

Fire Chiefs and BC Hydro – Downed Line Task Force Report

Status of Progress on Recommendations (as of December 1, 2009)

Background

In March 2007, after the experiencing the winter storms of 2006/2007, a task force was struck between the Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C. and BC Hydro to develop solutions to improve response during uncharacteristically severe storms to better serve the public when both of their organization's finite resources are over-extended. The goal was to:

“To develop a partnership between the Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C. and BC Hydro to create communication links, identify issues and to develop a Plan of Action to minimise the potential exposure of the general public during a major event that results in downed power lines that could lead to serious injury or fatality.”

To-date, the work of the Task Force has resulted in several positive and concrete actions to improve our mutual response to downed power lines. Recommendations were made in four areas: Education and Awareness; Communications and Coordination; Operations; and Finances. The following provides an update on the status of progress on selected recommendations:

Education and Awareness

Recommendation 2:

Increased **messaging to the public** by BC Hydro and Fire Departments on the hazards associated with downed power lines, violating limits of approach, improper generator use, and the benefits of emergency preparedness, should occur in advance of and during storm season. Additional information is available through BC Hydro's Public Safety website (<http://www.bchydro.com/safety/>), and BC Hydro can assist the Fire Service in providing appropriate messaging. BC Hydro should continue to explore opportunities to partner with the Fire Service to provide public safety messaging to communities.

Progress update:

BC Hydro has developed and aired Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on television warning of the potential dangers associated with outages¹, downed power lines, the underground distribution system, and trees growing into power lines. These PSAs can also be viewed through BC Hydro's Public Safety website (<http://www.bchydro.com/safety/>). Information related to downed lines on this website has also been updated.

In collaboration with the Office of the Fire Commissioner of BC, BC Hydro developed an electrical safety chapter for the 'Getting to Know Fire' education resource that was delivered to all fire departments across BC in early 2009. Fire fighters can use this resource to deliver safety education in schools and communities.

Recommendation 3:

All Firefighter Training Officers should take the **train-the-trainer workshops** on electrical safety that are offered free-of-charge by BC Hydro and delivered by the Electrical Industry Training Institute (EITI). These workshops will enable them to provide electrical safety training to their departments and better integrate electrical safety messaging in core training programs.

Progress update:

From April 1 2008 to October 31 2009, BC Hydro via the Electrical Industry Training Institute (EITI) delivered 20 'Electrical Safety for Fire Fighters' train-the-trainer workshops to over 300 fire fighter personnel, in

¹ Based on feedback by stakeholders and subject matter experts, concern has been expressed regarding the use of candles in the existing Public Service Announcements due to associated safety risks. Based on this feedback and supporting statistics, BC Hydro is reviewing the reference to and depiction of the use of candles in power outage communications.

collaboration with the BC Fire Training Officers' Association and BC Transmission Corporation. Additional workshops are being delivered from November 1 2009 to March 31 2010. The enhanced electrical safety materials will be delivered by Fire Training Officers to fire fighters as part of their core safety training. After April 1, 2010, four workshops will be run each year (one per quarter).

Communications and Coordination

Recommendation 5:

BC Hydro should continue to improve the **call handling capacity** (including automatic call handling) of the POWERON call system.

Progress update:

BC Hydro has implemented several solutions including: providing customers with a call queue wait time; providing customers with a system to allow them to report simple outages within the IVR system as opposed to speaking with an Agent; and overflowing calls to an 'Estimated Time of Restoration' updating subscription service. All of these solutions assist in diversifying when a customer calls, as well as moving any high volume of calls through BC Hydro's call handling processes faster.

Also, BC Hydro has provided pre-approved statements to its Customer Care Operations that can be added to ad hoc 'enroute' telephone messaging regarding when to call 911. This will prevent re-occurrence of the scenario wherein Customer Care message implies that all customers should call 911 when in fact they should hold on the line for a BC Hydro representative.

Recommendation 6:

BC Hydro should develop and implement a web-based **electronic interface** for communication of non-critical information (i.e. status reports) accessible by First Responders Dispatchers (Primary Service Answering Points (PSAPs) and Secondary Service Answering Points (SSAPs).

Progress update:

BC Hydro has developed, piloted and put into operation an electronic interface (the 'BC Hydro – Emergency Services web portal') between the BC Hydro Restoration Centre and Emergency Services Dispatch in order to free up wait time on the dedicated Fire and Police line. The web portal allows Emergency Services to electronically feed information directly into BC Hydro's POWERON system, and it allows the users to view BC Hydro's progress in resolving problems. The web portal was reviewed and tested by both the North and Central Vancouver Island Emergency Services and by Surrey Fire Services, and is currently in use by these same groups. Also, it has been introduced to the Association of 911 Agencies of BC.

Recommendation 7:

BC Hydro should create an additional **'life or death only' phone line** to call in the event that the existing dedicated first responder line is overloaded. Discretion should be applied in use of the high-priority phone lines to avoid overloading. Use of faxes to share relevant information with the BC Hydro Restoration Centre is also encouraged.

Progress update:

BC Hydro has added an additional "life or death" line for Emergency Services to call in the event that there is a delay in answering or busy signal with the priority fire and police lines. A satellite phone was purchased to increase the diversity of the 'life or death' line. The line was put in place in the summer of 2008 and has been communicated to Emergency Services Agencies.

Operations

Recommendation 9:

BC Hydro should explore having ‘**Utility Identification Responders**’ who could be used to assess downed wires when they are not likely to be energized (i.e., telephone or cable lines). These responders could determine whether or not a downed wire was indeed a power line and the appropriate priority could be assigned to the response.

Progress update:

BC Hydro has developed and implemented a program to deploy responders to attend and assess downed wire situations during major events, in particular those events that may not be power lines. A training program has been developed and delivered to two categories of BC Hydro employees so that they can assess downed wires and/or stand by downed wires: Non Electrical Major Event Responders (NEMERs) and Major Event Responders (MERs).

Recommendation 13:

The Task Force should explore using specific ‘**Stay Out – Electrical Hazard**’ tape to cordon off lower-priority downed lines areas rather than simply using the existing “Caution – Keep Out” barrier tape.

Progress update:

The Surrey Fire Service, in collaboration with BC Hydro, has developed a unique tape that can be used to cordon off areas where a downed line(s) is present. The specifications for this tape are included as an appendix in the Task Force Report.

Recommendation 14:

Local governments and BC Hydro should continue to discuss means to further improve response during extreme storm events to minimise the risk to the public from downed power lines. In addition, the action plan arising from the Task Force, and any programs developed as a result, should be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect new knowledge, operational changes, and conditions.

Progress update:

On-going communication has been maintained between the Fire Chiefs’ Association of B.C. and BC Hydro. Future meetings will be held as required. BC Hydro has also engaged the Association of 911 Agencies of BC.

Finances

Recommendation:

The Task Force should continue to discuss potential options for recovery of specified costs following an extreme storm event that will be mutually acceptable to Fire Services and BC Hydro

Progress update:

Discussions were held with representatives from Emergency Management BC and the Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) to explore whether local governments might be able to apply for PEP funding in these circumstances, since arguably the storm and downed lines would have exceeded the local government’s ability to respond to the emergency. The outcome was that PEP does not have the capacity to provide cost-recovery for local governments for all high wind events.

The Task Force will continue to discuss potential options for recovery of specified costs following an extreme storm event that will be mutually acceptable to local government and BC Hydro.