Into the Fire: FirstOnSite’s Response to the Fort McMurray Wildfires

A WILDFIRE UNLIKE ANY SEEN BEFORE

On May 1, 2016 a wildfire in a forest in the outskirts of Fort McMurray, Alberta, caught the attention of an airborne forestry crew flying over the Athabasca oil sands. Bone-dry forests and arid May weather soon acted as kindling for this wildfire to spiral out of control. In a matter of hours the fire edged closer to residential and commercial Fort McMurray, and by May 3, 2016 it had engulfed approximately 2,400 homes in the area and approximately 590,000 hectares of land. To put things into perspective, that’s more than 600,000 football fields.

The Fort McMurray wildfires resulted in the largest mass evacuation in Alberta’s history, and launched one of Canada’s most exhaustive coordinated first response efforts. As the fire raged, FirstOnSite Restoration’s CAT teams were on the ground to respond to and restore the community in crisis.

SUPPORTING FIRST RESPONDERS

Upon entering Fort McMurray on May 8, 2016, FirstOnSite crews were faced with their first challenge: creating safe conditions for the 500 and counting first responders to effectively fight the fires. Working in tandem with Alberta Emergency Management, FirstOnSite made restoring air quality an essential priority. CAT teams used over 100 high-efficiency particulate arrestance (HEPA) filter air scrubbers to restore air quality in critical personnel hubs, including first responder accommodations, operations centres and offices. This specialized equipment was used for a month to ensure that safety standards for responders were constantly up to par.

A coordinated effort of local and national personnel on the frontlines of the wildfire called for equally
efficient resource management behind the scenes. During the early weeks of the wildfire, FirstOnSite’s teams sourced materials and equipment from areas as far as Mississauga, Ontario, to help with efforts in Fort McMurray. From groceries and day-to-day supplies, to specialized equipment, replenishing resources for teams operating during the first response proved essential.

RESTORING CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE
When Premier Rachel Notley announced the June 1st phased re-entry of Fort McMurray’s 80,000 evacuees the need to prepare the area for residential use became FirstOnSite’s next priority. Critical infrastructure restoration was one of five key conditions of re-entry put forward by the Government of Alberta. FirstOnSite staged several hundred commercial restoration personnel in Edmonton for timely, large-scale mobilization. Upon getting the green light to enter the area, team members were tasked with restoring critical infrastructure and services, including banks, gas stations, lodging and grocery stores in time for residential re-entry. As residents came home to Fort McMurray, FirstOnSite’s teams began projects for day cares, multi-family residential units and telecommunications facilities. This approach also addressed the importance of reviving Fort McMurray’s local economy, getting essential services up and running, and getting the local population back to work as quickly as possible.

Personnel were armed with HEPA air filter air scrubbers and commercial-grade cleaning supplies, such as vacuums, duct and steam cleaners, to begin laying the groundwork for re-entry. FirstOnSite’s Mobile Command Centre was set up on Franklin Avenue, in the heart of Fort McMurray’s commercial hub. The Mobile Command Centre acted as an anchor for all ongoing projects and personnel, and consisted of two office trailers, five transport trucks, FirstOnSite’s mobile tool crib and five pull-behind equipment trailers.

STRENGTH IN EXPERIENCE
While lodging for restoration staff proved to be a challenge for many, FirstOnSite’s resource network and planning made this challenge manageable. By engaging existing contacts and extensive networks within the local Fort McMurray community, FirstOnSite was able to quickly and easily prepare adequate lodging for all staff, allowing for timely mobilization. By learning from past experiences with large-scale disasters such as the Slave Lake fires and the Calgary floods, FirstOnSite’s meticulous logistics planning dramatically reduced barriers to restoration, and process timeframes.
The FirstOnSite team acted with military-like precision to ensure a rapid, coordinated response to the wildfires.

PUTTING CUSTOMERS FIRST
CAT team members also provided an important on-the-ground perspective for commercial and residential evacuees while the area was inaccessible to the public. Fort McMurray’s strong telecommunications infrastructure, and the widespread availability of digital technology such as mobile internet sticks and hubs allowed FirstOnSite to keep commercial customers informed about the state of their properties and restoration efforts underway. Open lines of communication were also a central part of managing client expectations in the face of increasing wildfire damage and shifting priorities. For evacuated residents, FirstOnSite offered preparedness tips and peace of mind through interviews with local news and radio stations. Even in the midst of a wildfire, customer service was a prime concern.

LOOKING FORWARD
The Fort McMurray wildfires devastated a community, leaving behind $3.6-billion in damage and an estimated economic impact of $1-billion and counting. The wildfires also left in their wake a number of lessons for future large-scale disaster restoration projects. Technology’s role in easing the communications and management process cannot be understated. Technology such as satellite imagery systems, geo-mapping and cloud-based building management systems allowed for unprecedented remote access to the disaster area, and increased two-way communication between restoration professionals and their customers. While there are still some limitations, technology is quickly proving essential to the disaster restoration process. Fort McMurray can also serve as a case study for future disaster resilience planning and policy in Canada. While the isolated layout of Fort McMurray neighbourhoods spared a number of areas from serious fire damage, damaged suffered by the worst-affected parts of the municipality call for more evidence-based disaster resilience planning.

WILDFIRE DAMAGE TIPS
- Introduce fresh air to a contaminated environment by opening windows
- Do not attempt to wash walls, ceilings, unsealed wood, bricks or other absorbent surfaces
- Be sure to assess your roof for damage as a result of flying embers