

Big Lakes County

Fire Service Vision

2021 and Beyond

The Big Lakes County fire service is facing some unique challenges in the coming years. Having a large geographic area to defend with a lower population separated by many kilometers. Each hamlet is its own small island and the two larger Towns within the borders are separated by 125km. The question then becomes “How does Big Lakes County continue to provide quality service to its residents and visitors, while being responsible to its taxpayers regarding costs?” This is not a simple question to answer as it involves all of the major elements of problem solving, Ego, Turf, Time, Money. The executive summary is an overview of the EvalTool, while this document is a look at the future and the steps required to get there based on our experience, knowledge and evaluation.

Levels of Service

Levels of Service are measured against a variety of metrics including: Size of area (distance to travel), population, recorded callouts (and types), number of firefighters available, population, recorded callouts (and types), community hazard assessments, budget, and political direction.

While doing the community hazard assessments it became apparent that the Levels of Service in Big Lakes County would need to be reviewed, and in most cases adjusted to fit the communities, while keeping in mind the overall county response by their fire service. Unique challenges included: Large summer populations, smaller winter populations, largest recreational lake in Alberta that is road accessible, boreal forest surrounding many areas, distance to mutual aid partners in the MD of Smokey River, Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service, Woodlands County, extensive turnover in management positions in the past 3 years. The levels of service in this area should be increased to include: Water rescue (assisting RCMP, with mutual aid partners), Ice rescue (spread throughout county halls), dangerous goods operations level (problems – chlorine, ammonia, Tolko, CN Rail, highway routes, carbon monoxide calls), agriculture rescue, and airport familiarization. Big Lakes County is well prepared for standard fires (structural, vehicle), but lacks in preparation, equipment and training for other fires (flammable liquid and gas, wildfire). Motor vehicle collisions are handled throughout the region through a combination of regional Big Lakes firehalls and mutual aid partners. There is work needed in this area to standardize the response through proper incident command, apparatus assignments, and training. Many calls are attended by up to 5 firehalls, which is to be considered a misuse of resources. Medical callouts are siloed by firehall and there is no policy, or standard operating guideline to show the way to firefighters.

A meeting with the Alberta Government – EMS will help council, administration and the fire service have a clear understanding of the MFR (Medical First Response) Program that is available in Alberta. This should not be taken lightly, and must be fully understood before any implementation is undertaken. The main issue for consideration for levels of service is keeping firefighters safe, assisting the people in need, and covering the Big Lakes County liability issues. (Liability is covered when the County uses the right people, equipment, training, apparatus to cover each situation, this must all be documented as part of a fire service program)

Staffing

Staffing is a difficult decision for any community. Staffing is measured by a variety of metrics including: size of area to cover (travel distances), firefighters available (Fire Underwriters Canada – sets insurance gradings for 85% of Canada – lists 15 firefighters as a minimum to recognize a working fire service at each fire station), daytime/nighttime availability of firefighters, type of system (Volunteer, part paid, career, combination), frequency of callouts, and service levels.

It is our professional opinion that work needs to be done to the staffing levels, and placements with Big Lakes County. It will take time for the new Regional Fire Chief, and Regional Deputy Fire Chief to learn their roles, complete the fire service programs, and procedures identified in this evaluation, and assess their staffing needs moving forward. In more immediate terms assistance needs to be provided to your two fulltime Chiefs in the following areas: Program and procedure development, training plan and implementation, apparatus and equipment maintenance, firehall maintenance and cleaning, service level review and implementation, mutual aid contracts, and First nation contract review and implementation.

Your firefighters are dedicated and ready to answer the call. That said, systems need to be developed and implemented that review firefighter pay, staffing levels at each hall, training levels, and availability in each area. It is said often that volunteering should not make you money, but I'm a firm believer in the fact that it should not cost you money either. In today's society, time is the most valuable commodity available and your firefighters are feeling the strain. Babysitting costs, fuel to attend practices and callouts, missed time from families, and the time commitment required for today's Health and Safety standards, Alberta Transportation standards, and all the procedural pressures takes more time than ever before. The burden needs to be removed from the volunteer, or they need to be compensated for the loss of time. Fire districts all around your borders have gone to different pay type systems and you are being left behind. What was once a monthly practice and a few callouts has turned into multiple practices and many callouts. The standards are there to protect firefighters, and they protect the public. It is time to have the tough discussions and to make a change to the system acceptable to all involved. There are generational gaps that are identified in this process and Big lakes County is not exempt from this. Older firefighters remember the old ways and want them back, new firefighters value their time and want compensation and proper training. Two things that firefighters hate: Change and the way it is now.

This could be said about many things but there is one thing constant on this big rock and that is simply that things WILL CHANGE, despite the fact that we may object. Our recommendation is to look at a part time, pay system where firefighters are compensated for their time at practices and callouts. There are many systems to look at along every border of your area of responsibility. Firefighting staff should be kept at a minimum of 15 firefighters at each station and a recruitment and retention plan must be developed, funded, and implemented to keep these staffing levels up.

Apparatus

Apparatus is measured by a variety of metrics: Size of area (distance to travel), population, recorded callouts (and types), number of firefighters available, mutual aid available, community hazards, budget, political direction, and most importantly levels of service.

Big Lakes County has followed the advice of at least 6 different fire chiefs and managers over the last 10 years. This is very evident when looking at the fleet of apparatus that has been purchased. Some earlier units followed a simple plan of standardization, and need. Later models followed different plans and directions without consideration of standardization and levels of service. Older apparatus are kept instead of being sold, pickups are entered into the system without consideration of ongoing costs and uses. Big Lakes County has built too large a fleet for the service, and are not following a standardized, well developed plan. A new plan must include: Levels of service, locations, distance to travel, vehicle uses, firefighter safety, cost, service life, interoperability, maintenance plan.

A move toward Water Tender/Pumpers (takes water to put out fires, and lots of it), Rescue/Pumpers (versatility of use – think swiss army knife), Urban Interface pumpers (can do multiple jobs in multiple locations – wildland, urban, interface, rescue) and smaller utility vehicles should be used. A reduction of overall units can be realized through combining units, and removing single use units from the fleet. The plan must have the vision to accommodate each firehalls needs while helping boost the overall capacity of Big Lakes County. Both Urban centers in Big Lakes County should be included in this plan, and be funded through similar funding models. The core should be housed in High Prairie, Swan Hills, and Kinuso, as these areas are well suited geographically and in larger populated areas. Pumper/tenders and Rescue/pumpers should be in all of these locations. The other halls should be equipped with smaller pumper/tenders, and urban interface pumpers. A few small utility/wildland trucks should be kept in the areas they are needed throughout the County. (We will discuss locations below)

Equipment

Equipment is largely decided by your fire service levels of service and standard operating guidelines. In general, Big Lakes County has invested heavily in equipment, including (recently) standardization, volumes, need. This investment needs to be protected by a vigorous maintenance plan that is fully developed, funded, implemented.

Firehalls and Training Centers

Firehalls are measured by a variety of metrics including: size of area to cover (travel distances) (Fire Underwriters Canada – sets insurance gradings for 85% of Canada – lists 8 km from a recognized firehall for insurance rate discounts), firefighters available, daytime/nighttime availability of firefighters, current and forecasted infrastructure, population, recorded callouts (and types), community hazards, budget, and political direction.

This is a lot of information to consider when reviewing the data for the correct size, and numbers of firehalls, especially when the history of each area is entrenched. I have separated out each firehall below to help understand some of the metrics.

Enilda – This is the smallest hamlet, with the least amount of community hazards. With a small population, and limited industry and retail this hall should be considered for closure. With a fast response from the mutual aid partners in High Prairie, and the short travel distance this area can be serviced well without this firehall.

As part of the discussion, I will add that on the firefighter side, you have a large dedicated crew of volunteers here, and this is the best kept, most organized hall in the regional system. Closing this firehall would result in the loss of these great firefighters and a reduction in the available workforce and apparatus fleet (pumper, wildland). This will also have an immediate impact on the insurance grading for all residents within 8 km of the Enilda firehall.

Joussard – This hamlet is very diverse in nature. With everything from summer campers to year round homes, businesses and a school this area should continue to be protected by a firehall. With a swelling summer population, and excellent geographical location within Big Lakes County this firehall should be built up with a larger workforce and be equipped with an urban interface pumper, and a single axle tender/pumper for quick responses and support to the surrounding areas. The encroachment of the Boreal forest has created a large urban interface hazard. This should also be looked at as a great location for central warehousing, maintenance, and headquarters to the fulltime staff.

As part of the discussion, it is important to note that there are currently only 8 volunteer firefighters on the roster here. To make this a sustainable firehall a recruitment and retention plan must be implemented quickly.

Grouard – This hamlet has a variety of community hazards that are unique to the area. Large summer occupancy in multiple campgrounds and summer subdivisions can swell the population to over 6000 people. The urban interface with the boreal forest is large and significant, leaving a gap in the protection this hall currently provides. Two of the largest benefactors in this area are Northern lakes College, and the Kapawe’no First Nation. Agreements should be in place to capture the levels of service required. First nations have the ability to have their own fire service (which Big lakes County could contract service from) or to make agreements with partners to provide that coverage for them (no deal exists currently). Agreements should be in place with Shaw’s Point and the provincial campground so that all parties are clear on expectations, and costs to respond. (There is also a cost to be available to respond).

As part of the discussion, I will add that there is 10 firefighters currently with an up and down attendance over the years. Recruitment and retention planning, and a clear direction would be needed for this firehall to continue. This firehall should have 15 firefighters, an urban interface pumper, and a single axle tender/pumper.

Faust – This is one of the larger hamlets within Big Lakes County with a population that grows with summer campers, and cottagers. The encroachment of the Boreal forest has created a large urban interface hazard. At this time we recommend keeping this as an active firehall with an apparatus contingent for its expanded role in water rescue. This firehall has 10 firefighters, an airboat, urban interface pumper and a ¾ on pickup.

As part of this discussion, we recommend keeping this firehall open with 15 firefighters, the airboat, a utility vehicle (F550) for towing and water rescue storage, and an urban interface pumper. Firefighters at this location should be trained to be the water/ice rescue leaders and trainers for the entire service. They must also keep up their firefighting skills, but are not needed for motor vehicle collisions.

Kinuso – This hamlet (including the Swan River First Nation) is quite large and spread out. Like Grouard firehall, the Swan River First Nation has the ability to have their own fire service (which Big lakes County could contract service from) or to make agreements with partners to provide that coverage for them (no deal exists currently). Without an agreement with the First Nation this firehall could be right sized to a much smaller service. Similar to Jousard.

Geographically located in an ideal position Kinuso could become one of the anchor firehalls with High Prairie and Swan Hills (mutual aid partners). All three anchor halls should have rescue/pumpers, and tandem axle tender/pumpers to respond to motor vehicle collisions and bring large volumes of water to any firefights regionally. Kinuso is also home to the only UTV in the region (this should be increased in the region to allow for searches, firefighting in the urban interface, and winter movements on the lake) and should be given a utility vehicle (F550) to support that and wildland firefighting in the summer season.

As part of this discussion, we would recommend the closure of the old Kinuso firehall and the dispersal of any other vehicles in this location. The firefighters in this location are quite unhappy. A full transition to becoming part of a larger regional system has never happened here, even though the community was connected to Big lakes County permanently many years ago. We recommend some human resources professionals be brought in to sort out the current (and past) issues and to help create a path forward for all to follow. Left alone this problem can only grow and spread.

High Prairie and Swan Hills – Both of these automatic aid partners are important to the Big Lakes County fire service. We recommend that both towns have updated agreements with BLC and that both firehalls operate with a minimum of 15 firefighters, a rescue/pumper, and a tandem axle tender/pumper for large water delivery into the county. Having clear contributions to both capital, and operating budgets along with updated service level, and reporting requirements from these communities is needed.

Training Centers – High Prairie has built a training center at the High Prairie airport. A current agreement between Big Lakes County and High Prairie allows for some training to take place at this location. Structural firefighting, some confined space and water movement can, and should be taught here for County firefighters.

A similar agreement should be made with the Lesser Slave Regional Fire Service at the opposite end of Big lakes County to use the Slave Lake facility. All types of firefighting, confined space, water rescue, flammable gas and liquid firefighting should be conducted at this facility.

Motor vehicle collision training should be conducted at each hall. Space, time, and budget should be allocated for each Big Lakes County Firehall that does these rescues to be trained at their own facility.

In conclusion there is plenty of work to do within the Big lakes County fire service. Start with the levels of service, move to the administration and changing of the size, type, quantity of apparatus, firehalls and equipment. Take the time to set yourselves up for success by having the hard discussions with the right people, and making solid decisions on direction and plans for moving forward. Once that is completed help your fulltime staff move forward within your system. “Leave it alone, it will work itself out” will not work here, its time for some tough decisions based on best practices, recommendations and the requirements of running a professional fire service.