

WATCHES, WARNINGS AND

SEVERE WEATHER

MANITOBA SEVERE WEATHER WARNING WORKING GROUP RELEASES FINAL REPORT

BETWEEN JUNE 22-24, 2007, a severe weather system resulted in impacts across a wide area of southern Manitoba. This storm system resulted in tornadoes that destroyed four homes at Elie and one in the RM of Argyle, in addition to causing widespread damage in an area extending from southwestern Manitoba to the Whiteshell region along the Ontario border.

Last summer, the Honourable **Steve Ashton**, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and the Minister responsible for Emergency Measures, directed the Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) to work with the AMM in exploring ways to increase the reach and effectiveness of Environment Canada's severe weather alerts and to assist other partners in emergency management with their response activities resulting from severe weather warnings.

On February 7, 2008, Minister Ashton released the Manitoba Severe Weather Working Group Final Report, together with AMM President **Ron Bell** and EMO Executive Director **Chuck Sanderson**. According to Bell, "One of the key aims of the AMM is strengthening the overall emergency management capacity of municipalities and enhancing the safety of Manitobans, and we were pleased to work with EMO on this report for the minister."

In reviewing events related to recent severe weather emergencies in Manitoba, the Working Group identified three themes as requiring attention in order to improve preparedness for future events of this nature. The themes are:

I. DISSEMINATION OF ALERTS AND SUBSCRIPTION TO EXISTING ALERTING SYSTEMS

The few existing public alerting systems in Manitoba are not widely subscribed to, resulting in the warnings not being widely received. Improving subscription to alerting systems such as Environment Canada's *Weatheradio* system would significantly improve the response to imminent threats, as would increasing subscription among first response and emergency management agencies and institutions such as schools.

Note: Weatheradio Canada is a nationwide network of radio stations broadcasting weather and environmental information 24 hours a day in both official languages directly from Environment Canada's storm prediction centres.

WATCH OR WARNING?

A tornado **watch** is issued when conditions are favourable for the development of severe thunderstorms with the potential to produce tornadoes.

A tornado **warning** is issued when there is a confirmed sighting of a tornado on the ground, when weather spotters report funnel clouds with a rotating thunderstorm, or a tornado signature is detected on Doppler radar.

Source: Environment Canada



Photo by Sara Tkachyk

TOWARDS A NATIONAL PUBLIC ALERTING SYSTEM

It is also important to recognize the national context of issues around emergency public alerting. (President Bell noted that in 2005, at the AMM Annual Convention, a resolution was brought to the floor calling for a national alerting system.)

Canada is one of the few industrialized nations that does not have a national system to warn people at imminent risk of being harmed by an emergency or disaster. While there is one province and a small number of municipalities with a public alerting system, this is a critical gap when evaluating the adequacy of severe weather warnings.

In recent years, there has been growing focus on the implementation of such a system, notably including statements from the Premiers at the Council of the Federation, and the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence. Without diminishing the opportunity and importance of immediate measures to improve preparedness for severe weather emergencies, the development of a national system for public alerting is the most critical need in improving the preparedness around severe weather emergencies.

"We look forward to Ottawa taking action on a recent commitment to develop a national public alerting system by 2010," added Minister Ashton. "Manitoba has called for this concept for some time."



L to R: AMM President Ron Bell, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Emergency Measures Steve Ashton, and EMO Executive Director Chuck Sanderson

2. PUBLIC EDUCATION

Most severe weather conditions necessitate immediate action to protect life safety, and too often people at risk are found to be watching the weather rather than taking protective action. As President Bell noted, "We saw last summer how important public education is when we saw people rushing toward a tornado, rather than hunkering down and getting away from it."

Many people also seem to misunderstand the language used around severe weather warnings. There are significant differences between a Severe Weather Watch and a Severe Weather Warning (see sidebar on page 31), but these differences do not seem to be reflected in how they are understood by much of the public.

3. EMERGENCY PLANNING

Severe weather is an emerging hazard for Manitoba. Severe weather hazards will evolve and become a more prominent risk in each of the province's regions. Over time, it is likely that emergency managers will develop, through practice and experience, a similar comfort around these hazards as many now have when facing a more common emergency such as an overland flood. Providing greater attention to severe weather events in emergency preparedness is a more appropriate approach to building response capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The working group investigated lessons learned from severe weather emergencies in Manitoba and made "eight practical, workable recommendations," according to Minister Ashton. These

recommendations should better prepare people and agencies in the event of severe weather emergencies.

DISSEMINATION OF ALERTS AND SUBSCRIPTION TO EXISTING ALERTING SYSTEMS

1. Consider options to improve the subscription to Environment Canada's Weatheradio system.

The Working Group urged particular attention to making Weatheradio available for first response and emergency management organizations, and institutions such as schools and medical facilities. Focusing on these groups will provide an opportunity to spread warnings more widely in their communities and activate response plans in advance of an event.

2. Supplement Environment Canada's weather watcher volunteer numbers with local emergency managers.

Environment Canada has a network of volunteers across Manitoba who report to them on weather, and also confirm local conditions when requested. Encouraging local emergency managers to become supplementary volunteer weather watchers for Environment Canada would add to the overall number of volunteers, while also providing volunteers trained from an all-hazard perspective, who can be relied upon to contact Environment Canada and bring those conditions to their attention quickly and accurately.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

3. Build public education campaigns that emphasize the actions required in response to a severe weather threat.

“WE WERE
PLEASED TO
WORK WITH
EMO ON THIS
REPORT FOR
THE MINISTER.”

While there seems to be a good understanding around identifying severe weather, providing focus on the appropriate actions is critical to ensuring people are in the safest possible conditions when a threat materializes.

4. Focus on education in schools.

Programs such as fire and life safety have shown the importance of teaching children about what to do during an emergency. This not only results in better actions to protect themselves, but it has also been shown that children bring this information home and educate their parents about the same actions.

5. Provide education on Environment Canada’s system for warnings.

At the November 2007 AMM Annual Convention, Environment Canada made a presentation¹ on how they generate alerts and the difference between a Severe Weather Watch and a Severe Weather Warning. Providing this information in all public information materials will re-enforce the difference between these alerts, and explain how each requires different action.

6. Provide severe weather education for first responders and emergency managers.

As severe weather threats evolve in ways that may be unique for each region of the province, first responders and emergency managers will be responsible for dealing with the preparedness, response and recovery from these events. Manitoba EMO’s training program provides a good venue to deliver general information on severe weather threats and regionally specific concerns.

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EMERGENCY PLANNING

7. Strengthen the overall level of community emergency planning.

The Working Group sought information from a number of states in the U.S. Midwest that have dealt with severe weather such as tornadoes on a fairly routine basis.

They encourage the general improvement of emergency plans from an all-hazard perspective. At the community level, improving the level of emergency planning results in an improved response capacity not only for severe weather emergencies, but for a broad range of other emergencies also.

Manitoba has adopted an all-hazard planning approach for municipal emergency planning, and an option to build on these plans is the implementation of a recognized standard for emergency planning as a requirement for local emergency plans.

8. Enhance institutional emergency plans to address severe weather emergencies.

Many institutions such as schools, daycares, and personal care homes have developed emergency response plans that deal with specific hazards. Expanding these plans to address

severe weather emergencies has the potential to reduce the most severe impacts of such events, specifically loss of life.

"In Manitoba, because of the great partnership municipalities have had with the province, we've been getting better and better at emergency response and prevention of emergencies. Along with these and other initiatives of Manitoba EMO, municipalities do have more tools," noted President Bell. "Certainly with the increase to the municipal equipment rate (announced at the 2007 AMM Annual Convention) and the talk of a national public warning system, we've got more tools to work with in developing a complete, comprehensive and effective emergency warning system. So we're pleased with the work that is continuing to go on between municipalities, the AMM, and EMO."

The complete report can be viewed at gov.mb.ca/emo/pubinfo/mbswwwg-final-report.pdf.

1. Severe Weather in Southern Manitoba - Rob Paola, Warning Preparedness Meteorologist, Prairie & Arctic Storm Prediction Centre, Environment Canada
<http://www.amm.mb.ca/PDF/Presentations/Convention07/Severe%20Weather%20in%20Manitoba%20-%20part%201.pdf>

MEMBERS OF SEVERE WEATHER WORKING GROUP:

- Joe Masi, Executive Director, Association of Manitoba Municipalities (co-chair)
- Jeremy Angus now replaces Brock Holowachuk, Senior Planning Officer, Manitoba Emergency Measures Organization (co-chair)
- Paul Anderson, Customer Relationship Manager, Science, Technology, Energy and Mines
- John Irwin, Regional Director, Manitoba Conservation
- Rob Paola, Environment Canada
- Anne-Marie Palfreeman, Environment Canada
- Chuck Sanderson, Executive Director, Manitoba Emergency Measures Organization



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