

Sea Hawk Fire Service Evaluation Tool – Executive Report

Big Lakes County – Enilda, Grouard, Jousard, Faust, Kinuso

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Evaluation Tool: Sea Hawk Fire Evaluation Tool

Evaluation tool
Interviews
Documentation review
Audits - Apparatus
Audit - Sites
Audit - Hearing
Audit – Equipment
Community Hazard Assessment

Municipality Evaluated:

Big Lakes County
Regional Fire Service
Contact Person Regional Fire Chief Jason Cottingham
 Director of Protective Services – Brett Hawken

Lead Evaluator: Jamie Coutts

Onsite Dates:

Start November 02, 2020
End December 15, 2020

Operations Active at Time of Audit? X Yes

Overall Score Achieved: 60 %

PURPOSE

An evaluation is an opportunity to identify the strengths of the existing fire service, and to make recommendations so the service can continue to develop and improve. Some minimum requirements are not being met, and must be identified for immediate action by the fire service.

SCOPE

Brief Description of Operations:

Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service is a multi-discipline fire service covering firefighting, rescue, training, and maintenance. There are 68 dedicated, committed members covering the area 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with professional, efficient responses. 68 fire staff use 19 apparatus out of 5 firehalls to meet their commitments. High Prairie, and Swan Hills are automatic aid partners covering large portions of this fire service area.

*** Brief Description of Organizational Structure:**

The evaluator has examined the paperwork provided to determine the scope of the positions to ensure a representative sample was considered for interviews and documentation review. The Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service is run by a group of dedicated officers including: Fire Chief, Deputy Chiefs, Captains, Lt's and Training Officers.

Apparatus Sampled:

(attach an additional page if necessary)

Department	Location	Included in Audit
BLC	Enilda	3 units
BLC	Grouard	3 units
BLC	Joussard	4 units
BLC	Faust	3 units
BLC	Kinuso	6 units
High Prairie	HPFD	2 units (county)

Site Sampling Justification:

The firehalls were all evaluated.

Interview Sample:

Total # of part-time, casual and temporary employees at time of audit: 68

Minimum number of interviews from Table: 20

Number of interviews conducted: 28

Evaluators:

Lead Evaluator:

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Team Evaluators:

(Describe each evaluator's role in the evaluation process.)

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Name	Ken Skahl
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Role	Participated in all aspects of evaluation.

Name	Patrick McConnell
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Email Address	patmccConnell15@hotmail.com
Role	Participated in all WUI/SPU portions of evaluation. (Urban interface – wildfire)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Evaluation Tool measures the fire service against various minimum standards in five categories: Administration, Operations, Health and Safety, Training, and Infrastructure. Best practices are listed to remember the parts that are done well and to share with thousands of departments across Canada. Recommendations and requirements are listed to assist the service with the development of programs, procedures, and development/implementation of the levels of service for the Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service. No part of the evaluation tool is meant to be punitive, in reverse it is meant to assist the County in addressing their obligations while running a smooth, and safe regional fire service. This fire evaluation proved difficult when assessing the interaction with other municipal partners and counties. At times regionalization seemed the only appropriate path, but in the end we looked towards **STANDARDIZATION** as the goal instead. If the Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service, along with their automatic aid partners in High Prairie, and Swan Hills use standard Levels of Service, Polices/SOG's, training programs and apparatus/equipment they will be aligned in their goals and objectives. This standard approach will provide division of labor, a common direction, and an exceptional training program and operations while avoiding extensive negotiations, agreements, and political discussions. This can be started by the fire chiefs and shared throughout the firefighter ranks, bringing clear expectations, and abundant communications.

Administration

The administration of the Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service is administered by the Regional Fire Chief and Regional Deputy Chief (added late 2020). After having 3 Fire Chiefs in the last 4 years the regional fire service administration is scattered and only partially implemented where available. Each new management position started at zero and moved through the requirements leaving 3 partial programs. A fire service database will allow for **consistent application of requirements and recommendations while allowing multiple users to store data on administration (SOG's, records), operations (callouts, testing), health and safety (forms, tracking), training (lesson plans, schedules, evaluations), infrastructure (maintenance, cleaning, purchase, replacement, inventory)**. By capturing all data into a web based model, with access from many devices at any time allows all firehalls to use the system, cutting down on paper copies and the opportunity to lose momentum. The fulltime staff can see inputs in real time and react accordingly. Once this type of system is installed, and populated any new users can quickly add and retrieve the data requested. Extensive work needs to be done to bring the fire service bylaw, levels of service, policies and standard operating guidelines into alignment and implementation. Once developed and ratified all firefighters must be trained to this level, and all infrastructure must also be at this level. This is a huge task to place onto the desk of fulltime staff that already have very busy portfolios. A plan to assist the Regional Fire Chief, and Deputy Fire Chief with these programs and procedures with internal/external assistance will be key to success over the next two years.

Operations

The fire service knows how to put out fires, and rescue customers. There should be no doubt that calls are handled and firefighters want to do a great job protecting their neighbors. The volunteer firefighter is a vanishing breed and with each new generation we need to continue to change the way we provide service. Assisting with these dangerous calls requires extensive training, preparation, and commitment. With always increasing service requirements, health and safety obligations, and government regulation changes it is becoming very stressful to keep up. These standards are to protect the firefighters but also become a hinderance in keeping our firefighters. This balancing act is crucial and must be constantly managed at all levels: council, administration, and by the fire service. It is impossible to run a fire service today like it was even 10 years ago. Big Lakes County is no exception. How does the County find, recruit and keep its firefighters? This plan needs to be paramount and include, advertising, recruitment, and retention (costs \$10,000 to outfit a firefighter and \$8,000 to train for the first 3 years). None of this can be considered EASY, but to have a proper fire service we must get this right. **We must invest in our people.** A very controversial part of recruitment and retention is paying firefighters. This has many views and many sides. This was very clear during our hall discussions and interviews. Each generation sees pay differently, and through a different lens. Current models that will bring some level of success include: payment for hours at training and callouts, bulk payments delivered to an association or society. All payments should be easy to track and pay, easy to keep fair, common to the fire service. Currently High Prairie and Swan Hills have payment per training and callouts while Big Lakes gives small bulk payments to each hall. Other assets like life insurance, mental health benefits, tax breaks, fuel rebates can be used. Hourly rates is the easiest to track, evaluate, pay and keep fair. **Volunteering shouldn't make you money, but it shouldn't cost you more than your time.** Firefighters discussed costs like: fuel, babysitting costs, vehicle use, lost revenue from day jobs as real concerns while time away from their families and 24 hour callouts as a part of the commitment. Recruitment and retention must become a top priority for Big Lakes County.

Health and Safety

Big Lakes County has a robust occupational health and safety plan. It has **not** been implemented in the fire service in any way. It is the responsibility of the employer to protect **all** employees (including all volunteer, part paid, fulltime) Implementation of the BLC OH&S system must cover all aspects of development, implementation, training, forms, and follow up. Health and safety boards, with all requirements must be addressed at all halls. Fire staff needs to be involved in the process including meetings and having OH&S as a topic at all fire service emergencies and training sessions. Although all participants said that health and safety are important, very few knew what that actually meant within the fire service, and this must change. The most important factor in this section is simply **“Every firefighter deserves the right to come home safely.”** These are very dangerous jobs and it is the Counties' responsibility to assist everywhere possible.

Training

Currently each hall decides what they want to train on and senior officers and training officers do the training. An annual schedule lists topics. Firehalls are very individual and operate very independently. This makes for a very scattered and ineffective training program. They train on what they think they need with little direction and input (some like it that way). A coordinated training schedule, lesson plans, fire staff evaluations and follow up, and instructor qualifications will make the basis of a plan. Tracking of who takes training is available, but topics, and evaluations of skills are not present. **All training MUST be useful, appropriate, knowledge and experience driven, and in line with current levels of service and SOG's.** In house training should be the main driver, with certified, and uncertified weekend, or week-long courses backing up instructors where and when needed for tougher topics (ice rescue, rope rescue, hazardous materials) Joint training with other jurisdictions in High Prairie and Slave Lake at live fire training centers will add realism and excitement to the annual training plan. The Regional Fire Chief should seek out training opportunities for staff to attend certified training in other areas to spread knowledge and expertise (Big Rig training, water rescue, medical, Alberta Fire Chiefs Association, Peace Chiefs Fire Association, Fire Department Instructors Conference – USA (largest in North America))

Infrastructure

A great deal of time, effort and money has been invested in the Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service. New firehalls, apparatus, and PPE has been supplied over the last ten years. There is a comprehensive replacement schedule for apparatus. Infrastructure has followed the wants and needs identified by each new fire chief, therefore there is not one clear plan. **To be successful moving forward it important for the Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service to develop and follow one plan that can survive into the future** independent of each employees' views and wants. This must be a County plan that covers capital, operating, and direction of the fire service. It is necessary to align this plan with the bylaw, and levels of service so all staff knows the direction intended.

Apparatus

The Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service has 21 apparatus currently. There are many types, and uses for these apparatus. It is clear that the type, use, and cost of each apparatus followed the new plan of each fire chief through the years. There are MANY types of apparatus. **A capital replacement plan that follows the levels of service needs to be developed to look at areas individually, while remembering the County as a whole.** By choosing a limited number of apparatus types, and uses and following an overall County plan, units can be purchased and delivered to each hall that meets their local needs but also assists with the overall County coverage. An example of this is water supply. Currently the County can deliver 3000 gallons of bulk water to fires in tenders. A plan allowing for 10, 500 gallons will be presented that will allow for fire water flows during large fires, but also allow for operations outside of fires (rescue, traffic control, training). All new purchases should fall within the service levels and be multiple use vehicles (rescue, firefighting, staff moving, training) including new technologies that assist firefighters to stay safe (hydraulic ladder racks, large LED scene lighting, hydraulic porta tank holders, water stream monitors, pump

and roll, foam systems, rollover protection, emergency lighting and traffic control alerting to name a few) A clear list and service levels are provided in the draft capital replacement plan, we recommend that these are discussed and a clear replacement plan is made and ratified by council.

The vehicles last 20 years and they should keep the firefighters safe and protected throughout while providing maximum assistance to their ability to fulfill their requirements. Keeping these apparatus prepared to respond wherever, and whenever needed is paramount. A maintenance plan that outlines what is required, and at what intervals, and by who will provide clear objectives and outcomes for the fire service. This plan must include: annual pump tests, mechanical inspections and maintenance, repair reporting and tracking of costs and qualifications of people working on apparatus. All equipment should be standardized by type, location, use where possible on all apparatus. In a regional system all fire staff should be able to go to any apparatus and find standard equipment on standard apparatus to do a standard job at any emergency scene, or training event. The current fleet needs to be modernized and aligned with service levels and SOG's. **Dropping single use apparatus (light rescues, most pickups, wildland trucks) and replacing with multi use, appropriate apparatus should start immediately.**

Equipment

There has been considerable investment into equipment. Rescue tools, bunker gear, PPE, end appliances and hose are in good repair and were recently upgraded and standardized. **A good maintenance and replacement plan needs to be developed.** Cleaning and care are important to firefighter safety and health. All firehalls should be equipped with the proper facilities to clean and repair damaged or dirty equipment. Carwash units, maintenance benches and tools, and washing/drying units are required. A system for bunker gear cleaning and maintenance must be developed and followed. The County currently has no industrial washer to clean the large, severely soiled bunker gear used at all halls. We recommend picking a county fire station as the main equipment storage, repair, and cleaning facility for the fulltime staff to use. (Enilda can be used while allowing for a smaller fleet of vehicles) Self-contained breathing apparatus must be replaced every 15 years, leaving the County SCBA overdue. This is an expensive capital purchase but is critical to firefighter safety and required under OH&S to protect them from IDLH atmospheres whether they enter a fire or not. Smoke will be abundant both inside and outside of fire areas, meaning the SCBA is required on vehicle fires, structure fires, carbon monoxide releases or leaks, etc. A clear list and service levels are provided in the draft capital replacement plan, we recommend that these are discussed and a clear replacement plan is made and ratified by council.

Firehalls

The County firehalls are new, and large enough to support current activities. Use, maintenance, fire service operations need to be aligned and a clear plan with: obligations, priorities, accountability needs to be developed. Multi use facilities and multiple department obligations are hard to align. **Take the necessary time to integrate user groups, departments (FCSS, building maintenance, public works), health and safety and fire operations into a coordinated plan that works for all.** Buildings need a maintenance request process and health and safety inspections and follow up are important. The current process clearly states that firehalls are exempt from the current inspection plan, and that must be reversed. Buildings have excellent exhaust removal systems (although untested), some have carwash and maintenance facilities (all must have) and all have ample room to provide: apparatus parking, meeting space, washrooms/changerooms, kitchens, gear and equipment storage, training room. Exterior spaces and surfacing vary by area, this should also be aligned with the common needs and goals of the County Fire Service.

CONCLUSION

The Big Lakes County Regional Fire Service has many amazing people, infrastructure and equipment. **It is time to invest in these amazing people.** Firefighters do an incredibly dangerous job, with no set timelines and outcomes. Low frequency, high risk events are the most dangerous within a firefighter's scope. It is often said **"You can't train too much for a job that can kill you."** Although this can be debated many ways the message is clear, **"Each firefighter deserves the right to come home safely from helping their neighbors at their darkest moments"**. The decisions that need to happen are not easy, or obvious. Firefighting and rescue services are a huge investment in community safety. At this time with all the information we have gathered we recommend no firehall closures. We recommend a 6-apparatus reduction and alignment of new apparatus into a more multi use system that meets your service levels and community hazards. Community protection from wildfire is one of the greatest risks identified during the community hazard assessments and this threat must be taken seriously. Depending solely on the Alberta Government will not end well, and a strong partnership between agencies will reduce the risk, and prepare the County fire service for these threats in the future. Training for urban interface firefighting efforts should be arranged, and a structure protection plan and equipment needs to be purchased. The fire service evaluation is designed to give you a high-level view while providing a ground level roadmap and framework to develop your Regional County Fire Service. Although many elements require attention, there are many successes noted in this service, and the new staff and processes will keep your current firefighting staff moving in a standardized, understood, regional direction. **Working together with your automatic aid partners to realize a high level of standardization will move your service in a sustainable, relevant, informed direction while providing an excellent service to your internal and external customers.**

Please contact the auditors if you require more information or have any questions.

Signed,

Lead Auditor
Jamie Coutts

Date