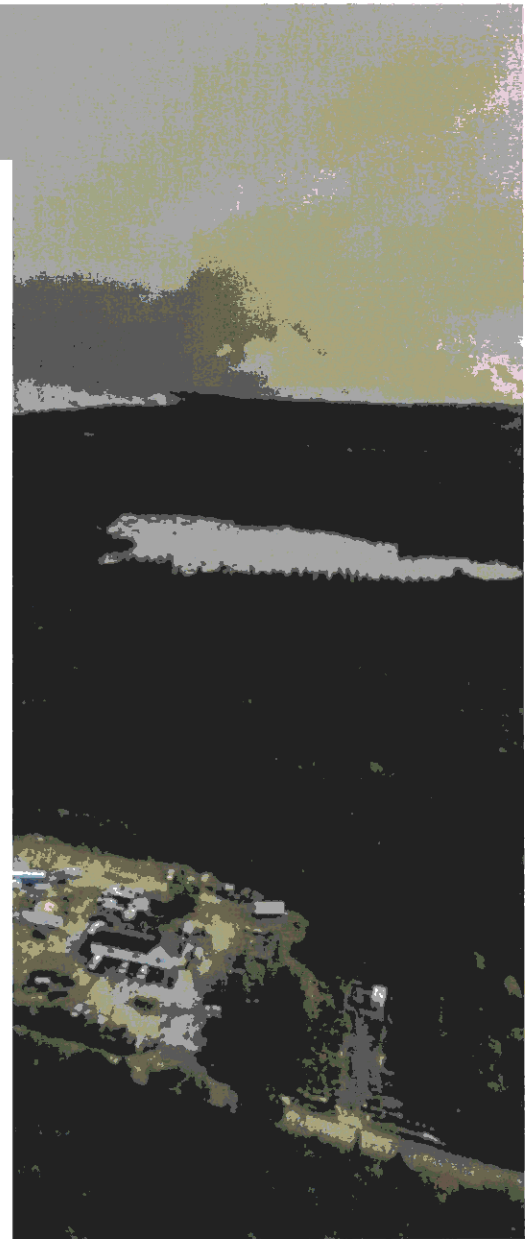


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# Long Lake/ West Dalhousie Wildfire Event 2025 After-Action Report



NOVEMBER, 2025

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COUNTY *of* ANNAPOLIS

NATURALLY ROOTED

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# Table of Contents

Purpose and Objectives of the After-Action Report.....3

Incident Overview .....4

What was expected? .....5

What actually happened?.....5

What Went Well.....6

Areas for Improvement.....8

Recommendations..... 10

Conclusion.....12

Appendix A: Timeline of Long Lake / West Dalhousie Wildfire Event.....13

Appendix B: Key Tips for Future Events .....15

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# Purpose and Objectives of the After-Action Report

This After-Action Report (AAR) focuses on the challenges, successes, and lessons learned during the Annapolis Regional Emergency Management Organization (REMO) response to the Long Lake/ West Dalhousie Wildfire that began in August of 2025. The AAR further provides recommendations to improve preparedness, coordination, communication, and response effectiveness for future incidents in the County and beyond.

The AAR is not intended to be a full account of the emergency incident; however, it is intended to provide a critical analysis of the event response from the Annapolis REMO perspective.

The information for this AAR was gathered through surveys from staff directly involved in the response, surveys from partnering organizations, as well as several debrief meetings with staff and other stakeholders.

The surveys and meetings consisted of the following general questions:

- What did you expect to happen during an emergency response?
- What actually happened during the emergency response?
- What went well?
- What were the areas for improvement?
- What are your recommendations? This will assist in enhancing future operations, as well as providing relevant advice to other municipalities who may experience similar events.

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# Incident Overview

On August 13, 2025, a forest fire was ignited by a lightning strike in the West Dalhousie area, which grew rapidly due to severe drought conditions. The escalating situation required activation of the Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) and a significant inter-agency response involving municipal, provincial, and external partners.

## Summary & Key Facts

- The wildfire was triggered by a lightning strike on August 13, 2025.
- The fire burned in extremely dry conditions and created fire conditions that were described as “unprecedented” by experienced responders.
- At its greatest estimated extent, the wildfire complex covered  $\approx 8,468$  hectares, or 85 square kilometers.
- The fire destroyed 20 dwellings, damaged others, and damaged or destroyed multiple outbuildings.
- The wildfire forced the evacuation of over 500 civic addresses at its peak.
- Event required a multi-jurisdictional firefighting response involving Nova Scotia DNR crews, local fire departments, and interprovincial support from Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Prince Edward Island, and others.
- As of the completion of this report, the fire is under control but is still not declared as out.

## Appendix A: Timeline of Long Lake/ West Dalhousie Fire Event

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## What was expected?

- Closer adherence to the Incident Command System (ICS) regarding the structure of the ECC and documentation.
- Partner agencies would be in the Annapolis ECC on a regular basis to discuss and collaborate.
- More coordinated joint media releases.
- Staff who had not experienced an actual ECC event expected turmoil.
- Constant communication between the Incident Command Post (ICP) and the ECC.
- More relief from other partners to support ECC positions.

## What actually happened?

- Staff seemed to work more as a team, as opposed to having specific roles within the ICS structure.
- Most partner discussions were held virtually through provincially arranged meetings. Outside of these meetings, there were challenges receiving timely information.
- Multiple agency approval for communications slowed the release of information.
- Staff worked extremely hard and collaborated effectively, which allowed the ECC to run smoothly.
- When resources allowed, Annapolis ECC added a staff member to the ICP to improve communication; however, at times, this led to the assumption that this staff person would be solely responsible for the information flow between the ICP and the ECC.
- Many Annapolis County staff worked long days for weeks in a row with little to no relief.

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# What Went Well?

## Coordination and Teamwork

- Overall, the response was very good.
- Strong camaraderie and morale among ECC staff; collaboration across municipal departments was excellent.
- In-person structure allowed for effective communication and coordination.
- All supporting municipal staff were flexible and highly responsive.

## Communication Success

- Media relations were effective and collaborative. The media were cooperative, and regular communications involving the Warden, Deputy Warden, and agencies went smoothly.
- The 1-833 public information phone line functioned well with dedicated, full-time staff.
- Regular briefings with council and the REMO Advisory Committee proved to be an important communication stream.
- Updates through summaries of daily scribe notes improved internal information sharing.

## Operations and Logistics

- Navigator program provided strong community outreach and connection.
- GIS team was able to provide crucial mapping in a timely manner.
- Animal care response for animals that were temporarily displaced or left behind was excellent.
- Administrative tracking (overtime, mileage) improved over the course of the event.
- Mental health support was valuable for residents.
- Scribe notes, site visits, and strong leadership presence supported situational awareness.

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- Existing Memorandum of Understandings (MOU) with stakeholders and regional partners allowed instant activation of comfort centres, psychosocial support, and donation management without last-minute negotiations.

### Residents

- Evacuations and resident cooperation went well.
- Site visits for those impacted by the wildfire ran smoothly and were appreciated.
- In-person meetings held with residents who were directly impacted by the wildfire were important and well received.
- The support offered through outside agencies was extremely appreciated and helpful.

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# Areas for Improvement

## Structure and ICS Implementation

- Maintaining ICS structure may have improved efficiency and created better opportunities to have external staffing relief.
- Many staff used their work cell phones as primary contact numbers during the incident, which kept them tied to the response even on their days off. Assigning each ICS position a dedicated, position-specific phone would have allowed external HR resources to step in more easily and provided staff with the ability to fully disconnect when off duty.
- Maintaining ICS documentation would have enhanced our ability to support external staffing resources.
- Ongoing training for councillors and staff would reinforce all roles and responsibilities during an event response.
- The room setup worked well for joint discussions; however, breakout areas for media, the public information phone line, and elected officials could have been improved.

## Communication

- Improved coordination between ICP and ECC. It seems important to have cross-staffing between ECC and ICP, with designated responsibility.
- Audio visual systems in ECC need improvement for hybrid communication.
- The public information phonenumber should be physically closer to the ECC and have those staffing the phones involved in regular briefings or information sharing.
- Multi-departmental response requires consistent communication to avoid conflicting messaging. A sole provincial source for communication may be beneficial.
- Improved direct communication with residents in the affected area could be achieved through the collection of additional contact information, and by offering multiple mediums to share information, such as meetings, group texts, emails, physical postings, designated social platforms, etc.



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- Regular reminders and enforcement emphasizing leaked information and pictures of the incident can create misinformation and increase anxiety.
  - Back-up for communications staff is needed, internal or external support.

#### Documentation

- The scribe position was crucial, adding a documentation position would have helped with notes, as well as financial information.
- Formal notetaking and an after-meeting email summary at key meetings (PCC, ECC daily briefs) proved to be valuable.

#### Resource and Personnel Management

- It is important to ensure proper rest periods for all involved; staffing fatigue occurred due to the extreme dedication of the staff involved.
- Maintaining the ICS structure would make it easier to rotate personnel from other jurisdictions.
- Additional health support should be considered, including mental health support and improved nutrition during the event.
- A more purpose-built ECC would have greatly improved operations. For example, dedicated breakout rooms, proper phone setups, noise reduction, and adequate wall space for posting information and maps.

#### External Coordination

- Communication with provincial partners (DEM, DNR, NS Guard) could be improved across all areas. While some aspects of communication strengthened over the course of the event, others did not. Regular documentation and clear, designated communication channels would help address these gaps.
- Jurisdictional roles related to communications and media responsibilities should be defined early in an event.
- Discussions and agreements should occur to better determine the comfort centre(s) and Red Cross support.

#### Other

- Civic numbering needs improvement.

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# Recommendations

- Strengthen ICS Adherence
  - Reinforce ICS principles with clear position assignments and backup personnel.
- Improve Communication Systems
  - Integrate ECC and ICP communication channels and establish dedicated communication tools.
  - Development of a Disaster Response Communications Plan
  - Discussions with provincial representatives to develop improved communication.
- Enhance Documentation and Information Flow
  - Assign a dedicated documentation officer and use standardized ICS forms.
- Personnel Management
  - Enforce rest periods and mental health support plans.
  - Ensure that there are at least two people trained for every position within the ECC.
- Public and Partner Engagement
  - Start conducting community meetings early in the incident and maintain county-led communication platforms.
  - Ensure all contact information is up to date, so the Municipality has multiple ways to contact residents, whenever possible.
  - Additional or improved agreements be put in place with all partnering agencies to better define roles during an emergency.

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- ECC Physical Space and Equipment
    - Plan for an improved ECC location(s) that offers larger floor area, divisible rooms, large meeting table, robust audio-visual technology, and walls suitable for posting operational materials.
  - Training and Preparedness
    - Conduct joint exercises with Province, community groups, etc., and refresh ICS and documentation training.
    - Offer Public Information Officer training
  - Health Support
    - Health support should be available not only for residents but also staff and responders involved with the incident, including mental health support.
  - Other
    - Work with partners and community on improving civic number visibility and adherence.

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# Conclusion

Despite numerous challenges, the response to this incident was marked by exceptional dedication, collaboration, and adaptability among County staff and partners.

This After-Action Report highlights both the successes and the gaps in communication, documentation, and structure, helping to strengthen the region's emergency management capacity and resilience. While no one hopes to face a similar event again, the insights and planning that result from this report ensure that Annapolis County is better prepared to respond effectively to any future disaster.

Council and staff extend their sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed—directly or indirectly—to the emergency response.

Note: Residents who were directly affected by evacuations and/or damage to properties will be contacted to provide feedback, which will become an Appendix to this document.

## Appendix A: Timeline of Long Lake/ West Dalhousie Wildfire Event

| Date / Period   | Event / Action  | Notes / Impacts  |
|-----------------|---|--|
| August 13, 2025 | Fire began  | Lightning strike in very dry forested land.  |
| August 14, 2025 | First evacuation order; fire ~ 406 hectares               | Mandatory evacuations in areas along West Dalhousie Road, Thorne Road, etc.  |
| August 15, 2025 | Evacuation Expanded                                       | Mandatory evacuations expanded West Dalhousie Road, Morse Road, West Dalhousie Road, Thorne Road, Medcraft Lane and Heartland Road |
| August 15, 2025 | DNR Helicopter crashed                                    |  |
| August 16, 2025 | Annapolis County declares State of Local Emergency (SOLE) | Special Council Meeting held virtually to declare the State of Local Emergency. Fire ~1000 hectares                                |
| August 17, 2025 | Fire size ~1977 hectares                                  |  |
| August 18, 2025 | Fire size ~3210 hectares                                  |  |
| August 22, 2025 | Fire growth; SOLE renewed                                 | The fire was roughly 3,212 hectares at that time.  |
| August 23, 2025 | Fire size ~3255   |  |
| August 24, 2025 | Evacuation Expanded                                       | Mandatory evacuations expanded to Highway 10; Trout, Zwicker and East Lakes  |
| August 24, 2025 | 20 homes lost   | The province confirmed 20 homes destroyed in the West Dalhousie / Long Lake area.  |
| August 28, 2025 | Damage report & continued firefighting                    | Fire estimated ~ 8,234 hectares, still out of control.   |

|                                    |  |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| August 29, 2025                    | SOLE renewed   | Fire still out of control, resources continuing to fight perimeter.   |
| Late August – Early September 2025 | Fire reaches ~ 8,468 hectares; re-entry of some evacuees | Re-entry for areas judged safe  |
| September 2, 2025                  | First Phase Re-entry                                     | Highway 10; Trout, Zwicker and East Lakes   |
| September 4, 2025                  | Navigator Program initiated                              |   |
| September 8, 2025                  | Status “being held” Phase 2 Re-entry                     | The fire was assessed not likely to expand under prevailing conditions.   |
| September 19, 2025                 | Remaining evacuees allowed to return home (Sept 20)      | The remaining evacuated residents could return home on Sept 20, though access would remain restricted.                  |
| September 26, 2025                 | Fire still held at ~ 8,468 ha                            | Monitoring, infrared scanning and suppression of hotspots continues.  |
| September 27, 2025                 | Declared “under control”                                 | The wildfire complex was officially classified under control; active suppression continues pending full extinguishment. |
| October 3, 2025                    | SOLE expires   | The SOLE expired at midnight and will not be renewed.   |

## Key Tips for Future Events

- Protection of Destroyed Properties
  - Following standard procedure for house fires, and on the advice of the Province, the Municipality secured the destroyed properties using an external fencing company. This was a costly process and should, where possible, be redirected to insurance companies when coverage exists, or coordinated with homeowners to develop an appropriate site-security plan.
- Re-entry Tips
  - Stagger times for re-entry. This provides a smoother process.
  - Red Cross provided cleaning kits.
  - Pre-re-entry site visits give residents an important opportunity to prepare for what they will encounter when they return.
- Cleaning/ Appliances
  - Due to evacuations, residents may encounter extended absences from their homes; this combined with prolonged power outages can result in severe food spoilage in refrigerators and freezers. Some appliances may be impossible to fully clean, leading many residents to choose to dispose of them. The Municipality assisted by picking up these appliances and having them disposed of properly.
  - Although residents were asked to sort their waste, additional support from a separate contractor was still required.
  - Additional waste pick-ups were coordinated with the service provider (Valley Waste-Resource Management - VWRM).

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- Drinking Water

- For properties on well water, it is important that residents understand that fire-related chemicals may affect water quality. Many long-term residents may never have tested their wells or may have only completed basic testing at the time of purchase. Comprehensive testing can be costly, and there is no legislative requirement to conduct it. In this incident, we advocated with the Province for support from the Department of Environment and Climate Change to provide testing and assistance to affected residents in the fire zone.
- Drinking water was also provided as an interim measure.

- Animals

- Several animals could not be removed quickly, such as cats that couldn't be located in time or large numbers of poultry. Our animal control officers worked with the Department of Agriculture to ensure that any remaining animals received food and water whenever it was safe to do so, and reunited some pets with their owners, when possible.
- Remind pet and livestock owners to have a plan for quickly relocating their animals, if needed.

- Donations

- While many people will want to support those who are displaced, this can also attract individuals looking to take advantage. It is best to channel donations through one, or very few, centralized agencies. Monetary donations are preferred, as funds can be directed to where they are most needed.