

From: [Meier, Ian R FOR:EX](#)
To: s.22
Subject: Re: Call to action
Date: December 8, 2022 4:12:45 PM

Hi there,
My number is s.22 Probably best to text me first because I am on the phone a lot.

Talk soon,



Ian Meier

Assistant Deputy Minister
BC Wildfire Service
Ministry of Forests
Cell: 250 643-0078

Report Wildfires: 1 800 663-5555 or *5555



From: s.22
Sent: Thursday, December 8, 2022 3:33:09 PM
To: ian.meier@gov.bc.ca <ian.meier@gov.bc.ca>
Subject: Re: Call to action

[EXTERNAL] This email came from an external source. Only open attachments or links that you are expecting from a known sender.

Dear Ian Meier,

I assume that you are well aware of the Minister's new mandate to fix retention and recruitment. How exciting, isn't it? You might be wondering how that found its way into the letter - well suffice it to say that the issues I have highlighted below are the same that convinced the Premier that BCWS needs to reform retention and recruitment.

I have refined my position regarding next steps since I last wrote to you, but one thing is clear - BCWS can no longer pretend that professional firefighting can occur without addressing pay for experienced and trained staff, fatigue management (linked to mental, emotional, and physical health), pensionable time, among others issues.

If you are actually interested in hearing about proposed solutions, I would be happy to elaborate.

There is no playbook for this, which makes it an exciting opportunity, albeit a daunting one. Good luck and God speed!

On Mon., Jun. 6, 2022, 6:13 p.m.^{s.22}

wrote:

Dear Ian Meier,

I would like to thank all of you for your hard work through what has been, and will continue to be, a challenging and transformative period for BCWS. I cannot imagine the pressures that you and the ELT have been under throughout this time. I am writing to you, because I wanted to share some thoughts that may add to your perspective. I have had sleepless nights, because of the issues outlined below which, in my opinion, are putting at risk the safety of BCWS staff.

All of us are only privy to the information, thoughts, and perspectives that make it through the filters of professional and bureaucratic life. I hope this email cuts through those filters and broadens the keyhole through which you understand where BCWS is. I trust that you can read this with an open state of mind and reflect on its content without prejudice.

I will preface this whole email with the fact that, just like you, I saw BCWS through my own lens. Mine is, of course, more limited than yours especially when it comes to understanding the constraints of the Minister's mandate, the machinery of government, and other unknowns to me. Given this rather large caveat, here is my analysis of some issues which merit both acknowledgment and immediate action. I initially wrote this as an essay, but changed the format to a very long briefing note.

Finally, I would like to mention an anecdote from a Canada Wildfire talk that happened last week which captures the issues well. The guest, Dr. Preston Cline, is a researcher that specializes in critical teams including wildland firefighters, special forces, swat team, ect. At one point in the chat, he asked if this sounded familiar (paraphrased):

"the WUI (he actually said WUI) is experiencing more fire, the fires are burning hotter and longer, the seasons are getting longer too, you are losing depth in experience as retention is not what it used to be, and recruitment is challenging too, and ultimately a bad outcome resulting in injury or death is what people are worried about."

He was speaking about his experience working with US wildland firefighters. But few have captured the operational challenges that BCWS faces better than this researcher who himself has never worked with BCWS. Immediately, almost as if a knee jerk reaction, the host countered with the fact that (paraphrasing):

"Canadian firefighters do not have fire shelters and our tactics are much different. We are different, and we are not concerned with this because it is not a problem and would not happen here." The host's answer was perhaps partly true 5-8 years ago, but that is no longer the case. And to believe that we are somehow better than the US is a critical misjudgement of ourselves and an inflation of our egos which

is a first step in the bad direction.

Preston was then asked what to do about it. His answer: "do not believe your leadership is taking diligent notes about the issues that you see. In fact, do not believe they even know the issues exist. It is your job to tell them, and for that you may have to put yourself in a difficult position."

This is me telling you about the issues that I see.

I hope to get an answer from you soon, despite your busy schedule. I trust that your answer will give a satisfaction that I do not need to bring more light to the issues in a way that might be damaging to the organisation, but ultimately necessary for the situation to improve.

Regards,

A concerned BCWS firefighter.

ISSUE:

To help prevent a mass-casualty event, and to future-proof BCWS against reputational damage, BCWS needs to improve fire line safety, and cost-effectiveness of suppression efforts by: (1) implementing a safety-based and tiered Type 1 standard for crews subject to yearly recertification, (2) reintroducing minimum fireline ICS requirements for supervisory staff, (3) reclassifying BCWS jobs based on typical and integral ICS duties, (4) incorporating suppression excellence in our Strategic Plan.

RATIONAL:

Contrary to policies in the leading wildfire organisations in the US, BCWS has, over the past decades, removed a meaningful and functional crew typing system for ministry crews (Type 1 or Type 2) and removed ICS requirements for supervisory staff. This erosion of standards coupled with the lack of attention on crew performance and retention is at the expense of crew safety, as well as successful and cost-efficient wildfire suppression. In addition, unlike the US federal wildland fire agencies, BCWS does not have incentives to keep professional firefighters which has reduced its operational effectiveness, increased costs to taxpayers, and reduced firefighter safety. The US has taken meaningful steps to solve these issues over the past decade, it is time BCWS does the same.

BACKGROUND:

1. **BCWS publicly claims to have 1100 Type 1 firefighters:** This, I assume, is based off of 1100 people passing the CIFFC standard. This is misleading as this definition has little to do with functional crew capabilities, unlike the US standard (see below) and BC's Type II standard which are both higher in experience and training requirements. BCWS Type II contract crews have several requirements which are beyond those of the CIFFC standard:
 - a. Minimum fireline days for crew members (35 days)
 - b. Minimum fireline days acting as crew leader for crew leaders (35 days)

- c. DTA per crew
 - d. DTF per crew
2. **BCWS has about 15-30% of crews meet a functional definition of Type 1:** A functional definition, used by operational staff, means that there is at least a certified faller, a basic chainsaw operator, first aid requirements, and DTA. These are minimum requirements for our Type 2 crews, and are essential for any fully operational crew Type 1 crew. 15-30% figure comes from the Crew Configuration Task Team who had a cursory look into this question during the winter of 2022.
 3. **BCWS has roughly 5% of UCs crews meeting a strict Type 1 definition based off US standards:** The US standard (page 308) for Hotshots (which can be applied to Unit Crews) requires among other:
 - a. Supervisor with TFLD, ICT4; Ass. Supervisor with STCR, TFLD, ICT4; Squad Bosses with ICT5.
 - b. No more than 4 new recruits or 80% of the crew with at least 1 season
 - c. 4 certified fallers, and 50% of crew as trainee fallers or better (FAL3).

These requirements would disqualify virtually all of the BCWS unit crews for the upcoming season. These requirements are important however, because together they represent a crew that has the experience, knowledge, and training to be safe, and cost-effective.
 4. **BCWS Risk Register does not consider a mass casualty event to be likely:** A scenario, like a burn over is not considered in the BCWS risk registers as a possible event.
 - a. **Reputational damage:** Aside from the deaths, and heartbreak of such an event, the reputational risk to the organisation is unparalleled. If an inquiry leads to the discovery that the organisation knew that the majority of our crews do not meet our own internal and functional definition of Type 1. Even without an inquiry, the government would have difficulty controlling the narrative because there would be enough firefighters who would feel compelled to speak out against BCWS's perceived disinterest in having experienced, well-trained, and safe Type 1 firefighters.
 - b. In 1994, a mass-casualty event in the US led to an inquiry which was extremely damaging to the USFS and which led to a rewrite of National Wildland Coordinating Group (NWCG) core policies. The reforms required minimum fire certifications for managerial and supervisory staff.
 5. **BCWS removed minimum ICS certifications for Zone staff:** Previously, as you know, WOs, WTs, WAs all needed either to be either certified or soon to be certified as IC2 or IC3. This is in direct contradiction to standardized minimum fire requirements for supervisors and managers under the NWCG which are meant to increase safety and operational effectiveness.
 6. Around the year 2000, BCWS removed crew typing (Type 1 and Type 2 ministry crews): All ministry crews are considered Type 1 despite their functional qualifications and experience.

7. **ELT approves incorrect PSA response to reclassification appeal for Crew Leader (in appendix):** The response (released on the heels of another unprecedented fire season) from the PSA goes against BCWS SOPs, and SOGs. The response demonstrated a lack of understanding of what crew leaders, ZWCOs, and RWCOs do at the highest level of the organisation. And it eroded the trust between the operational staff (from RWCOs to crew members) and the ELT. Given the opportunity to correct the record, BCWS directorship claims that the PSA misinterpreted its comments. Yet, the directorship is within its purview to correct the PSA's response to reflect our SOPs, and SOGs.
8. 2022 recruitment and retention: The tight labour market has worsened an already difficult task of filling all crew member positions. Given BCWS crew expansions, the number of new recruits at boot camp and crew leader camp has rarely (if ever) been higher.
 - a. Some figures:
 - i. 60-65% of all crew leaders in the SEFC are new this year.
 - ii. Some bases, like Merritt, will have over 50% of all staff as new recruits.
 - iii. Despite a record seven boot camps, zones are still street hiring recruits.
 - b. BCWS does not track or measure, at an organisational level, the average experience of crews (the NWCG does through proxy of a functional Type 1 standard).
9. US Congress legislated (page 135 STAT 1102) major reforms in fall of 2021, among which:
 - a. Increases US federal firefighter base pay by 50% or 20 000 USD (whichever is lower).
 - b. Reclassifies forest technicians to firefighters.
10. US congressional reforms – a result of outside activism: Federal agencies and their leadership did not sound the alarm about recruitment and retention issues to their Dep. Secretary of Agriculture. Instead, operational staff approached politicians and the public directly to expose the federal agencies's failings. Congress mandated the federal agencies to fix the issues in the Infrastructure Bill in the fall of 2021. The issues are essentially the same as in BC. The main difference, however, is that the US has strict enforceable standards for Type 1 and minimum fire line requirements for supervisory staff, so they cannot “recruit off the street” as BCWS does. The US only follows such policy as a result of the South Canyon Fire which brought to light the issues of diluting experience and standards with off-the-street hires.
11. NWCG Core Policy – safety first: As a result of the Storm King Mountain fire (South Canyon Fire) turnover and a subsequent report, the Federal Wildland Management Program and Policy Review recommended some core policy changes (page 19) to how the US will fight fire and prioritize safety.
12. **US federal firefighter pay and BCWS crew member pay:** adjusted for Purchasing-power parity (varies between 20-30%), and hazard pay (25%) US federal firefighting

wage (15 USD\$/hr) is about 22-24 CDN/hr.

13. BCWS does not compensate for ICS certifications: A WT that is certified IC2 is paid no more than a WT who has no fire experience. This is a certification that can take 15-20 years or more to obtain. This goes against the principle of recognition, a major contributor to psychosocial health of employees.

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. **Tracking functional Type 1 crews - What we do not measure, we do not see, and we cannot improve:**

BCWS must measure the capabilities of its crews at an organisational level to better understand its suppression and expansion capacity. This can be done through a functional Type 1 standard like the US (which has no more than 1 new recruit per squad for instance). Put differently, is an IA crew with a cumulative of 5 years of experience equivalent to a crew with 30 years cumulative experience? According to BCWS, these crews are equivalent as they are both Type 1. Functionally, these crews are not equivalent. The more experienced crew will be safer, and cost-effective by catching more fires (all else being equal).

2. **Safety and a mass casualty event: A mass casualty event will come to BC, a likely contributing factor will be having inexperienced crews and supervisors.**

BCWS risk registers do not have a mass casualty incident, like a burnover, as a possible event. Granted, a single fatality type event is included in the risk register, but there is a difference, as the consequences and risks to the organisation are between single and mass casualty events.

The reputational risk to the organisation that would arise as a result of a burnover is unparalleled. The risk would be especially damaging if an inquiry were to lead to the discovery that BCWS knew that the majority of our crews do not meet our functional definition of Type 1 – a supposed marker of a highly trained and experienced crew. Given the lack of experienced crews and supervisors, more intense fire season, and unparalleled fire behaviour, it is a scenario that merits serious consideration and preventative action now.

3. **Cost effective and fire suppression efficiency:**

The more experienced crew save taxpayer money by catching fires earlier and using resources appropriately. They have a greater understanding of what resources are needed (or not needed) to contain a fire and they have the confidence to act on their experience.

4. **Lack of qualified supervisory staff:**

Given the amount of fires we get, it becomes impossible to have supervisory staff to take over command of all these fires as we simply do not have enough experienced supervisors (WAs, WTs, Sups). Of course, given greater connectivity, an inexperienced crew can send pictures back to Operations and defer to them, but this is a stop gap measure and should not be the norm due to limitations in situational awareness.

5. **Recruitment and monopoly of firefighting:**

Similarly to the military, BCWS and other provincial governments have a monopoly on firefighting which restricts outside recruitment of experienced staff. Every experienced firefighter that leaves BCWS is a staff member that cannot be replaced through normal recruitment methods. If BCWS loses an IC3, they will not have much success in replacing them through recruitment processes – just like how the military cannot replace a staff

sergeant with a civilian. Whoever BCWS loses, they must be replaced from within because there is a government monopoly on wildland firefighting. The monopoly of firefighting and its impact on recruitment must be incorporated into a retention strategy, if one were to be developed.

6. Capacity building takes time:

Building capacity takes time. By my estimate, it takes 4-6 seasons at minimum to have a confident, humble, and professional firefighter that is beginning to be aware of their limitations, can make safe decisions, who is understanding of their environment, and knows how to apply cost-effective suppression tactics. Even if we fixed everything today, BCWS has a long road ahead.

7. Change Management and misalignment within BCWS:

As BCWS undergoes transformational change, it is useful to examine the state of affairs under the lens of change management using McKinsey 7-S Framework. From my perspective, I believe we have misalignment in the following categories:

- **Skills:** What are the skills needed for the institution and the individuals to be successful? Again, BCWS does not measure skills at an organisational level, once we do (by proxy of a true Type 1 standard), we can then understand the priority areas of improvement.
- **Style/culture:** BCWS has shifted to a culture which prioritizes items that are ancillary to fire suppression (but remain massively important, just not at the expense of fire management). For instance, our Strategic Plan does not speak to improving fire suppression effectiveness, but rather focuses on *Our People, Strong Relationships, Learning Culture*. These are crucial, but should not usurp our drive for excellence in wildfire response. However, in my opinion, they have by mere fact that improving response effectiveness is not included in our Strategic Plan.
- **Staff:**
 - **Recruitment:** similar to skills, our staff recruitment draws heavily on summer students who have no intention of making firefighting a career. Having summer students is not a bad thing, but the core of our recruitment should be to those wanting to make this a career. We still need seasonal firefighters, but they should not be our primary recruitment focus.
 - **Career Development:** The incentives for professional firefighters in BCWS do not exist. For effective decentralized command, you need boots on the ground that are experienced, and trained. The incentive models used by BCWS push firefighters to leave the crew ranks as soon as possible because there are no incentives for experience or training (e.g. ICS). There are lots of agencies which have an incentive model which rewards professionals (Victoria Aus., or Cal Fire, for instance). Going full-time, while helpful, may in fact be a detriment to recruitment as most experienced firefighters have in-demand skills which are more lucrative than regular winter pay.
- **Strategy:** BCWS must evolve with the realities of 21st firefighting. And while I commend the shift to a year-round service, our strategy must not evolve without other pieces of the puzzles that must come with a year-round service. Again, Cal Fire, USFS, Victoria, all have better provisions than BCWS on many fronts (fatigue management, retirement, pay incentives) – we need to learn from these and adapt them to our organisation without discriminating for the inconvenient (i.e. paid days

off in state of emergency or prep 4-5, ICS pay, hazard pay, faller pay).

- **Shared values:** Operational staff value efficient and safe firefighting. This is not a shared value among headquarters and managers as demonstrated by its absence in our Strategic Plan, the lack of incentives for professionals, the denial of the reclassification appeal, faller dollar, and the lack of Type 1 crews. Perhaps it is because about 35 out of the odd 45 managers have no fire experience or very little (again, against NWCG core policy). We know that individuals revert to what they know and are comfortable with, so naturally if managers do not know how firefighting works, they will not try to improve it.
- **Structure:** For improving business continuity, Zone operations should be focused on preparedness/response and not prevention, mitigation, and recovery. Business continuity seems to be non-existent in BCWS during busy years – this is a problem considering we are an emergency response organisation. I recognize however that there is some movement here with the IMT secondment initiative, additional prevention uplift, and other initiatives. But again, these seem to be in addition to the duties of zone staff, not separate.

NEXT STEPS:

The following are four actionable steps that would help improve trust and start rebuilding BCWS so that it may become an effective firefighting agency. These are based on safety, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness considerations. This, of course, is not an exhaustive list of necessary steps, but is a good start.

1. **Follow and create a strict Type 1 standard for BCWS crews subject to yearly recertification:** And for the crews that do not meet such standard an alternate typing can be created (Type 1 A, B, or C). Have the Type 1 standard based on crew experience, training, and subject to yearly recertification: this will give BCWS a proxy measure of how capable our crews are, and our levels of retention. Remember, the end goal is not to have experienced crews with high levels of retention, rather the end goal is for BCWS to have safe, efficient, and cost-effective crews. Crew typing provides the perfect proxy to measure those end goals.
2. **Bring back minimum ICS requirements for supervisory staff:** Bring back minimum ICS requirements for all staff positions. Follow guidelines from the NWCG.
3. **Reclassify positions based on ICS minimum requirements:** Realign incentives to retain professional firefighters:
 - Pay for experience: why does a certified IC3 crew leader get paid virtually the same as a IC5 crew leader - these are not equal by any objective measure.
 1. CalFire: I do not need to tell you, but BC cannot imitate CalFire without addressing the wage gap. CalFire pays a salary versus an hourly wage which would surpass even the most lucrative seasons for BCWS staff.
 2. As a note, USFS firefighters received a 20 000 USD or 50% base pay raise (whichever is lower). USFS crew members and BCWS crew members make a similar amount adjusted for PPP and hazard pay.
 - Pay for hazards: the joint job classification system does not pay for hazards, but BCWS should if it wants to retain staff. This would be a stop-gap measure as hazard pay should be rolled into salary and not adds-to-pay.
4. **Incorporate in our strategic plan a drive to improve fire suppression capabilities:**

this can be done by prioritizing point 1 and 2.

CONCLUSION

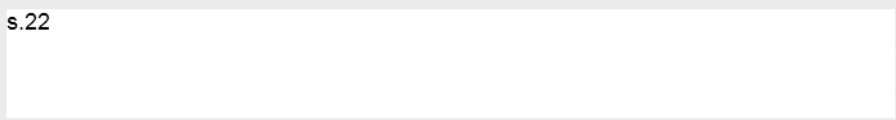
As you know, the solutions presented here are not new and were in fact BCWS policy within the last 25 years. Other solutions presented here are common in other jurisdictions such as the US and Australia.

Ultimately, BCWS is currently run as if it is a government organisation that happens to firefight whereas, to offer the best product to British-Columbians, we need to start thinking of ourselves as a firefighting organisation (I am including all four pillars of emergency management in this) that happens to be within government. Wildland firefighting, as has been demonstrated by the US, cannot be run as a typical government department. This bears disastrous consequences. BCWS must take heed from the lessons-learned paid in blood by our US counterparts – doing otherwise is naïve and dangerous to both our staff and BCWS.

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s.13



Text Message
Fri, Dec 9 at 13:52

Hi Ian,
Happy to chat about retention and recruitment. We can chat next week.



Text Message

Microphone icon

