27% 4	7.27% 4	34.55% 19	14.55% 8	9.09% 5	27.27% 15	55	3.93
Space (for operations and breakout rooms)	3.64% 2	23.64% 13	36.36% 20	5.45% 3	7.27% 4	23.64% 13	55	3.60
Pinnies	1.82% 1	10.91% 6	20.00% 11	16.36% 9	10.91% 6	40.00% 22	55	4.44



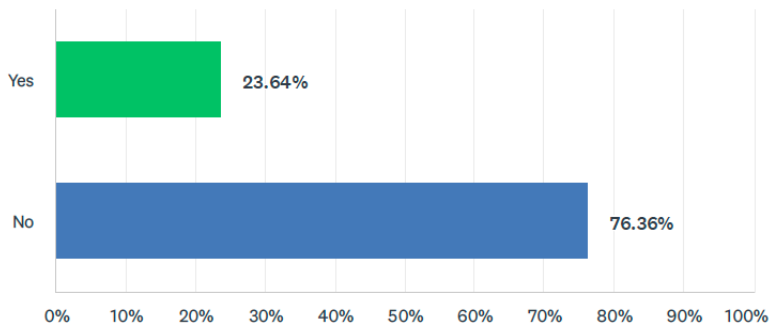
Q11 Did you feel you had the right support to successfully do your job during the emergency?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



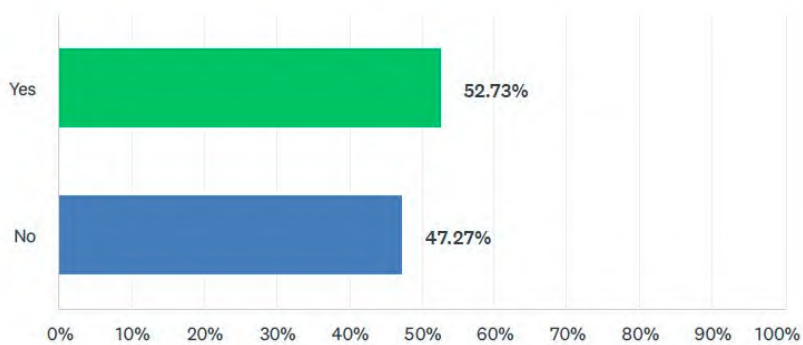
Q13 Prior to this emergency, were you familiar with the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) for your community?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



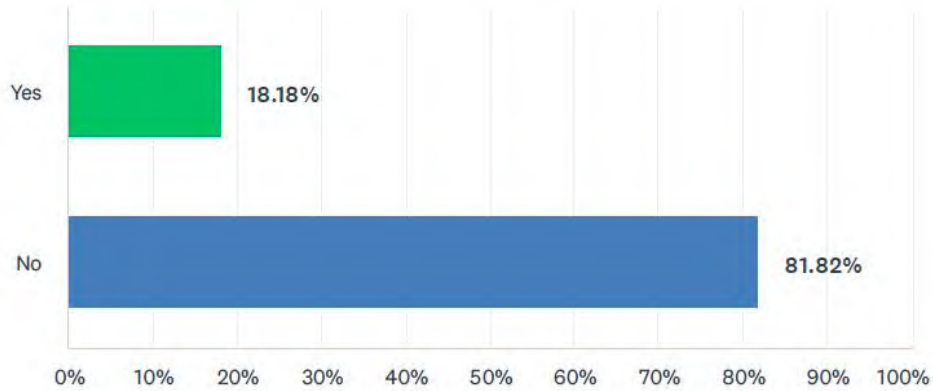
Q12 Did you feel you had appropriate situational awareness during the RCU 005 Buck Creek Wildfire?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



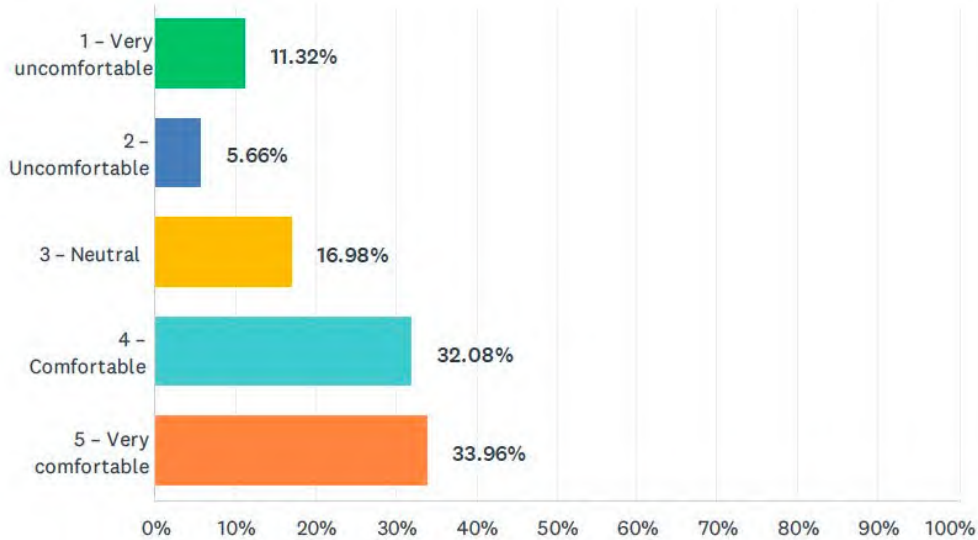
Q14 Have you been trained on the MEMP for your community?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



Q15 How did you feel reporting to someone that is not your usual supervisor/manager within the organization?

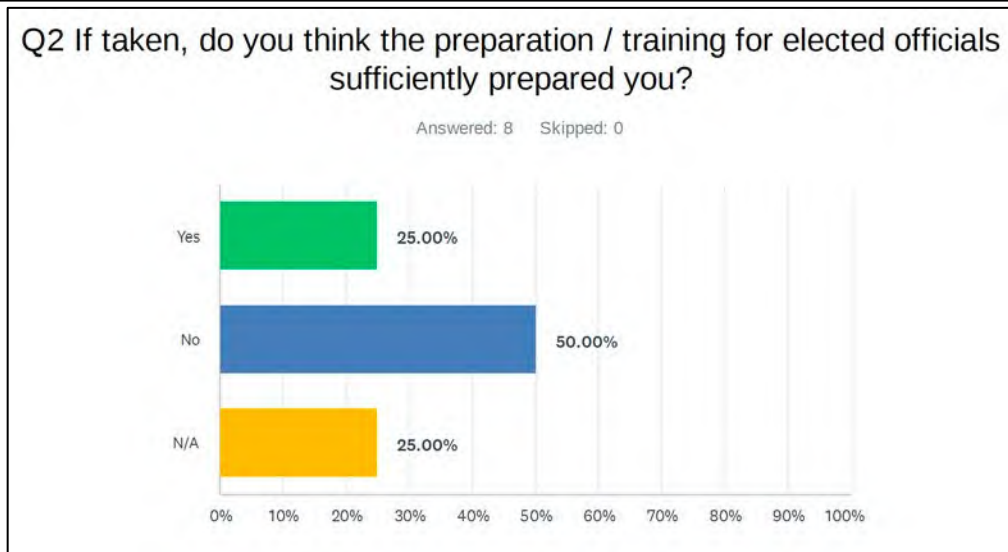
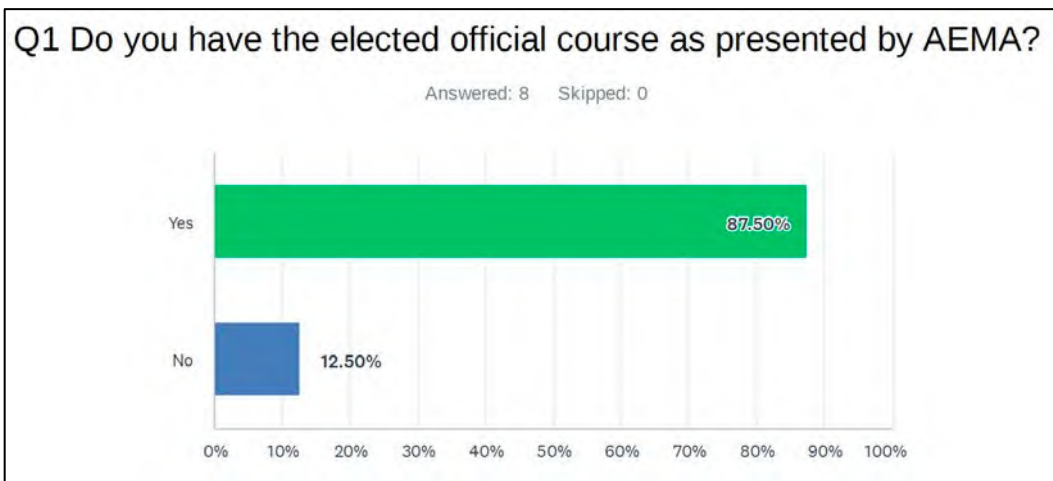
Answered: 53 Skipped: 2

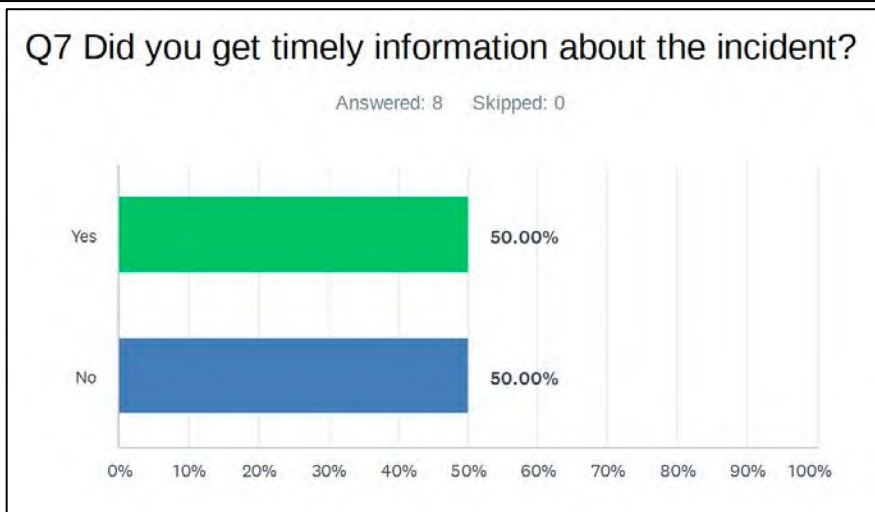
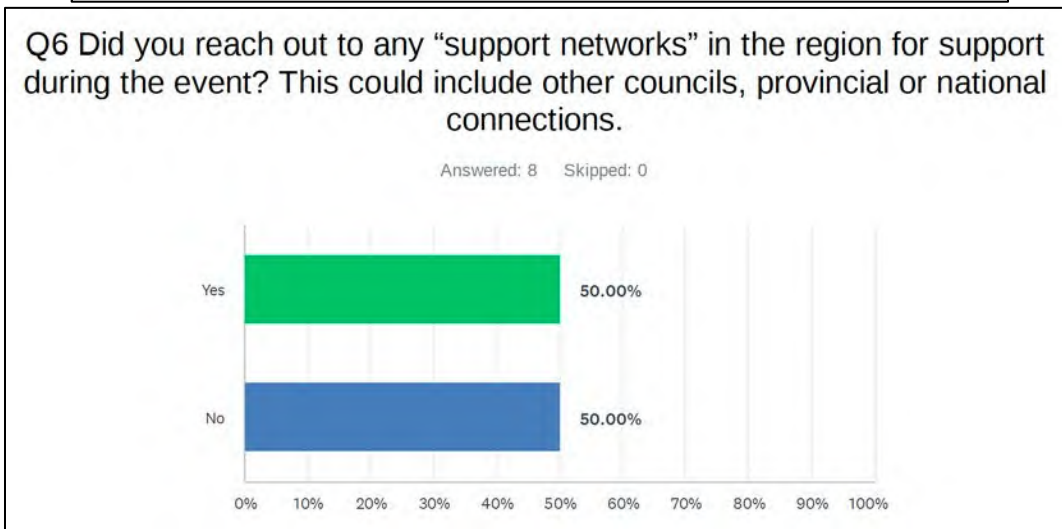
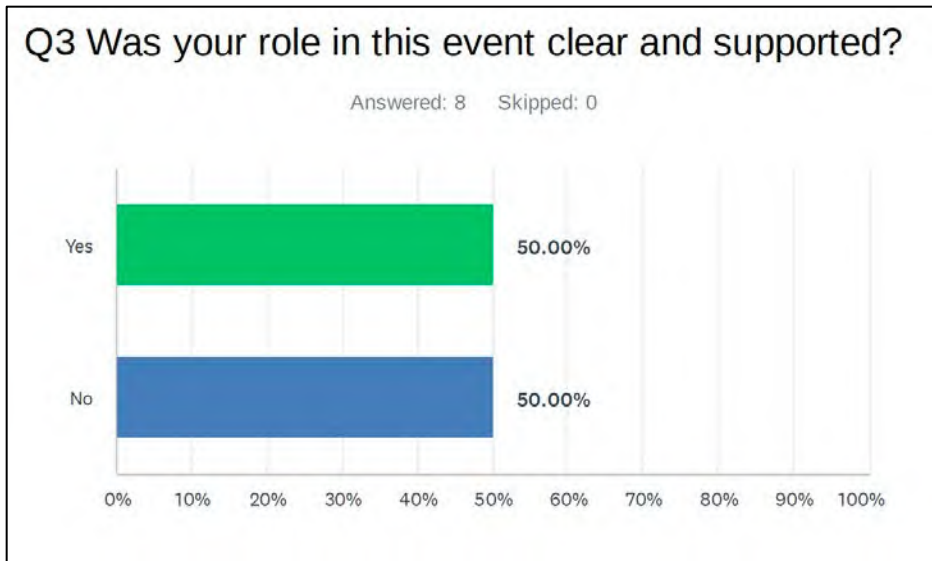


APPENDIX C: ELECTED OFFICIALS RESULTS

The qualitative survey outcomes derived from elected officials provide a unique and significant viewpoint on the recent events. These results encapsulate the perspectives and reflections of key decision-makers involved in navigating the challenges and orchestrating responses during the crisis. Offering insights into their observations, decision-making processes, and identified areas of strength or improvement, these survey findings present a comprehensive narrative that enriches our understanding of the event's management from a leadership standpoint. The collected data offers a valuable resource for assessing the efficacy of strategies, highlighting successes, and pinpointing avenues for more effective future disaster governance and decision-making.

Eight (8) elected officials from both Drayton Valley and Brazeau County participated in this survey. This is considered a good response rate. Only survey responses with qualitative data are provided to protect the privacy and confidentiality assured to participants.





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