

Barrington Lake Wildfire After-Action Review (AAR)

Municipality of the District of Barrington
Municipality of the District of Shelburne

April 2024

DRAFT

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Purpose & Objectives of the After-Action Review (AAR)

An After-Action Review strives to answer the following questions: what was supposed to happen (if applicable), what actually happened, what went well, what did not go well, and what should be changed for next time. This review attempts to capture items that will document the successes of the municipalities, the challenges during the incident, and details that will support future reflection. It is important to document these reflections, and important to recognize that the complexity of the incident created challenges that by nature results in impacts that cannot always be prevented.

This AAR is not an exhaustive account of the emergency incident; rather, it is a critical analysis intended to inform internal discussions and decision-making within the Emergency Management Organization. The information presented should be considered in the context of continuous improvement, allowing the organization to learn from experiences and enhance its capabilities for future emergencies.

This AAR is not intended to assign blame or liability but is a tool for organizational learning and development. The EMO encourages open and candid discussions to foster a culture of continuous improvement and preparedness.

This document does not constitute official policy, and the EMO reserves the right to update, modify, or revoke any aspect of this AAR at its discretion.

Scope of the Review

This review includes the response and recovery of the Barrington Lake Wildfire. The largest recorded wildfire in the history of Nova Scotia spanned over two weeks - burning approximately 23,015 hectares (56,871 acres), requiring the evacuation of over 5,000 people and destroying 31 structures.

Municipal Response

Strengths

Common Strengths

- Staff performed amazingly and adapted to changing circumstances quickly.
- Leadership and engaging with specialists quickly. Utilizing the staff and volunteers effectively.
- External communication. Hiring of a communication firm.
- Early engagement of external partners Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), NS Department of Public Works (NSPW), Barrington and Area Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR), Provincial Coordination Centre (PCC), Nova Scotia Power (NSP), Red Cross, NS Department of Natural Resources and Renewables (DNRR).
- Animal rescue and shelter efforts by organizations, businesses and residents was excellent.
- Air quality monitoring was excellent but could have acted earlier on response.

Municipality of Barrington Specific Strengths

- Ability to quickly relocate operations.

Municipality of Shelburne Specific Strengths

- Early designation by CAO of a Director to manage continued municipal affairs and manage their own core staff affairs allowed the CAO and Emergency Coordination Centre team to focus exclusively on emergency matters.
- Early engagement of volunteer coordinator in Shelburne relieved a tremendous amount of pressure on core ECC team.
- Community kitchens provided essential services to emergency responders and ECC staff.

Recommended Improvements

Common Recommended Improvements

Improvement	Action Required
Create a dedicated Regional Emergency Management Organization email address.	By creating a dedicated REMO email address, every REMO team member that has the REMO email address will have access to the Outlook contact list as well. This will allow everyone to have instant access to new contacts when another member of the team adds a contact to the list.
More emergency management training for staff and Council so roles are better understood	More basic emergency management training for staff and Council.
Pre-developed forms/spreadsheets.	More basic EM training for staff and Council.

Consider inviting neighboring EMO / REMO coordinators to come and supplement the ECC team.	In the event of a shortage in trained staff, invite neighboring EMO / REMO coordinators to assist.
Waste handling was confusing and required considerable staff time to manage public inquiries and concerns.	Explore the possibility of having an emergency management plan with alternate pick up and disposal protocols. Consider waiving tipping fees for debris cleanup.
Unable to access relevant mapping for daily updates.	Establish pre-determined protocols or data sharing agreement to have access to that information when needed.
Training for staff in dealing with difficult/upset people.	Organize training for staff and Council.
Quicker access to mental health assistance for staff.	Create a list of local and remote/virtual mental health supports.
Create an emergency registration page on our municipal websites.	In order to avoid privacy concerns and the inability for the Municipality to obtain important contact information for the recovery phase.

Municipality of Shelburne Specific Recommended Improvements

Improvement	Action Required
Create a protocol of collecting and centralizing receipts for emergency related expenses.	Appoint a finance coordinator at the beginning of an emergency and communicate to all team members and volunteers that receipts are to be delivered to them.
Consider childcare arrangements for staff.	In order to free up staff forced to stay at home with children during an emergency, make arrangements for safe and secure childcare.
Subscribe to an alternate emergency alert system that does not solely rely on cell coverage access by the public.	The Municipality of Shelburne is currently testing Voyent Alert that provides five mechanisms for delivery of information.
Improve communications with emergency providers and first responders.	Emergency providers and first responders need to be educated further on the support that can be offered by the ECC.
Need to assign staff at the beginning to manage the public REMO phone lines.	In order to save ECC team member time, a staff member can staff the REMO phone lines to answer most of the public queries and direct more complicated matters to the correct ECC team member if required.
Make arrangements ahead of a future emergency for a qualified community group to accept financial donations.	Have an agreement in place with the community group ahead of future emergencies.
Inability to know what residents require special assistance in evacuation areas.	Investigate opening a vulnerable person registry that residents can choose to sign onto. Double check with legal.

Consider appointing a logistics coordinator earlier in the emergency.	A logistics coordinator can work in coordination with the volunteer coordinator to centralize delivery and dissemination of donated goods and supplies.
Have ECC team members work in pairs.	In order to avoid burn-out, have ECC team members work in pairs with overlapping shifts to ensure continuity of tasks.
Consider creation of an emergency volunteer list.	It would be beneficial if the ECC team had a list of names to call in the event they required volunteers in a hurry.
Keep Council informed.	Setup a regular Microsoft Teams meeting to inform Council as well as the local MLA & MP.
Create policy to reward volunteers.	Volunteers should be paid during an emergency.
Establish a communication & coordination protocol with Province.	In order to avoid the confusion created by the Province wanting to open Hwy 103 in the midst of a mandatory evacuation area, we need to establish a communication and coordination protocol with the Province.
Involve legal council earlier on in the emergency.	Legal advice would have been very helpful on a range of issues.
Establish One REMO phone number that can feed into multiple phone lines.	
Air quality response could have been quicker.	
Alert Ready did not provide visual maps for evacuation zones.	Currently testing Voyent Alert for mapping features to release to residents at the time an Alert Ready is issued.

General Reflections of the Municipal Response and Incident

Common Reflections

- Incident was handled well given the circumstances.
- Amazing amount accomplished by a very caring professional staff.
- Contacts made with external partners will be extremely beneficial in the future.
- Community assistance was phenomenal from volunteers to donations.
- Utilizing external supports via the Provincial Coordination Centre was extremely helpful.
- Access to community recreation facilities was extremely useful, highlighting the importance of these facilities in our community.

Municipality of Barrington Specific Reflections

- Ability to quickly relocate emergency coordination centre, municipal operations and evacuation center as well as plans for future moves.

Municipality of Shelburne Specific Reflections

- Communications need to be improved with Staff, Council, emergency providers and first responders.

Municipal Recovery Activities

Strengths

Common Strengths

- Bringing in external agencies, such as Task Force 2, with expertise to help develop re-entry and recovery plan.
- Ability to put everything in place and communicate with all partners quickly.
- Staff ability to get the contacting of residents done in a timely manner and getting necessary resources in place quickly.
- Assigning a dedicated ECC team to recovery activities.
- Assigning a dedicated space for the recovery team to work from.
- Good communications with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing in regard to housing assistance.
- A phased approach for re-entry into evacuation zone was appreciated by victims.
- The recovery package for victims was very good.
- It was good that various fees for victims were waived, including water testing, building permits, demolition permit, etc.
- It was vital to have access to mental health resources after the emergency.
- Community and business response for alternate & temporary housing for victims and evacuees was outstanding and demonstrated the support and care for victims.

Municipality of Barrington Specific Strengths

- Ability to quickly relocate the emergency coordination centre, municipal operations and evacuation center as well as plans for future moves.

Municipality of Shelburne Specific Strengths

- An onsite Provincial Coordination Centre (PCC) representative was very useful.
- Excellent planning and execution of a victim notification process.
- Excellent advocacy on behalf of victims in navigating challenges arising with dealing with the Province and assisting agencies.

Recommended Improvements

Common Recommended Improvements

Improvement	Action Required
Need a trained professional to deliver traumatic news to victims.	We need to source or sign an agreement with a person or agency that will be on standby in the event we require a professional to deliver traumatic news.
Need to provide staff with access to mental health	Create a list of local and remote/virtual mental health supports.

professionals during the emergency.	
Recommend improvements in information sharing with Red Cross.	Establish pre-determined protocols or data sharing agreement to have access to that information when needed.
Investigate methods to limit media access to victims at vulnerable times (i.e. right after notification).	Organize staff training in communication and media relations and develop appropriate media policies and protocols.

Municipality of Barrington Specific Recommended Improvements

Improvement	Action Required
DOE water testing should not be left to municipality to look after.	Advocate for water testing to be administered by the NS Department of Environment and Climate Change or request more resources to assist the municipality.
Notification of residents with property damage in a timelier fashion.	Research best practices and develop clear procedures on how to notify residents.

Municipality of Shelburne Specific Recommended Improvements

Improvement	Action Required
Need a plan and better communication on waste management by residents.	Research best practices and develop a communication plan to notify residents.

General Reflections of the Municipal Response and Incident

Capture the general feel and comments about the incident, the response to the incident, and any other sentiments that come out of the AAR.

Common Reflections

- Putting together the re-entry plan and executing the plan in the timeframe was top notch. The logistics of this operation was an immense undertaking but was completed quickly and professionally and with care.
- Residents who suffered loss being able to have access to their properties before the general public was greatly appreciated by those affected.
- The water testing service was confusing and not particularly well supported by the Department of Environment and Climate Change. It was left to the municipalities to deal with.

Resources

List resources that worked well and were considered necessary and valuable, and resources you recommend as necessary for future incidents (I.E. equipment, people/positions, or other assets).

Resources that worked well/were necessary	Resources you would recommend or need for future incidents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specialists ▪ Task Force 2 ▪ Red Cross ▪ Fire Departments ▪ RCMP ▪ BGSAR ▪ Our House ▪ Lions Club ▪ Staff ▪ DNRR ▪ TIR ▪ Alert Ready System ▪ PCC / EMO ▪ Air quality monitors ▪ Iris Communications ▪ Community Facilities (Arenas, Community Centres, etc.) ▪ Critical Incident Stress Management Team ▪ Starlink Satellite Internet ▪ Private Companies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Department of Environment and Climate Change personnel for water testing informing residents of the process and collecting of the samples. ▪ Better mapping. ▪ Cell phone boosters. ▪ Organized community resources ▪ Standing agreement for mental health professionals to arrive on scene upon request. ▪ Information access agreement with Red Cross. ▪ Emergency registration process (i.e., on our website) (Shelburne) ▪ Alternate emergency alert system – Voyent Alert (Shelburne)