



# Message from the Fire Chief

## *Spring Fire Prevention*

With the warmer weather upon us, we look forward to the season changing and enjoying spring as a time of growth and renewal. I too am looking forward to a changing of season as my time with the Special Areas draws to a close. It is with mixed feelings that I share my plans to retire from the Special Areas effective July 15, 2022. This spring message will be a bit of a different from my usual one as I wanted to take this opportunity to share my reflections and thanks for my time with the Special Areas.

I have enjoyed my forty years of employment working in the Special Areas and have seen and experienced many changes over these years. From changing faces to evolving processes, it seems as though all things shift and grow over time. I considered myself fortunate to have gained employment with our local municipality, and to have served my community. Special Areas afforded me the opportunity to move up through the organization and gave many different challenges along the way. If not for this variety, I don't believe I would have enjoyed a forty-year career with the same employer. During my time here at Special Areas, I have had the chance to serve under three different Chairman, numerous managers, and worked with quite a cast of characters, I mean colleagues. I never sought out the fire service, by fate certainly moved me there.

There have been countless changes in the fire service over my career, but the core mission has never changed: serve the people and answer the call.

When I began my leadership role in the Special Areas Fire Services, my goal was to support a culture of professionalism and public service. I felt – and still feel – giving our volunteer firefighters the tools and support they need to deliver a high level of professional service is key to building a culture we can all be proud of. I often wonder if the freedom afforded to me in my early days as Fire Chief was due to not knowing much about the fire service, or if there was a sense that changes were needed. Regardless, I took that opportunity and ran with it to impact the level of service being provided and to make sure our fire services were sustainable. Changes were needed in our equipment and facilities to accommodate the larger trucks which became a necessary part of the fire service. Recruitment and training were key to building a sustainable fire service bigger than the sum of our individual parts. With limited resources, both human and financial, we are incredibly fortunate the men and women of our fire services are so committed to serving their communities and helping their neighbours.

Without volunteers, Special Areas Fire Services would fail to exist.

As the types of incidents we were called to continued to change, we realized we could not afford not to train. In 2005, the East Central Emergency Training Partnership was created to support the local instruction and training of local volunteer firefighters. This partnership, which includes fire services throughout our region, has delivered high quality instruction to hundreds of local volunteers at a fraction of the cost. It has allowed our volunteer fire services to access specialized training which would otherwise require significant travel time and expense. I expect this group will continue to provide key leadership and support to fire services and members in the years to come.



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In my time as the Special Areas Fire Chief, what fire services do – and what is expected of us by the public – has dramatically changed. In some respects, Fire Services is not an accurate reflection of all we now do. We continue to have those traditional “fire” calls – grass, vehicle, and structure fires along with motor vehicle incidents. But the demands on our volunteer fire services have shifted from traditional fire calls to a large volume of medical response calls. These can include anything from potential drug overdoses to covid to medical issues related to an aging population. These calls often come with additional stress and unknown risks to first responders, including exposure to infectious diseases, illicit activity, weapons, and other drug-related risks.

Beyond the calls changing, I have also seen changes in how quickly fire calls can progress. Twenty years ago, structure fires could take up to 20 minutes to become fully involved; now it can take as little as 3 minutes. Changes in the materials used to build houses and structures means more synthetic furnishings and construction products. These changes don’t just translate into less time to respond, they also mean more toxins and more hazards for our first responders and the public.

It’s not just our physical world that has changed, but also the way we create and share information. Social media – or as I like to call it “real time data” – has transformed how we do our work and how we respond to emergencies. It can be a powerful tool to inform and to harness a community. It can also be a source of misinformation and division. As a part of our evolving fire service, we have learned to harness this tool to provide consistent and credible information and to help build those relationships which connect us all together. I expect this will continue to evolve and grow as our digital world continues to impact our physical one. Another way technology has transformed our fire services is in our 911 dispatch. Later this year, 911 services will transform with the introduction of Next Generation 9-1-1 (or NG911). It will be introduced in Alberta and BC as a first in the world and will allow callers to provide dispatch with information via text including photos and videos. This critical information can then be shared to first responders to help assess and help with what resources are required at the incident.

Our emergency world just keeps getting bigger, and the challenges keep getting more complex. This means we need to keep expanding our partnerships from police and EMS to other organizations like AHS, AEMA, Alberta Agriculture & Forestry, CFB Forces, industry partners, and mutual aid partners. In 2021, a regional emergency management group was created which includes all municipalities in the Special Areas as well as the MD of Acadia. We have seen how emergencies have increased in frequency, scale, and complexity. Responding independently from one another is not sustainable, and collaboration and coordination is our path forward. This partnership supports that new model and helps us develop those critical relationships. If there is one thing I have taken away from my experiences in emergency management, it’s that developing relationships ahead of time is invaluable to help deliver effective, efficient, and responsive service.

Regarding relationships, I have so much respect for those who Answer the Call.



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The challenges and demands put on firefighters makes me so proud of the work they do. They are the epitome of public service – volunteers who give of themselves, their time, and their skills to serve the public. They do it selflessly and professionally, and I feel privileged and humbled by their service.

Before I close, it's fitting I put in one last plug for FireSmart. This idea of fire prevention is so key to helping our communities become more prepared and resilient. Fire prevention doesn't need to cost a lot of money. It can be as simple as fire guards in the spring, keeping combustibles away from structures, and keeping yards well trimmed and maintained. Simple things like mowing grass and putting a fire break of non-combustible materials like gravel around buildings can help save barns, shops, and homes. Over the last few years, I have had the privilege to see some of these fire prevention tactics being used throughout our region by farmers, ranchers, homeowners, and community members. I have seen fire guards and headlands being maintained throughout the fire season. I have noticed discers and water trucks parked in fields during haying and harvest. I have seen farmyards that are trimmed and maintained, and hay stacked in multiple spots all with fire guards in place. I am so pleased to see this shift as fire responses come at a cost, both to the public and to firefighter safety. Fire prevention is all our responsibility, and we all have a part to play in reducing risks and mitigating hazards.

I will close with a "Thank You" to all our brothers and sisters who Answer the Call as volunteer firefighters in the Special Areas. This includes our Acadia Valley firefighters who I have always considered to be part of our fold.

Mutual aid means being there for your neighbour, and I want to thank our neighbouring municipalities who come on a moment's notice to help: Starland County, Drumheller, Cypress County, Count of Newell, City of Brooks, County of Paintearth, MD of Provost, and CFB Suffield.

I want to extend a special thank you to Chief Mohl, and to the Hanna Fire Department, for providing the foundation from which we were able to grow the Special Areas Fire Service.

To our retired Chiefs – thank you for your guidance and mentorship.

To our current Chiefs – thank you for your leadership and service.

To the men and women of our fire service – thank you for your dedication and passion. With you I would like to share a quote from Mark Esper I have returned to often in my career as a firefighter - *"Stay focused on your mission, remain steadfast in your pursuit of excellence and always do the right thing"*.

To my Deputy Chief Rob Palmer. Thank you for your work and for your friendship. Our times and calls together will be forever remembered and cherished.



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And to the staff, management, and elected officials of the Special Areas Board – it was an honour working here with you. It has been said that “People Make the Difference” and working with you over the past forty years has shown me how true that statement is. Thank you.

I’m going to sign off this – my last fire prevention message as Special Areas Fire Chief – by transcribing a typical radio dispatch signoff, just as I would do when leaving an incident.

**SA Fire Chief:** *Red Deer Dispatch this Special Areas Fire Chief, “Over.”*

**Dispatch:** *This is dispatch, Go Ahead, “Over”*

**SA Chief:** *Dispatch I’m going to transfer scene command over to Acting Special Areas Fire Chief Palmer, “Over”*

**Dispatch:** *Dispatch copies, Transferring command to Acting Special Areas Fire Chief Palmer, “Over”*

**SA Chief:** *Thanks dispatch for being that voice no one sees, but the one we hear on all of our calls. For meeting all of our demands and requests, is truly appreciated. Calm, competent and Professional all the way. Special Areas Fire Chief, “Out”*

**Dispatch:** *You’re welcome, Dispatch “Out”*

Phone Home: *V.M. Hi Crystal, Just leaving scene, I will be home for Supper. See you then!*

(Thanks, Dave, for always giving that reminder to call home)

Take Care, Keep Safe, and Yours in Fire Prevention,

Glen Durand,

(Ret.) Special Areas Fire Chief