

Community is Concerned About Emergency and Disaster Management Act (EDMA)

Burns Lake, BC: The Chinook Emergency Response Society (CERS) assists communities in the Regional District of Bulkley Nechako (RDBN) Electoral Area-E prepare and respond to emergencies and disasters.

Without any prior consultation or communication with communities directly impacted by this incoming legislation, the *Emergency and Disaster Management Act (EDMA)* came into effect on November 8, 2023. CERS is extremely alarmed about the potential impacts this new act will have for the community, local governments and First Nations in disaster response.

“Since 2018, CERS has worked hard organizing a grassroots community emergency response system in our vast area. Our community members include highly skilled and trained people who have actioned countless emergency events in our area. We have developed relationships with local First Nations and the RDBN, which have been acknowledged and praised by BCWS, government agencies and elected officials. Now, in an attempt to fast-track policy that would throw us in jail for protecting our property and livelihoods, they are pushing not only the EDMA down our throats, but regulations that would effectively criminalize us for responding to emergencies in our communities. It’s insane!!!” Risé Johansen - Founding CERS Chair

There are 3 main areas of concern:

1. Maximum fines of one million dollars and/or jail time for individuals and businesses who are non-compliant during an emergency, effectively criminalizing neighbors helping neighbors.
 - In the summer of 2023, community volunteers responded to 27 fires in the region. These volunteers could now be jailed and/or fined.
 - Community members protecting property, feeding livestock and fighting fires behind evacuation order lines could also be jailed and fined.
2. EDMA regulations will strip Regional Districts in B.C. of local decision-making authority and autonomy.
 - In 2023, the RDBN issued Temporary Access Permits for Agricultural Purposes and allowed the support of residents and business owners who remained within areas under evacuation orders to feed livestock and protect infrastructure. Under EDMA, the RDBN and their staff could face fines and jail time if they continue to support residents in this way.
3. EDMA regulations will take away individual and community rights and their ability to organize and respond to emergencies that threaten their property or livelihoods.
 - Neighbors facing fines and/or jail time will be reluctant to help protect community resources.
 - Overreach of this magnitude cripples communities who want to protect themselves and aid others in an emergency event.

“It has been shown that the government does not have the capacity to deal with large-scale wildfire events such as those that have occurred since 2017. Because of this, more and more communities are organizing to help protect their properties and livelihoods. CERS has been working with local community members since 2018 and receives no government funding and the actions of community volunteers have saved millions of dollars in timber resources, structures and firefighting costs. This government needs to work with organized communities, and they need to start now.” Sharon Vare – CERS Board Chair

CERS is urging residents to voice their concerns before the government deadline of January 31, 2024.

- Email concerns to modernizeEM@gov.bc.ca (<https://engage.gov.bc.ca/emergencymanagementregulations/written-submission-guidelines/>)
- Contact your local Regional District, municipality, band office and local elected officials to find out more about their response to EDMA.
- Contact your local MLA

Chinook Emergency Response Society Background

The Chinook Emergency Response Society assists community members in the RDBN Electoral Area-E in responding and reacting to any and all emergency situations. Electoral Area E is located in the territory of the Wet'suwe'ten and Cheslata'ten people and focuses on three priority areas:

1. Communication
 - a. CERS sets up communication and information systems for residents, such as email and phone lists, website, Facebook page and newsletters.
 - b. CERS works to communicate effectively with other organizations like the Southside Volunteer Fire Department, BCWS, Regional District officials and the local First Nations. This work is about building relationships and trust with these organizations. Trust building takes time and willingness from community members and representatives from these organizations to sit and talk out plans and share concerns.
2. Education
 - a. CERS organizes training events including S100 training, fire smart and wildfire preparedness events.
3. Coordination
 - a. CERS organizes Neighbourhood Pods and Community Wildfire Response Trailers as well as utilizes asset mapping to see what resources are locally available and can be used during an emergency.

In 2023, community members responded to 27 fires in RDBN Area-E, extinguishing 12 of these in 5 hours or less. Anyone of these fires could have resulted in a large-scale wildfire event resulting in loss of property and countless hectares of forest. On July 9, 2023, some community members choose to stay behind evacuation order lines during the Parrot Lookout (R21234) and Ramsey Creek fires (R11238). These volunteer residents had the experience and resources to safely work with structural protection and BCWS to help protect property, resources and community infrastructure.

Further Information:

- <https://www.burnslakelakesdistrictnews.com/local-news/tension-rises-over-emergency-and-disaster-management-act-7290019>
- <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-emergency-diaster-management-act/>
- https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/application/files/6517/0198/7607/Board_Agenda_December_14_2023SOnilPww.pdf. PG 106-128.
- https://www.leg.bc.ca/content/data%20-%20ldp/Pages/42nd4th/1st_read/PDF/gov31-1.pdf

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