

Nov 9, 2023

File 7130-01

Premier David Eby and The Honourable Bowinn Ma
Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
Via email: premier@gov.bc.ca | EMCR.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Ma:

RE: Emergency Management Act and Regulatory Discussion Papers

The province is seeking public input on two upcoming regulations related to the Emergency and Disaster Management Act (EDMA), as outlined in Bill 31. The Act became publically available on October 3, 2023. Engaging in the modernization of these regulations without a clear grasp of the Act's extensive scope and new requirements is challenging.

The fulsome suite of legislation and regulations directly impact our day-to-day operations, budgets, work plans and the expectations of our residents. We require sufficient time to fully comprehend the Act to provide valuable input for the development of its regulations. Expecting feedback on regulatory discussions while we are only now beginning to understand the Act is unrealistic.

FVRD fully agrees that Emergency Program Act requires updating. We commend the commitment of the Province to reducing disaster risk and incorporating climate change considerations. However, we are concerned about the approach the Province has taken. It does not appear to reflect the reality of our experience with rural communities and landscapes.

Regional districts administer unincorporated (electoral area) lands outside municipalities and First Nations lands. We provide emergency management services in an exceptionally challenging landscape. Our eight electoral areas cover over 12,000 square kilometers with major floodplains (Fraser, Harrison), high-energy rivers (Chilliwack, Coquihalla, Nahatlatch), innumerable streams, valley slopes, and critical utility/transportation corridors. Our communities are distributed along valley bottoms with large distances between them. Often, they rely on a single route for access and egress. These landscape features bring many unmitigated hazards with high risks – landslide, flooding, erosion, debris flows, rock avalanche, snow avalanche, wildfire, highway closure, train derailment, and others. We have experienced events with multiple concurrent and cascading hazards.

Overlapping jurisdictional authorities are a defining feature of emergency management in electoral areas. Hazards often originate from crown lands and are influenced by resource activities that we have no control over and no ability to mitigate. Roads, forests, and Crown slopes/streams – which we do not have jurisdiction over - are associated with most of our emergency events. In addition, we share our landscape with 30 First Nations with 146 reserves. Critical Fraser River dike infrastructure is administered by autonomous improvement districts. As a result, all phases of emergency management require extensive coordination and communication which requires significant time and resources.

The challenge is exacerbated by limited first responder services to rural areas and modest community infrastructure. Electoral area communities experience long wait times for RCMP and ambulance services. Local fire departments are volunteer-based and do not serve all parts of the electoral areas. We have large areas without adequate internet and cellular services. And, we have no public works crews or heavy equipment so all physical response works rely on contractors or other authorities.

We rely extensively on a small property tax base generated by a population less than 15,000 people and about 6,400 homes to provide emergency management services in this exceptionally context. This is a very limited tax base to draw upon to contend with a vast landscape with high risks, many hazards, and pervasive jurisdictional complexity.

We do an admirable job despite these challenges. We have begun rebuilding our emergency management program to respond to our environment, allocate our resources in the most effective way, and focus on the EM activities that most benefit our residents.

Unfortunately, we do not see this reality reflected in the EDMA. We are still working to understand the proposed act and regulations and we have some serious initial concerns. The Act seems to:

- expand requirements for plans, process, and policies rather than build capacity;
- increase FVRD's responsibility for planning and emergencies on Crown land with no ability to collect revenues from those lands to support it and not ability to mitigate the considerable risks associated with these lands;
- impose statutory and regulatory requirements which expand legal responsibilities for local government emergency programs and increase exposure to liability; and,
- foster greater expectations on the part of residents and other organizations without adequate resources to meet them.

We are concerned that we may be unable to fulfill and fund these new requirements. We ask that the Province provide meaningful opportunities for FVRD and other regional districts to provide input on the proposed act and regulations. And we ask that the Province respond directly to our input. Other regional districts have made similar requests. We join them in asking you for the creation of a Regional District disaster & emergency management working group. This collaborative effort will enable us to work together with the Ministry, ensuring that the legislation adequately addresses the unique challenges of disaster and emergency management in rural areas.

FVRD is committed to collaborating positively and productively with the Province to advance the modernization of BC's emergency management legislation. I'd be pleased to bring my team to Victoria or to host your team at FVRD to discuss this further.

Yours truly,

Jason Lum
Chair, FVRD Board

cc:

- » Tara Richards, Deputy Minister, Emergency Management and Climate Readiness
- » All 27 Regional Districts
- » Hon. Anne Kang, Minister of Municipal Affairs
- » Trish Mandewo, President, Union of BC Municipalities