

Information officer tip sheet

Working in an emergency operations centre: wildfire response

When you start your shift:

- Get the latest situation update and find out what has changed since the last public message.
- Confirm who the EOC director, BCWS information officer and your key agency contacts are.
- Confirm who approves messages and who is the designated spokesperson.
- Check that you have access to the website, social media and notification systems you may need.
- Review the most recent public update before posting anything new.
- Find out when the next EOC briefing is and when the next public update is expected.
- Start your activity log immediately.

1. Communicate every day, even when nothing has changed

Silence gets read as “things are bad” or “no one is paying attention.” Post a daily (at a minimum) update on the same schedule, every day, for as long as the response continues. If the situation hasn't changed, say so directly:

A short, predictable update builds trust. It also gives you a steady channel to correct rumours before they spread.

2. Time your release to match your alert

When you're issuing an evacuation order, line up your news release, social media posts and your Alertable or Voyent emergency alert so they go out together. If residents see the news on Facebook an hour before their phone actually buzzes with the emergency alert, they will lose trust in you.

3. Use a single source of truth and put a date on it

Make the emergency webpage the place where the current information lives. Every social media post and every media response should point back to it, rather than repeating the full update in several places where it can fall out of sync.

Put a date and time on every significant update, so people can tell whether the screenshot Aunt Carol shared on Facebook is three minutes old or three days old.

4. Don't assume people know what “on alert” means

Most residents have never been through an evacuation. Explain the terms every time they come up, in plain language, not just the first time you use them. Don't assume a resident has read a previous post or knows the difference between an alert and an order.

Stage	What it means, in plain language
Evacuation alert	There's a risk to your area. You are not required to leave yet, but you should be ready to go on short notice. Pack a bag, gather medications and important documents, and make a plan. If you leave the area that is under alert and it goes to order you may not be allowed back—so don't leave the kids alone.

Stage	What it means, in plain language
Evacuation order	Leave now. This is a legal order. Leave immediately using the route identified in the evacuation order. Once you are safe, follow the instructions provided for Emergency Support Services.

Always pair the term with the action you want people to take. “Evacuation alert” on its own tells people nothing; “you’re on evacuation alert, which means be ready to leave on short notice” does.

5. Be precise about maps

Evacuation communications live or die on location clarity. Use only the current, approved map for the order or alert in front of you, never an older version or one you’ve adapted yourself.

Always describe the affected area in words as well as showing it on a map, using street names, landmarks and boundaries. Don’t assume everyone can interpret a map at a glance, especially under stress.

6. Know who does what, and say so clearly

During a wildfire, residents will ask why the highway isn’t closed, why the fire isn’t out yet, or why your EOC hasn’t issued an order. You need to know, and be ready to explain, where your authority ends and another agency’s begins.

When a question falls outside your authority, say so and point people to the right source, rather than guessing or staying quiet.

Who	What they’re responsible for	What they don’t do
Local government (your EOC)	Issues, communicates and implements evacuation alerts, orders and rescinds for your community. Activates Emergency Support Services (ESS) for evacuees. Manages closures on municipal roads.	Doesn’t fight the fire and doesn’t control provincial highways. Local fire departments will assist with structural protection as needed.
BC Wildfire Service (BCWS)	Fights the fire. BCWS manages wildfire response and provides fire behaviour information. Recommends when an alert, order or rescind is needed, based on the fire’s behaviour.	Doesn’t have the authority to issue or rescind an evacuation alert or order. That decision, and the legal responsibility for it, belongs to local government.
Ministry of Transportation and Transit	Decides on and enforces closures and detours on provincial highways. Posts updates to DriveBC.	Doesn’t manage municipal roads or issue evacuation orders.
Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR)	Coordinates calls between your EOC, BCWS and other provincial partners. Provides provincial resources and support through your Provincial Regional Emergency Operations Centre (PREOC).	Doesn’t issue evacuation alerts or orders on your community’s behalf.

7. Speak with one voice

Every public message may go through your EOC director or the person they've designated before it's posted. Confirm their preference before publishing any communications. If a partner agency (BCWS, EMCR, the regional district) is also communicating on the same event, agree on key messages together so residents aren't getting conflicting information from different sources. Don't interpret the information from another agency and write your own post—share a post from the experts so people know who to trust.

8. Write for someone who's scared, not someone who works in emergency management

Drop the acronyms and the jargon. Use short sentences and everyday words. A resident deciding whether to evacuate their kids and pets doesn't have time to decode “EOC,” “PREOC” or “strategic evacuation.” If you must use a term like ESS or EOC, spell it out the first time.

9. If you don't know, say so and follow up

Never guess at fire behaviour, containment numbers or evacuation timing. Tell people you're checking and give them a time you'll follow up, then follow up. An inaccurate answer, even a well-intentioned one, damages trust for the rest of the response.

10. Watch for misinformation and correct it quickly

Monitor your community's social media, local Facebook groups and news comments for rumours (a road that's actually still open, a fire that's actually under control, a false report of a new evacuation). Correct the record publicly, calmly and with facts, without naming or arguing with whoever posted it. And put a date on it. Once you say this is happening, it will change, so state it is true for right now.

11. Log everything

Keep a record of every message you send, when you sent it, who approved it and what prompted it. This protects you if a decision is questioned later, and it's the raw material for your after-action report.

12. Build in relief for yourself

EOC shifts run long and information officers are often the last ones to leave. Arrange a second information officer or a backup as early as possible in the response.

When you hand off, brief the incoming information officer on:

- current evacuation status, including every alert and order in effect
- the time of the next scheduled update
- outstanding media questions
- misinformation you're currently monitoring
- pending approvals
- anything drafted but not yet published

13. Keep your “keeping social media social” habits going

Everything you normally do in local government communications still applies during an EOC activation: be friendly, be visual, respond publicly, limit back-and-forth with trolls and breathe before you post something in anger. People are scared and they need a reassuring tone and messages from their neighbours who are running the EOC.

