



Federal Consultation: Rural Development Action Plan

A Safe, Secure, Strong, Supported and Prosperous Future for Rural Canada: A Fire, Emergency and Life Safety Perspective

From: The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

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Building a Safe, Secure, Strong, Supported and Prosperous Future for Rural Canada: A Fire, Emergency and Life Safety Perspective

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) strongly commends the federal government for undertaking its consultation entitled: [Help shape the future of rural Canada – Moving from strategy to action](#). Our safety, security, sovereignty, and prosperity depend on the health of every community in this country, particularly those closest to where our natural and agricultural resources, safety, security and sovereignty may be most vulnerable.

CAFC represents the country's 3200 fire departments through Chief Fire Officers and a National Advisory Council made up of provincial, territorial, and national affiliate fire chief organizations. Despite the name, fire departments are all-hazard responders who are most often first on the scene in most types of emergencies. They are often also delegated authority having jurisdiction in an emergency. Close to 80% of all departments are in rural communities and are volunteer departments.

In this submission, we respond to the three questions asked. We also offer two recommendations (1) install a national or federal fire advisor or fire and emergency liaison office to support all communities, especially rural communities in fire, emergency, and life safety and also to help all federal departments become aware of the fire, emergency and life safety implications of their policies; and (2) ensure fire departments are eligible for funding under the 1.5% of GDP intended for defence given their integral relationship between emergency response and national security and sovereignty.

1. How can existing federal initiatives be improved to better address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by your rural community?

When we speak about rural Canada, a unifying factor is the presence of the local volunteer fire department, which makes up more than 2,700 of the country's 3,200 fire departments. Composed of close to 90,000 volunteer firefighters who are trained as professional firefighters, these individuals serve their communities and our country, asking very little in return. Without them, rural communities may have no other access to fire, emergency, and life safety services. Employing full-time career firefighters is most often beyond affordability considering the tax base of most rural communities in our country.

The contributions of Canada's 90,000 volunteer firefighters are estimated at close to \$13.5 billion, given what it would cost to salary those individuals at the going rate on a full time-basis. Volunteer firefighting is therefore one of the country's largest charities and the original civilian emergency response workforce. Their fundamental contribution to the safety of Canadians is often poorly understood in the federal government, resulting in initiatives for the fire sector that translate poorly in rural communities.

As such, our first recommendation to the federal government is to achieve conceptual clarity to its own language and intentions. It can do so by engaging fire, emergency and life safety expertise across federal departments through a national fire and emergency office, liaison, advisor or administrator. Some examples of areas this would assist are provided:

1. Reducing use of Canadian Armed Forces: In well intentioned efforts to ensure the Canadian Armed Forces are relieved of the pressures of responding to emergencies by building surge capacity, the federal government is trialling programs like a Youth Volunteer Corps in response to climate emergencies, Humanitarian workforces, and Civilian Emergency Response Capacity. In the design and implementation of these programs, there is often little coordination with the all-hazard role of volunteer firefighters and fire departments. The challenge is that volunteer firefighters often wear multiple hats with multiple organizations; 65% of volunteer departments are actively recruiting and many have youth programs. Most Non Governmental Organizations in emergency response have no MOUs with local fire departments. The Great Canadian Fire Census shows that about 20% of volunteer firefighters are cross-appointed to other agencies and volunteer organizations. As such, it is very possible that federal emergency management proposals are competing with local capacity building in volunteer fire departments. This could be avoided if there were an individual or office within the federal government that would provide substantive advice to the government on how the system works.

2. Climate emergencies: Rural communities also face the harshest consequences of fire, emergency, and life safety accidents in our country. The consequences of the emergencies rural communities face can be severe, disrupting towns, counties, and their residents permanently. The federal government has developed several well-intentioned programs and investments designed to improve fire, emergency and life safety in all communities, including those in rural areas. These include initiatives focussed on climate emergencies, the transportation of dangerous goods, firefighter cancer, and mental health, among others. Unfortunately, these programs often have had a low return on investment because the federal government funds them without any access to subject matter expertise on the fire, emergency and life safety system in Canada. For example, the Great Canadian Fire Census 2025 showed that: only 9% of volunteer (rural) fire departments were aware of federally funded wildfire training, only 19% received equipment from P/Ts, and only 46% had resources for resilience programs like FireSmart.

3. Hazardous Materials and Dangerous Goods Training: Similarly, for over a decade since the tragedy at Lac Megantic, the federal government has provided federally funded HAZMAT training, funded through a highly reputable and important union. Unions operate mostly in large career departments. However, most firefighters are not unionized, nor are they in urban centres. To date, only 31% of rural fire departments are even aware of this training. Only 25% have received it. The majority of firefighters are volunteers and in rural communities. Good programs intended for unionized firefighters in large centres, do not always translate for rural communities and volunteer firefighters even if they generously wish to share them. Census 2025 shows that more than 50% of rural fire departments feel confident handling the transportation of dangerous goods incidents by road, and only 20% by air, rail or water. The Canadian Emergency Response Flammable Liquids Incident in Training Program (CERFLTIP) is another commendable resource available to all departments, but it is a curriculum that needs to be adapted and taught, which is beyond the capacity of most rural fire departments.

4. Safety, security and sovereignty: When it comes to the equipment and resources needed to support rural fire departments, the state of fire and emergency equipment is aging significantly. More than a

quarter of rural fire departments are using gear and self-contained breathing apparatus older than the industry standard (10-15 years), and 41% are using emergency vehicles, including trucks used for rescue, tankers used for water supply, and pumpers used for suppression, that have exceeded the age of insurability. Through Budget 2025 and its commitment to increase defence and security spending to 1.5% of GDP, including EM systems, there is an opportunity to address aging equipment. This is appropriate because in the event of any emergency, the local fire department's personnel and equipment will be first on the scene. Building local capacity reduces the need for CAF deployments and surge capacity during emergencies.

5. Federal policy fire and emergency blindspots: Nearly every federal department engages in well-intentioned policy development that has implications for fire, emergency and life safety in its blindspot. Examples include fireworks or explosives legislation, housing policy, transportation of dangerous goods, and climate proposals, among others. In addition, more than 50% of fire departments have identified a significant infrastructure risk in their community that could cause a major emergency. These “blind spots” are no one’s fault. Fire Chiefs do not expect federal policymakers to be experts in fire operations. They do expect them to know what the right questions are and who to ask.

In conclusion, unlike any other G7 country, Canada has no fire, emergency and life safety advisor or liaison to help the federal government understand the fire, emergency and life safety system. How can existing federal programs be improved to address the unique challenges and opportunities of rural communities? Canada needs substantive advice on how to support fire, emergency, and life safety through national and federal policy. Given that the backbone of the fire, emergency and life safety system are volunteer fire departments that serve rural communities, supporting them is not a jurisdictional issue. It is essential to our safety and security.

2. What federal, provincial, territorial or regional programs have been notably successful in promoting rural development within your region?

While we have identified many challenges for rural Canada from a fire, emergency and life safety perspective, there are also many positive initiatives that the federal government can build upon.

Doubling of the Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit: To its credit, the federal government has correctly recognized the importance of volunteer firefighters through the firefighter tax credit. In 2024, in the face of the country's worst-ever wildfires, the tax credit was doubled. This was an important and commendable action benefiting volunteer firefighters not only financially, but also sending a strong signal of appreciation from the nation for a type of volunteerism that is dangerous, disruptive, and sometimes deadly. The volunteer firefighter and search and rescue tax credit was created in 2011, originally allowing volunteer firefighters to claim \$3000 on their taxes. The tax credit was doubled to \$6000 in wildfire season 2024, saving volunteer firefighters up to \$900 per year. This increase will particularly benefit rural communities, where firefighters are mainly volunteers and are confronting increasingly more frequent wildfires.

Rapid action and ongoing remission from tariffs and surcharges on emergency equipment/vehicles:

When the threat of counter-tariffs revealed the potential to impact thousands of products required by fire departments, the federal government took rapid action to ensure fire departments and other health and public safety equipment needs were exempt from surtaxes and tariffs. This continues to be recognized and appreciated in the context of an uncertain tariff environment.

Allowing fire departments to apply for the Canada Community Building Fund: Formerly the Gas Tax Fund, the federal government, with the provinces and territories, now allows fire departments to be eligible for consideration. Our thanks to then Chair MP Kody Blois, the rural liberal caucus and all of its members, for championing this initiative, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and the Provinces and Territories for supporting this request from the Fire Chiefs. We hope there might be an opportunity to see such expanded application criteria applied to other funds, such as the Green Municipal Fund.

Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP): JEPP was established in October 1980 to enhance national capacity to respond to all types of emergencies and to strengthen the resiliency of critical infrastructure. In 2013, the federal government sunset the program for reasons that may have been appropriate at the time. Since then, the need has re-surfaced. CAFC's Census data shows that in 2025, a quarter of all volunteer departments were using gear or self-contained breathing apparatus exceeding industry standards (10-15 years); 60% of volunteer departments are using pumpers, exceeding industry standards (15-20 years); half of volunteer departments need new fire trucks. This affects the fire department's ability to safely respond to emergencies in their community, especially considering the federal government's intention of rapidly building affordable housing in communities and updating regulations on electric vehicles.

Recognition of the linkage between defence, security, sovereignty and Emergency Management:

Federal Budget 2025 recognized the relationship between Canada's defence needs and the ability to respond in every part of the country. In any emergency, fire department personnel and equipment are usually the first on the scene. This is especially true in rural communities. There is an important opportunity per Budget 2025 to ensure that fire departments, the majority of which are in rural communities, are eligible for funding under the 1.5% of GDP intended for defence.

3. What kinds of policy changes or initiatives would make the greatest difference to the long-term sustainability of your region, and how can we measure their success? What nation-building projects could contribute to this sustainability?

The first policy change that would make the greatest difference to long-term sustainability in rural communities is the creation of a national office to liaise within and across federal departments and with the field of fire, emergency and life safety. This would be true even if all departments were career departments, but it is especially critical because the majority of the fire sector is in fact volunteer fire departments serving rural communities.

What fire chiefs are trying to convey is the following: Canada must do better in fire, emergency, and life safety to avoid compounding catastrophic risks stemming from federal policy decisions. Our

recommendation is to choose a model to facilitate the insight needed, even if only as a pilot, before the next large-scale disaster or emergency in 2026, and to guide Federal Budget measures from a fire, emergency, and life safety perspective.

A national fire administrator or liaison or advisor would engage and liaise within between and across federal departments and the fire sector to provide all federal departments with advice on fire, emergency, and life safety issues and helps to prepare the sector, mostly volunteer, for the implications of federal policy, from housing, electric vehicles, fireworks, climate response, the transportation of dangerous goods, marine emergency response, among others.

The second policy change, which we believe is already on the federal government's radar, would be to ensure that fire and emergency equipment is considered eligible for the 1.5% of GDP spending on defence and security-related investments, including emergency preparedness systems, announced in the Federal Budget 2025. National security is impacted when local communities are vulnerable to emergencies. This investment in the budget indicates that the federal government recognizes the linkage between national security, sovereignty, and fire departments. Rural communities have been disproportionately affected by major emergencies and disasters over the years, and 60% of fire departments have deferred the purchase of emergency equipment due to budget pressures. This puts fire departments at risk of being unable to respond to emergencies in their communities safely.

In closing, rural fire departments are primarily volunteer and supported by local governments and counties. The total expenditures of all 3200 fire departments are \$6 billion, and only 12% of that is used by the 2700 volunteer departments, who make up 80% of the sector. This is staggering. Local, rural communities cannot afford to do this alone. The longer we delay the installation of a national fire administration, advisory, or liaison for the federal government, and the longer we delay on the restoration of local equipment, the worse the issue will become.

Concluding Remarks

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs strongly commends this initiative to consult for Rural Canada. Local volunteer fire departments are common to all rural communities in Canada. They are fundamental to the safety, security and prosperity of our nation. Our recommendations are to (a) install a national or federal fire advisor or fire and emergency liaison office to support all communities, but especially rural communities in fire, emergency and life safety and to help all federal departments become aware of the fire, emergency and life safety implications of their policies; (b) ensure fire departments are eligible for funding under the 1.5% of GDP intended for defence given their integral relationship between emergency response and national security and sovereignty. We would welcome the opportunity to speak further and welcome any questions you may have.