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November 19, 2009

Mr. John Doyle
Auditor General of British Columbia
8 Bastion Square
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

RE: Request for an Audit and Examination of Provincial Fuel Management programs

Dear Mr. Doyle,

I am writing to request an audit and evaluation of the B.C. government's progress with respect to the Premier's 2004 commitment to implement all of the recommendations from the 2004 Firestorm Report.

On October 4, 2003 Premier Gordon Campbell appointed Gary Filmon to conduct a comprehensive review of the 2003 wildfire season, which was the worst ever for forest fires in British Columbia, particularly for interface fires, which affect areas of urban development. The review was intended to offer the province lessons for future fire seasons, and concrete recommendations for how best to budget for, prevent, plan and respond to wildfires in B.C.

Gary Filmon's report was delivered February 15, 2004, just four months after the review was commissioned, in order to bring forward timely recommendations for the upcoming fire season. In that report, Filmon made 42 recommendations, with the first suggesting that province should *"lead the development of a strategic plan in cooperation with local governments to improve fire prevention in the interface through fuel management."*¹

In the February 10, 2004 Throne Speech, the government pledged to act on the Filmon recommendations. This commitment was reiterated in an April 17th press release issued jointly from the Office of the Premier and the Ministry of Forests. Since 2004, there have been a number of actions taken by the government in implementing those recommendations. However, I assert that such actions have not adequately fulfilled the obligations as laid out by the Firestorm report and a follow-up review is necessary.

¹ Firestorm 2003, Provincial Review, page 69

Among others, concerns continue to be raised about the following issues:

- Status of fuel management projects and community wildfire protection plans
During the process of Estimates, the Official Opposition requested a list of the communities that had completed Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) and fuel management treatments². From the few details that were provided, several problems are evident: a) not enough communities have completed CWPPs; b) there is a distinct lack of publicly available information about how much work has been done in each community; and c) through discussions with local government, there is reason to believe that even those communities that are listed as having completed CWPP's are inadequately prepared for wildfires.
- Impact of incomplete fuel treatment plans
In the 2009 fire season we have seen the consequences of not implementing fuel treatment. In Lillooet for example, there are indications that incomplete fuel treatment plans has led to problems with the watershed in the area because of work that had to be done during the process of fighting the 2009 wildfire.
- Funding deficiencies
During the September 2009 conference of the Union of B.C. Municipalities, the Minister of Forests and Range announced that the funding formula for Community Wildfire Protection Plans would be changed. This was intended to address the problem of communities lacking available funds to set up a plan, and indicated a larger problem with respect to the division of financial responsibility between the provincial government, individual communities, and UBCM. Furthermore, the Minister has admitted that funds to implement fuel treatment plans would be substantially more than has been budgeted for to date.³

These concerns about the status of fire preparedness in B.C., and the impact that it has on funding across jurisdictions has led to questions about the effectiveness of the wildfire strategic planning to date. Questions about strategic planning and the implementation of Filmon's recommendations have also been raised in the past by various groups, including reports done by both the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals, and the B.C. Forest Practices Board.

The ability to adequately budget and plan for these dangerous outbreaks will be increasingly important to British Columbians. As communities expand further into forested areas, in an era of climate change with potentially hotter and drier weather⁴, and with a large volume of standing dead timber from the mountain pine beetle epidemic, there will be greater costs associated with wildfires, both financially and in the effect on our forests. As we have seen in the 2009/10 Budget, costs associated with fighting forest

² See attached list of Community Wildfire Protection Plans

³ Committee A, Estimates debate for the Ministry of Forests and Range, October 6, 2009

⁴ The connection between climate change and forest fires has been expressed by the Minister of Forests and Range, Pat Bell on a number of occasions. Specifically in speaking to an International Energy Agency on August 24, 2009.

fires can have a very significant effect on the provincial budget⁵, and as a result, can impact government spending in all other areas. The financial implications, in addition to the community and residential consequences of wildfires underscore the need to do a full assessment of the progress made with respect to wildfire prevention, planning and response.

The Minister of Forests has suggested that there would be a 'careful analysis' of the 2009 fire season⁶ done to determine what went well and what could be improved upon. This work is welcomed, but I would respectfully submit that an independent analysis would yield more fulsome conclusions about the overall state of preparedness for the inevitable fire seasons ahead. This independent analysis could offer constructive guidance toward improvements in this regard and offer greater assurances to British Columbians. Six fire seasons have passed since the Firestorm Report, and significant concerns still exist with respect to the completion of community wildfire protection plans and fuel management projects, I would urge your office to conduct a full examination of the government's progress on the 2003 Firestorm Report.

I have attached several documents that may be of some assistance in determining the importance and rationale for undertaking such an investigation. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me directly.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Norm Macdonald, MLA,
Columbia River-Revelstoke

Encls.

⁵ Firefighting costs for the 2009 season exceeded \$400 million and were cited by the Minister of Finance as a partial explanation for the increased provincial deficit for the 09/10 fiscal year. See Budget Speech, September 1, 2009.

⁶ <http://www.publiceyeonline.com/archives/004159.html>