

Canada: Unprepared for Natural Disasters Hill Times January 20, 2020 p. 7 Ken Rubin

The terrifying Australian bush fires is one of the more explosive episodes of increasing emergencies aided by climate changes.

Here in Canada, two recently obtained sets of access to information records from Public Safety and Agriculture Canada are not exactly reassuring for Canada's preparedness for natural disasters.

Public Safety records from the agency which is most responsible for coordinating emergency responses, acknowledged that the pace at developing emergency plans and actions has been "slow".

The documents noted that, among other challenges greater flooding will increasingly cause transportation systems and services to be disrupted in all regions of Canada, though no coordinating national plan of action is offered.

An October, 2019 Public Safety briefing note stated that residential flood risks only account for about 11 per cent to 13 per cent of total of the Federal Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangement program (DFASA) costs, whereas bridges, roads and other infrastructure account for much more. But when it comes to flooding and fires, more Canadians are losing their homes.

A particularly bleak future is found in the mitigation-disaster-risk assessment for Nova Scotia which was the only province or territory risk assessment made available. Increased flooding damage is the main risk in Nova Scotia due to coastal changes expected. The assessment lists 18 past years of natural disaster events causing \$134 million in damages to Nova Scotia.

All kinds of flooding – which are hurricane-related, or due to ice jams, rising sea levels, extreme rainfalls, dyke breaches and more - affect all provincial sectors. A scale of one-to-five of disaster risks of how many will be effected or become fatalities is not elaborated.

A Public Safety draft June, 2019 memo notes that, nationally, the resulting climate change losses to the economy could be as high as \$5 billion in 2020 and escalate to between \$20 to \$40 billion a year by the 2050's. The records state that under the federal disaster program, costs will be around \$902 million a year for the next five years. That's much more than the \$430 million on average spent in the last three years as reported by The Canadian Press.

A May, 2019 memo indicated that Canada has been reviewing adopting changes needed to its building and electric codes, fuel storage tank, wastewater treatment plants and flood resilient standards for residential communities and coastal areas. They are also starting to examine measures such as better bridge piers and buoyant foundation construction. But other standards under consideration are blanked out as secrets.

But will the new standards for measuring flooding risks and coastal flood hazards work be matched by actual mitigation or will it be enough?

This March, federal and provincial officials are expected to discuss emergency cost allocations and standards to meet climate change infrastructure threats.

Meanwhile, a second set of obtained access records obtained from Agriculture Canada warned that Canada's water and food supply is far from secure, should a major natural disaster strike.

If critical infrastructure collapses, getting bottled water and meals to people in stricken areas could be difficult. No agency stockpiles drinking water and foods.

Some provincial plans are being beefed up but there are many gaps to meet food and water shortages and they are far from adequate. Those plans rely on non-government agencies like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, who have limited resources.

Other critical needs in times of disaster, and which were noted include sufficient temporary shelters, adequate health-care centers and sufficient transport means.

Part of the problem is that no one agency is taking charge and indeed, documents indicated that Agriculture Canada even tried to get out of having a strong role in coordinating supplying or stockpiling adequate food and bottled water in time of emergencies.

The 2018 British Columbia case study Agriculture Canada commissioned in an area where threats range from earthquakes to extensive flooding and fires found that efforts to supply emergency food and bottled water are not well coordinated and confusing. Having extensive damage to road and rails and bridges would hamper efforts. Part of the review found that even animal emergency needs in British Columbia's ranching country for food and shelter were not adequate.

Canada is not the only country that's ill-prepared to meet growing emergencies brought on by climate change and natural disasters. Even in Japan, that has recently experienced torrential rains and a devastating typhoon, the on-ground emergency evacuation centers were found to be inadequate especially for having sufficient child care and bedding.

With our own increasing temperatures and more floods, forest fires and northern climate dramatic changes, are we prepared?

Canada needs to be less secretive and more transparent in its efforts to tackle emergencies and not hide its deficiencies in awakening to imminent risks posed by increasing natural disasters.

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