



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS  
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## **Strengthening Federal Leadership in Emergency Management**

### **Recommendations towards a stronger, more unified, and more resilient Emergency Management system**

**From: The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs**

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## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) represents the country's 3200 local and municipal fire departments either through chief officers, of which CAFC has close to 1,000 members or through a national advisory council representing all provincial, territorial and national affiliate organizations. Despite the name, fire departments are all hazard responders, and many are often delegated responsibility as Authority Having Jurisdiction in an emergency. This briefing note responds to each of the questions posed and focusses on the following themes:

1. Establish a National Fire and Emergency Advisor/Liaison within federal emergency structures.
2. Integrate fire and life safety impact assessment into federal policy development.
3. Use existing sector data to guide national planning
4. Ensure funding alignment and governance capacity in federal programs.
5. Include emergency management equipment within defence-related spending commitments.
6. Modernize FPT conversations to include municipal operational responsibility.
7. Strengthen local implementation of risk reduction programs such as FireSmart™

### **1. Federal Leadership and Coordination**

#### ***1.1 What should the federal government's role in emergency management look like in the future?***

- a) **Deeper and more meaningful execution of federal role in Emergency Management Act:** Engaging in a deeper and more meaningful execution of its responsibilities under section 4 of the Emergency Management Act. Section 4 of the act calls on the federal minister to receive the emergency management plans of each federal department. These plans are often developed without practical insight from fire, emergency and life safety experts.
- b) **Continued constitutional responsibilities with enhanced subject matter expertise:** Continuing its constitutional responsibilities and positive relationships with the provinces and territories, while recognizing that the EM responsibilities of the provinces and territories have been delegated to municipalities. While authorities can stay the same, recognition of a missing perspective is required.
- c) **Taking a broader perspective on primary and secondary prevention:** Taking a deeper responsibility for prevention of issues that require future emergency management by better understanding the fire, emergency and life safety implications of federal policies.
- d) **Leadership on emergency management issues of national significance and applicability:** This may include evaluation of pilots and proposals for spread and scale nationally, and exploring the mechanisms in which gaps need to be filled, i.e. through one-time investments. It may also include convening stakeholders.
- e) **Ensuring an office for continuity and advice:** Ensuring that in the event of an election or change in government, there is a stable and solid continuation of emergency management expertise and that the conversation, even if "restarted", doesn't start from scratch. This has happened five times in five years.
- f) **Continue to leverage the Heavy Urban Search And Rescue (HUSAR) teams:** Canada's HUSAR teams are a national treasure. They should be further coordinated and deployed.

#### ***1.2 How could the federal government strengthen its role in emergency management?***

The federal government could strengthen its role in emergency management by:

- **Acquiring deeper subject matter expertise and installing a fire chief able to liaise with the sector in GOC.** In the traditional "FPT" conversation, most PTs have delegated EM to local authorities in their new EM acts. This means a different mechanism is needed to reintegrate various sources of knowledge in classic FPT discussions. Examples might include opening SOREM to a national fire department advisor or liaison,

considering that fire departments are all-hazard and often AHJs in an emergency, putting a fire chief in the Government Operations Centre, and creating a national fire advisor, liaison, or officer.

- **Take a data-driven approach to emergency management:** What percentage of fire departments are the authorities having jurisdiction in an emergency? What percentage run the emergency operations centres for their communities? What non-governmental organizations or not-for-profits that are involved in emergencies have memoranda in place with fire departments nationally? What percentage of communities in Canada have a major infrastructure risk? What percentage have completed exercises? What percentage of fire departments are recruiting volunteers? What percentage of fire departments are looking for volunteers that are not firefighters? What are the major risks that communities are identifying? All of these data points are available and should be used by the federal government in emergency management planning.
- **Taking responsibility for the emergency management implications of federal policy:** Consider that in the last 90 days, there were multiple federal consultations on issues from explosives to lithium ion batteries to emergency management and airport fire rescue that would have implications for EM.
- **Lead a whole of society approach to EM with a whole of government approach to EM:** Ensuring a fire chief who is able to liaise with the fire sector is present at all times in the government operations centre and across federal departments.
- **Building infrastructure in a modular fashion:** Many different groups have different needs in emergency management. These needs can be accommodated, but it may be unwieldy to try to do them in one attempt or with one structure. Consider taking a modular approach. For example, in most federal emergency management organizations, there is an office for fire and emergency. This is usually smaller and less costly than the entire structure. It is also often the nucleus of the rest of the system, since it would contain the response capacity, personnel and equipment.

### ***1.3 What tools or structures could improve coordination inside the federal government and with other jurisdictions before and during emergencies?***

- **Fire and emergency liaison office or role (national fire advisor):** Creating a fire and emergency liaison role that is focused on the coordination of expertise and information related to fire and emergency from the perspective of fire departments and AHJs
- **Tying conditions and expectations to funding flows:** Well-intentioned funding has been allocated to bodies that have no capacity to flow that funding, or that would be in a conflict of interest if they did. Other monies are distributed to P/Ts from the federal government for functions carried out by fire departments, which creates the misalignment of revenues and expenses.
- **Proof of concept, pilots and rigorous evaluation:** Engaging in proof of concept efforts so that decisions that are made do not become subject to the myth of “sunk” costs without shame or blame.
- **Include Emergency Management equipment in the 1.5% of GDP for defence:** The federal government rightly flagged emergency management systems as eligible under the 1.5% of defence spending.
- **Explore the need for fire, emergency and life safety impact assessment on all federal policy measures:** For example, in various initiatives related to defence, economic development, and housing, inquire about whether a fire, emergency and life safety impact analysis is needed.

## **2. Building Capacity and Partnerships**

### ***2.1 How should federal programs and capabilities evolve to address current and emerging risks, including climate-related disasters?***

- **Access to reliable and trusted in-house fire, emergency and life safety expertise:** Fire Chiefs have recommended a national fire administration for this purpose, but it may also be called a national fire and emergency management liaison or fire and emergency advisor. The function is to provide advice and coordination of information. It is not intended to change authorities or impose decisions on federal, provincial or territorial governments. Consider the analogy of a Federal Department of Justice that has no in-house legal expertise or a Public Health Agency with no epidemiologists or public health experts.
- **Create situational awareness between the EM issues of different departments:** Between December 2025 and February 2026, there were several federal consultations related to emergency management. Even if each public consultation were to be effectively analyzed, the information is likely siloed and unsynthesized. Disasters are seldom the result of one problem, but the confluence of problems. This is not a statement of disrespect to policy expertise. Policy expertise is absolutely needed, but it is not sufficient to design and meet the evolving needs of the future. The most important leadership imperative for the federal government is to ensure that it knows what to ask and who to ask.
- **Clarification of Humanitarian Workforces, Civilian Emergency Response, Youth Corps, and fire departments:** The federal government has created various tables and investments in emergency personnel to come to the assistance of local communities when there is an emergency in which FPT resources are required. To date, there has been no coordination with the local authorities having jurisdiction or the fire departments. Our data show that most of the Humanitarian Workforce organizations have no MOUs in place with local AHJs and few have done exercises to ensure readiness. The same personnel are being deployed as both volunteer firefighters and NGO volunteers.
- **Modernize federal departments with potential emergency management issues:** Consistent with the federal emergency management act, we believe that every federal department needs to be advised on the fire, emergency and life safety implications of the policies that it sets. Even if they are not obvious, program and capability leaders need to know what questions to ask, who to ask, and how to integrate the information they get. When federal departments undertake initiatives with fire, emergency and life safety implications, there needs to be reliable resources through which to provide bidirectional information and support to and from authorities having jurisdiction and fire departments, so the country can be ready for these risks.
- **Modernize FPT conversations to include conversations with local authorities having jurisdiction:** This is not about changing the constitution; it's about recognizing that, substantively, in fire, emergency and life safety, there are local and substantive issues that need to be communicated.

## ***2.2 What approaches could strengthen local capacity and preparedness in provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous communities?***

- **Understanding who is who and what they do:** There isn't a clear understanding of the sector. As an example, some people believe that volunteer firefighters have lesser qualifications than career firefighters. This is a hugely problematic assumption in any type of policy development related to firefighting in Canada. It is not a problem to not know this necessarily; it's a problem not to have a trusted source that can provide this type of information from the get-go. If this individual hadn't thought to ask, their work could have been rife with problematic assumptions about how wildfire is fought.
- **Taking a systems approach and perspective:** Testing ideas and reviewing how the youth corps, climate corps, humanitarian workforces, and civilian emergency response initiatives work with fire departments that are usually the AHJs and also have 90,000 volunteers, would be important. We are unclear if these initiatives are drawing from the same pool of resources. They have also spawned similar ideas in provincial and territorial contexts. They may or may not actually be a drain on local capacity building, which is, in fact, the best way to reduce national surge capacity needs.
- **Addressing cracks in the foundation:** Ensuring that equipment is modernized through the 1.5% of GDP commitment to defence.

- **Tying terms and conditions to funding flows:** Ensuring that there are terms and conditions tied to any funding provided to other levels of government related to fire and emergency. This is important considering that funding is fungible, and other priorities may mean that investments are made but not translated. Federal funds can also be used to “displace” other current funding.

### ***2.3 What role can the federal government play in fostering public–private collaboration and community-level resilience for all Canadians?***

The federal government can proactively assess fire and life safety risks associated with federal initiatives, including: electric vehicles, explosives regulations, housing densification, and critical infrastructure. Early engagement between fire chiefs, regulators, insurers, and industry reduces downstream risk. Organizations such as the [Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation](#) provide examples of productive cross-sector collaboration linking knowledge on climate disaster mitigation, insurance, and financial institutions. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate alongside them to bring local fire departments into the fold.

## **3. Enhancing Risk Awareness and Public Readiness**

### ***3.1 What can the federal government do to improve risk communication and individual preparedness?***

Risk communication and individual preparedness can be improved by leveraging the role of fire departments as local and trusted sources of information for public safety. Their roles in public education give them expertise and experience in doing this well. A good example of where Fire Departments have assumed leadership is in the implementation of the FireSmart program. That said, FireSmart is typically funded to provinces and territories, often leaving local fire departments with insufficient resources to implement this excellent program.

### ***3.2 How data, technology, and research can be leveraged for decision-making and disaster risk reduction?***

Each year the [Great Canadian Fire Census](#) is issued to all fire departments in Canada. This study collects key data points that can assist the federal government in planning and/or in testing ideas. We would welcome the Federal Government to work with the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs to identify any questions that it would like to ask fire departments for its planning or service delivery goals. In the use of research it is important to note that published literature often has a dearth of information about the fire sector, so consulting with academic experts needs to be supplemented with information from experts with practical expertise. There is also tremendous opportunity in the fire sector to advance the state of science and technology; to help modernize equipment and technology and to align the emergency management system with defense, security and sovereignty considerations.

### ***3.3. What information would make your community better prepared to respond to emergencies?***

Communities would benefit from: Clear analysis of fire, emergency, and life safety impacts of federal policies. Transparent identification of high-risk infrastructure areas; Alignment between funding flows and operational responsibilities; and early notification of initiatives that may affect local response capacity and coordinated information from the Government Operations Centres and the local Authorities Having Jurisdiction in an Emergency. In Budget 2026 alone, numerous federal initiatives carry emergency implications. Careful coordination and operational consultation will ensure that resilience is strengthened rather than inadvertently fragmented.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs commends the undertaking of this federal consultation. Our submission highlights many opportunities. At the heart of these opportunities is the establishment of a national fire advisor or similar office to help bring subject matter expertise from the country’s all hazard fire departments and their roles as AHJs in emergencies, into Federal policy. Achieving this would be one of the most consequential policy instruments in the history of fire and emergency management in Canada, allowing Canada to recognize, address, and coordinate, on a national, regular, systematic basis, all fire, emergency and life safety issues facing Canadians.