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The 1999 Mallard fire: Lessons learned

Department of Nursing

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“If you don’t have a disaster, you’re never going to plan for one. If you see it once, then you’ll say, Well, next time it happens we’ll be ready. I think that has taught us a lesson here.”
“...after that it was like dreaming about each room burning down and stuff like that. And I think the worst thing too was seeing my children, yeah, seeing them go through the rubble and trying to find trophies and awards and stuff like that.”
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**Acknowledgments**
BACKGROUND

LA RONGE, SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA

La Ronge is located in northern Saskatchewan on the shore of Lac La Ronge. It is adjacent to the Lac La Ronge Indian band and the northern village of Air Ronge. La Ronge is the largest community in northern Saskatchewan with over 2700 people residing in the town, 2000 people on the adjacent First Nations lands of the Lac la Ronge Indian band, and approximately 1000 people residing in the bordering Métis settlement of Air Ronge. La Ronge acts as the service centre for almost all of Northern Saskatchewan.

Mining, government and the tourist industry comprise the majority of employment (43%). Additionally, industries such as fishing, logging, and wild rice production have played key roles in the development of the area and continue, in a variety of forms, into the present.

The landscape surrounding the area is defined by the presence of the lake and its surrounding waterways. The rocky Precambrian topography includes boreal forests, and muskeg that immediately encompass the settled areas.

The area of La Ronge has an extensive First Nations heritage of mostly Cree speaking people. Approximately 55% of the population are First Nations people.

The areas is also somewhat isolated as the closest urban center is 250 km south in Prince Albert. Due to its situation on the shore of Lac La Ronge as well as the banks of the Montreal River, the area has historically functioned as a crossroads for travelers and centre for trade.

La Ronge houses the main airport for the Northern part of Saskatchewan, which includes a fire fighting base equipped with water tankers.

THE 1999 MALLARD FIRE

Firefighters battled the Mallard Fire that caused the evacuation of the entire community of La Ronge on May 27, 1999. The fire, which was started by lightning, stretched over a distance of 8 kilometres and it took one week, 248 firefighters, and several water bombers to extinguish it. The damage included the destruction of 8 homes in Eagle Point, 1 trailer on Riese Drive and 1 bush home. Some commercial buildings were also destroyed within the town boundaries; however, no injuries were reported.

At the time, the area only had one main roadway in and out via highway #102. Smoke and flames slowed down traffic and visibility; fortunately, the highway remained open for evacuation. The area was initially well equipped to fight the fire and was believed to be manageable, as La Ronge houses one of Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management’s (SERM) main fire bases for the North. However, due to the strong winds and the high fuel load, the fire quickly grew out of control and additional resources were called in. Most of the town evacuated to the local Uniplex - a recreation centre in La Ronge.

"...a lot of people said that it was like the hottest, fastest fire ever. Like usually when there’s a fire when you go back to your home maybe half your fireplace is still standing or you can find a metal something or other. It was just black holes."
To the La Ronge Regional Area, the Mallard Fire of 1999 was a local fear that came to reality. Our communities are in the center of the boreal forest, so every fire season the local people live with the threat of what could possibly happen with an out of control wild fire coming into our communities. However, the threat of wildfire had not become a reality until the Mallard Fire of 1999.

The day began as a mostly sunny day which was interrupted by a plume of smoke in a westerly direction from our communities. Within less than 2 hours of seeing the plume the fire had made its way into the north end of La Ronge and a state of emergency was declared.

With the help from Saskatchewan Environment utilizing the water bombers and the fuel retardant disbursement process, a huge catastrophe was prevented as they were able to divert the fire from the center of town.

With the volunteer efforts of the three communities, as well as some government agencies, only minimal property loss was encountered.

The lesson that the three communities learned, was that working together and having an emergency plan in place is instrumental to success during times of crisis. Having gone through the Mallard Fire it has made our current planning more precise and organized.

Thank You,

Gordon Stomp, Mayor
Northern Village of Air Ronge

Chief Tammy Cook Searson
Lac La Ronge Indian Band

Thomas Sierzycki, Mayor
Town of La Ronge
Currently, the 20% of Canada’s population that is rural lives throughout 99.8% of its landmass. Rural Canadians enjoy a lifestyle that is unique, compared to the majority of the population who still reside within cities. Issues such as youth migration, access to health care services, economic development and community involvement are all central to understanding rural communities.

Rural to Urban Migration
Statistics Canada reports that there is a large rural-to-urban migration of youth aged 20-24 that is currently taking place, as youth leave their rural communities to pursue greater educational opportunities. However, individuals with a university education are three times more likely to move back to a rural location, after relocating to an urban setting. The same is not true for individuals with a grade nine education or less. Rural areas are indeed competitive in attracting community members with higher levels of education.

Rural Health Status: What are the Issues?
Residents of rural communities rate their own health lower than residents of urban areas. Risk factors for poor health, such as travel distance to health care services, smoking, and obesity, are considerably higher in rural communities. Significantly higher rates of hypertension and arthritis have also contributed to decreased health and functioning in both rural and northern Canadian areas.

Rural dwellers report a lower likelihood of taking action to improve their health. This diminished health status in rural communities has been recognized by local, provincial and federal governments. Across Canada, healthy lifestyle activities have been initiated, in an effort to increase the level of health experienced by rural and northern Canadians.

One example of these initiatives is the “Kick the Nic” program funded federally in Yellowknife and the Northwest Territories. Similar youth anti-smoking initiatives recognize the dangers of smoking and challenge young rural Canadians to make healthy choices early in life.

Community Involvement
Rural Canadians have strong ties to friends and family. Individuals who live in more rural places develop trusting and close relationships with their neighbors. A strong sense of belonging is also common and it is these characteristics that help rural residents work together when facing adversities such as economic downturns and natural disasters.

Furthermore, individuals who experience a sense of belonging feel as though they “fit” in the community and more often participate in its activities. They also self-rate their health as higher than those who do not feel as though they “fit or have a sense of belonging”.

Photo Courtesy of Judith C. Kulig
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Community resiliency has been defined as the ability of a community to deal with adversity and develop a higher level of functioning as a result. It is a process that most communities experience as they interact with their environment, particularly after events such as natural disasters.

**What does resiliency look like?**
The attribute of resiliency is the result of a dynamic process. Community members working collectively alongside each other will naturally develop a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging and shared outlook leads to community action that demonstrates leadership and conflict-resolution. While these qualities are borne of the specific actions of the community, resiliency does allow for feedback, input and new ideas from external sources.

**What are the benefits of resiliency?**
Resilient communities provide good examples for other communities. By understanding how affected communities have coped with adversity, others can benefit from their strategies. Residents of resilient communities carry a local pride that manifests itself in the life-perspective of its members. These community members will exhibit community action as conflict resolution and problem-solving activities occur.

**What can be done to increase resiliency?**
The social strengths of a community, such as multi-generational families, a healthy cohesiveness between residents, and the influence of powerful informal leaders can be valuable assets in a time of disaster. Resiliency will be promoted once community members increase their recognition that all residents are vulnerable and interdependent.

*“There should be unity and there should be that – the sense of wanting to work together. So to me that’s what best defines a community is that camaraderie and that cooperation.”*
Letter From the Fire Chief

TIPS TO BE PREPARED:

- Have adequate home insurance and review your insurance plan annually
- Have an updated community disaster plan which includes a back-up community that can assist
- Reduce the risk of wildfire impacting your home by adopting FireSmart® activities - For example:
  - Be familiar with fire protection services in your area
  - Remove all brush and debris from around your home to decrease fire fuel
- Be prepared during Fire Season:
  - Always leave sufficient gas in vehicles
  - Have cash on hand
  - Have a “grab and go” bag for all members of one’s family prepared in advance
From the initial confirmation of the fire, local individuals, the RCMP, administration, municipal and provincial (SERM) firefighters as well as different government officials were engaged in frequent communication. During the Fire a number of communication resources were utilized such as the local radio station for community members, and the incident command system (ICS) for personnel that helped in inter-agency and inter-community cooperation and dissemination of information. However, there were some communication issues: Children were in school when evacuation notices were issued and some parents did not know where their children were evacuated to.

In an area with more than one bordering community such as La Ronge, Air Ronge, and Lac La Ronge, communication between communities can be difficult. Community members claimed they received information from official and non-official sources that was not always accurate. However, the local radio station proved invaluable during this time as they remained on air throughout the entire duration of the fire, keeping in contact with the Town Office and the Provincial Fire Centre to inform the community. They also translated reports for Cree community members.

People need one main source of communication to receive reliable and timely information during a disaster. In 2010, the ‘Public Safety Radio System’ began operating in Saskatchewan. The system allows different agencies, including Municipal Fire and Police, First Nations agencies, Emergency Medical Services, Volunteer Search and Rescue chapters, Environment, Corrections, Highways and other government agencies to effectively communicate with one another during an emergency.

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Cross training is important to maximize efficiency and ensure that local firefighters can contribute as much as possible during a wildfire. This means that in addition to training in structural firefighting, rural firefighters have the proper training, clothing and equipment for interface firefighting as well.

In the province of Saskatchewan the forest fire management centre controls wildfire management from its La Ronge Centre and other centres across the province.

Locally, the municipality of La Ronge has the Regional Fire/Rescue Services with paid and volunteer firefighters.

However, at the time of the fire the community lacked a comprehensive emergency plan. Since the fire, the three communities have developed a detailed emergency plan.

In addition SERM officials now contact rural municipalities annually prior to fire season to discuss fire safety, emergency planning, as well as determine available resources, and establish contact lists.

One role of the Office of the Fire Commissioner for Saskatchewan is to support training opportunities for volunteer fire fighters.

In 2009, La Ronge hosted the provincial Volunteer Fire Fighter’s Association Conference and training. For many First Nation firefighters, this was their first conference. More than 60 First Nations fire fighters attended.

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At the time of the fire there was no emergency measures co-ordinator, as their previous co-ordinator had resigned and had not been replaced.

Local community members helped to evacuate people who were less mobile, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

Government officials need to know who the leaders are in a community in order to work together during a wildfire. Often in rural communities there are no obvious leaders for officials to connect with.

It is also important to have a key community contact who is in charge of coordinating with government officials.

The Local Fire departments of La Ronge, Lakeland, and Buckland all worked long hours helping to fight the fire.

Municipal fire departments, provincial firefighters and the RCMP worked together during this time.

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**LEADERSHIP THROUGH TEAMWORK**

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**AND FROM WITHIN**

**IT TAKES MORE THAN ONE TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS**

**FIRE FIGHTERS**

Rural firefighters play an integral role during a wildfire and are usually first on the scene. Their devotion is admirable as they are often on-call and/or volunteer and simultaneously hold full-time jobs in the community.

**COLLABORATION**

Amid the stress and confusion of the fire, community members were able to pull together an emergency measures committee (EMC) in a short period of time. The committee served as a unified command centre for the town of La Ronge.

**VOLUNTEERS**

Volunteers helped to strengthen community ties and build community spirit. When individuals found an area where they could lend their support, a purpose was discovered that transformed them from would-be victims to leaders with intention.
THE PRESENCE OF A WELL-DESIGNED COMMUNITY DISASTER RELIEF PROGRAM IS VERY IMPORTANT

WHO IS AT RISK?
When considering who may be at risk in your community during a disaster, it is important to delineate between different types of risk. Some things that may be “at risk” are economic security, physical property, individual health and social cohesiveness. When planning and preparing your community for a possible disaster, it is crucial to consider (and plan for) the multifaceted face of risk.

LENDING A HELPING HAND
Our findings show that people in the La Ronge have high levels of Cohesion. This means that they are friendly to one another, feel a sense of community, attachment and social connectedness to the area.

This sense of community support and connectedness is an important factor in reducing risk and promoting resilience, both at the community and individual levels.

This was evidenced during the fire as community members worked together to help others in need.

Provide a central location from which to offer services:
The Uniplex in La Ronge served as a point of registration as well as a place of refuge for evacuees. Out-of-town family members could confidently leave messages for loved ones, while local residents were able to contact one another during the uncertainty of evacuations.

Develop an awareness of community needs: Discover what things community members affected by a disaster actually need before donating goods, in order to ensure donations are useful. Cash donations are helpful to empower people to make their own decisions and to support local businesses.

Encourage local participation: Local volunteers were a huge source of support during the Mallard fire. The three communities of La Ronge, Air Ronge and Lac La Ronge all pitched in and helped one another - becoming one community instead of three.

After the Mallard Fire, the three communities (the Town of La Ronge, Air Ronge, and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band) collaborated on the building of a jointly owned and shared state-of-the-art Fire Centre for future fires and other disasters.

“COMMUNITY IS A WAY OF LIFE”

But I think the fire department and their team did a very good job by getting people out. We had a lot of emotions, people coming in crying and scared and - the health region was very good. They sent people over and did what they could do.”

Rural communities possess a depth that is built from shared history, shared relationships and shared activities.

When disaster strikes, citizens can be counted on to meet the needs of their community, both by anticipating the needs and responding to the communicated needs that are described by local officials and media.
Security & Efficiency

During the 1999 Mallard Fire local RCMP were required for assisting with evacuations and providing security to the community.

To maximize efficiency, involve local law enforcement agencies from the beginning of the disaster management planning. A co-created plan can be quickly acted upon for the benefit of the local residents.

"And there we registered and we were met by the most comforting group of Red Cross workers. They were supportive, they were giving cookies to the kids, they were smiling, and it seems to me they made a point of behaving in a very relaxed manner, welcoming people. That was very calming."

The Red Cross provided significant resources and services.

Other personnel that provided valuable services include the Mamawetan Churchill River Health Region & La Ronge Regional Fire/Rescue Services.

After a disaster, parents need support looking after children as they must contend with a myriad of issues such as dealing with insurance agencies, rebuilding their homes, and, if employment structures were lost, finding new employment.

Our findings indicate that there is a grieving period for people after a disaster. People need time to process the magnitude of what has occurred and the impact it has had on their lives.

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"...a lot of times they will have de-briefing when you find bodies in a house in a fire because it's so dramatic, but people don't realize stuff like this is too."

Who is Qualified to Help?

In an emergency situation, the people willing to volunteer are often the ones recruited.

There is little time or available staff to conduct formal interviews, perform criminal record checks and contact former employers for references. Having a reliable volunteer base already recruited, properly screened, and equipped with necessary skills and certification is an integral part of disaster planning.

The Emergency Social Services Program is an example of this type of service. Its pre-established volunteer base plans and provides for the needs of individuals and families during an emergency. Advance preparation reduces concerns regarding proper volunteer placement.

It may be helpful to consider relying on volunteers that have been approved for other service positions.
The Mallard Fire

Required:
- 258 firefighters
- 14 Water Bombers
- Numerous Helicopters

Equipment and Resources to Deal With the Disaster Must Be Allocated

The Mallard fire demonstrated the need for human resources and revised infrastructure as well as physical resources. Human resources including community volunteers and Emergency Social Services as well as paid employees contributed greatly to dealing with the disaster.

All-Saints Anglican Church

Allowing volunteer firemen time away from their regular employment is an example of the need for flexibility when it comes to allocating human resources.

Redistributing municipal firefighters to work in the bush fighting the wildfire is an example where revised infrastructure contributed to a more effective disaster management.

Creating inventories of what human and physical resources are available in your community will be a useful exercise in preparation for disaster management.

Rural communities have more limited physical resources than urban areas; therefore, issues such as transportation of evacuees, evacuation of pets, and generation of power all need to be addressed with a clearly articulated plan before disaster strikes.

In the case of the Mallard fire, different communities received resources from various levels of government. For example, La Ronge was aided by the Provincial government while Lac La Ronge received resources from the Federal Government. In this case, resources may not be the same or equally dispersed. Community cooperation and communication is extremely important within these types of communities in order to share and allocate resources.

Lessons Learned

Community Resources

Lesson Five

The Mallard Fire

Equipment and Resources to Deal With the Disaster Must Be Allocated

What Can the Municipality Do to Help Its Landowners With Disaster Planning?

- Work with local health & social services personnel to conduct public education about disaster management and preparation.
- Develop materials such as fridge magnets that emphasize the essentials needed for successful evacuation. Reminder notices can be sent in monthly bills or tax notices and the inclusion of information about disaster planning and management can be placed in the local newspapers.
- Adopt updated provincial policies related to disaster planning.
- Create evacuation plans for the community including plans for the evacuation of pets and large-scale animals.

Signed Contracts Must Be in Place to Protect Personal Property

Having an up-to-date list of contractors with equipment useful in fire management will be helpful. Having signed contracts with these individuals and their companies to access their equipment during disasters will help ensure efficient disaster planning.
RESOURCES TO ACCESS
GROUPS PROVIDING INFORMATION TO INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES
INTERESTED IN DISASTER PLANNING

GOVERNMENT OF SASKATCHEWAN - WILDFIRE RISK ASSESSMENT

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WILDFIRE

CANADIAN RED CROSS – DISASTER PREPAREDNESS
http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=000005&tid=003

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS – DISASTER PREPAREDNESS
Follow the “disaster and emergency services” quick link

THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS
www.ccep.ca

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
HOMEOWNER’S WILDFIRE MITIGATION GUIDE
http://groups.ucanr.org/HWMG/

LIVING WITH FIRE – A GUIDE FOR THE HOMEOWNER
EVACUATION PREPARATION AND CHECKLIST

IS YOUR FAMILY PREPARED?

SALVATION ARMY – EMERGENCY DISASTER SERVICES
http://www.salvationarmy.ca/eds/
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