



Emergency response planning is top of mind for companies like Selkirk Tangiers heli skiing.

Is your workplace prepared for an emergency?

By Marnie Douglas

Employers are required to conduct risk assessments in any workplace in which a need to rescue or evacuate workers may arise. Is yours up to date?

On the Friday morning of a long weekend in November 2021, meteorologists warned of heavy rain on its way to B.C., created by a weather phenomenon known as an “atmospheric river.” The storm, they cautioned, would bring localized flooding and high river levels in some areas.

Dozens of rainfall records would be broken, and nearly a month’s worth of rain would fall on some communities in less than two days. The results were catastrophic — extreme flooding, mudslides, stranded motorists, highway closures, whole communities evacuated.

The extreme flooding is just one example of a disaster that illustrates the need for emergency preparedness, including planning for evacuation, rescue, and return when safe to do so, explains Barry Nakahara, senior manager, Prevention Field Services, WorkSafeBC.

“This is something that we need to be more prepared for — it seems like these unusual natural disaster events are becoming more common,” says Nakahara. “After any disaster or emergency, all employers and workers should reflect back and see what they’ve learned, and then identify gaps in planning around emergency preparedness.”

Emergency response plans

Everyone can learn from what’s happened in B.C. this year, and use this as an opportunity to revisit and improve their own emergency response plans (ERP), he adds.

Employers have obligations to be prepared for emergencies and are expected under occupational health and safety regulations to plan, prepare, and train their employees for all emergencies.

“Emergency situations, such as severe flooding and landslides, can often occur with very little warning. That’s why employers need to conduct a risk assessment in any workplace in which a need to rescue or evacuate workers may arise,” says Al Johnson, head

of Prevention Services at WorkSafeBC. “The more you are prepared, the better you will be able to act and help ensure the safety of workers during an extreme weather event.”

Consider remote workers

In fixed locations, most workplaces have a basic ERP. However, remote workers face unique challenges in emergency preparedness if they are travelling for work or working in remote job sites. Nakahara adds it’s important to consider lone workers and what risks they might encounter. Ensure there’s a check-in system to account for them, and ensure they can obtain assistance, if needed, and have access to emergency provisions.

Severe weather events — and the related hazards they present — can occur year-round, as shown by the heatwaves and wildfires in B.C. this summer. However, an employer’s responsibility to prepare for emergencies is not limited to natural disasters or extreme weather. Fires, explosions, industrial accidents, and chemical spills can also pose serious threats to workers.

When it comes to the workplace, Johnson says it’s important to complete a risk assessment to determine the most likely emergency situations. It’s also essential to develop the proper written procedures for an evacuation and rescue, and make sure all employees know how to respond to an incident or emergency through proper training. This includes regular reviews of your ERP to ensure the required procedures are current and everyone understands them.

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Prevention Field Services, WorkSafeBC

Tips at hand

Here are few tips to keep in mind to be prepared in any emergency situation.

- 1 Know your plan and practice it.** Conducting regular, realistic, and relevant emergency response drills is one of the best ways to test how effective your ERP is. It’s also an excellent training opportunity.
- 2 Assess the hazards.** Conduct a risk assessment to determine the most likely emergency situations in your workplace, and always engage employees in the risk assessment.
- 3 Write it down.** Develop appropriate written procedures for evacuation and rescue.
- 4 Have an exit plan.** Provide well-marked directions towards an exit in the event of an emergency, and ensure employees are aware of the exit route and muster location.
- 5 Keep your plan inclusive.** Ensure that emergency procedures always consider the safety of all employees, including workers with disabilities.
- 6 Knowledge is power.** Make sure all employees know how to respond to an incident — don’t rely only on a supervisor to coordinate help, as they might not be available or could be the one actually needing assistance. Train all employees in emergency procedures and fire prevention.
- 7 First aid.** Always have first aid resources on site and accessible.
- 8 Be prepared.** Make sure enough workers are available to implement rescue procedures, should it be necessary. This should also include appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for employees doing the rescue or evacuation.

Find out more

Part 4 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation covers emergency preparedness and response. Find it through the Searchable OHS Regulation on [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com). ☺