

Canadian Red Cross

2023 Nova Scotia Fires **Community Assessment**

January 2025



















Executive Summary

This report shares the results of an assessment conducted by the Canadian Red Cross approximately one year after the 2023 Barrington Lake and Tantallon fires in Nova Scotia, which together **destroyed more than 200 homes and caused approximately 22,000 people to evacuate**. The goal of the assessment is to highlight strengths, gaps and unmet needs, and community priorities to help plan and prioritize supports for long-term recovery. A total of 36 participants from community associations, humanitarian organizations and government were interviewed. The results are presented here within the structure of social, economic, built and natural recovery environments.

The main findings in each environment are:

Social



Economic



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Tight-knit communities pulled even closer together. Local government showed flexibility in pivoting to do all they can to support residents. Community organizations stepped up and have expanded their mandates to offer more support and new actors are getting more involved in disaster recovery.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Coordination is an area where there are opportunities for improvement.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

There is a desire for more community-wide and group events and supports alongside existing resources for mental health and wellness. There is also demand for more training for crisis navigation and recovery capacity.

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

The majority of affected households had insurance coverage for fires and some neighbours are working together to navigate the claims process. While this is an area with some uncertainty, businesses appear to have sustained relatively limited impacts.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

There are gaps in insurance coverage that will be felt more acutely in the next year. Coverage for alternative living arrangements is likely to run out before many homes are rebuilt and there may be gaps for furniture, moving expenses and lot remediation. The households that did not have insurance coverage have continuing needs, and it is not yet clear whether disaster financial assistance will fully address the fires' impacts on fishers and woodlot owners.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

The main community priority is to address the gaps in insurance coverage.

Built



Natural



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

No continuing issues were reported with public critical infrastructure that was damaged by the fires. The communities also have shown strengths in construction capacity.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

So many houses in concentrated areas need repairs or to be rebuilt that there are not enough contractors to complete all the work at the same time. In Shelburne County, communications infrastructure does not provide adequate cell service, creating added vulnerability to disasters such as fires.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

There is a strong appetite to take actions to mitigate the risk of future fires. Another priority is finding permanent housing solutions for the households currently using modular housing.

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

After extensive well testing, there are no continuing widespread drinking water issues. No protected natural areas were burnt, and replanting efforts are underway in the areas that were affected.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

There are still a lot of burnt trees standing, affecting residents' psychological wellbeing and causing concerns about fuel loads. Testing for environmental contamination beyond drinking water has been left as a private responsibility and there may still be issues.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Removing burnt trees on both private and public land is the main priority that was expressed. There are ongoing discussions around fire breaks as a mitigation measure.



While this assessment strove to include the views of a wide range of participants, it is possible that valuable insights and perspectives were missed. This report is part of an ongoing dialogue intended to support recovery that will continue in the months to come.

Background & Context

In 2023, Nova Scotia experienced fires unlike the province had ever previously seen.

The Barrington Lake fire, the largest in Nova Scotia's history, began on May 26th in western Shelburne County and went on to burn an estimated 23,535 hectares of forest, destroying 60 homes and 150 other structures. The Tantallon fire began soon after, on May 28th, and burned an estimated 969 hectares, including 151 homes and 50 other structures in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). The fires impacted homes and businesses belonging to the Indigenous communities of Sipekne'katik and Wasoqopa'q. Combined, these fires forced approximately 22,000 people to evacuate. One of the great successes of the response to both fires was that there was no loss of life or serious injury.



As of the fall of 2024, more than a year after the fires began, the communities are in the process of recovering and rebuilding. In April 2024, the Canadian Red Cross initiated a process to better understand how communities are managing at this stage in their recovery.

While both fires took place at the same time, and both recoveries have a considerable amount in common, there are some important differences in context between the area in HRM impacted by the Tantallon fire and the parts of Shelburne County impacted by the Barrington Lake fire. Where there are differences, they are noted.

Purpose

The purpose of this assessments was to ascertain the strengths, gaps and unmet needs, and community priorities for the long-term recovery of those impacted by the 2023 fires in HRM and Shelburne County, Nova Scotia. The goal of this report is to share findings to facilitate coordination, planning and prioritization of ongoing and future supports.

Throughout the assessment process, the team engaged in informative and wide-ranging conversations where interviewees shared their experiences of the early days responding to the fires, stories of coping with challenges that arose in early recovery, and feedback on how different actors in disaster response and recovery could have worked differently to collaborate more seamlessly or could have otherwise better served impacted populations. These insights were valuable and will be passed through the appropriate channels to inform the broader understanding of the fires and support ongoing learning and opportunities for improvement. This assessment report will focus more specifically on pointing to existing supports and capacities across impacted communities, identifying gaps and unmet needs, and highlighting community-identified priorities. It will therefore centre on themes from the conversations that inform the purpose of planning ongoing and future supports. This assessment is not intended to promote particular solutions, nor does it provide recommendations. Determining how to use the information presented here is the next step for the communities and organizations supporting the recovery efforts.

Approach

Recovery is a complex process that looks different for each community, and each disaster. It involves individuals, businesses, community organizations, response agencies, service providers and governments moving together towards a new state of normalcy where they are once again able to focus on forward-looking priorities. While everyone recovers at their own pace, the long-term recovery period for a medium or large-scale disaster typically takes years and affords opportunities to build resilience and improve on the pre-disaster state.

This assessment is organized to approach recovery through the lens of four interlinked environments:









Social

psychological wellbeing, health, relationships and sense of community

Economic

livelihoods, insurance, financial resources, commercial activity

Built

housing, infrastructure, public buildings

Natural

plants, animals, air, water and soil quality, natural hazards

The approach chosen for this assessment helps to structure the impacts of disaster in a way that is holistic, but manageable. All recovery environments are inherently interconnected, and actions taken to address disaster impacts can span across multiple environments. This approach is rooted in global best practice, forming the basis for the Recovery Capitals (ReCap) project in Australia and New Zealand, which draws on development studies and

extensive experience of bushfires, among other disasters. That said, this assessment is about communities in Nova Scotia, who know better than anyone else what they need and what is important to them. Other partners and organizations work best when they augment and support community-led recovery. This report takes a strengths-based and community-centered approach, while pointing out gaps and unmet needs in addition to community-defined priorities.

Insights were gathered primarily through semi-structured key informant interviews with participants from community associations, humanitarian organizations and government. Participants were selected by approaching those known to be active in response and recovery. A snowballing method was used to identify additional key informants. A total of 36 people from 15 organizations generously sat down and spoke with interviewers for approximately an hour each between April and June of 2024. Questions were selected and tailored for each interview from a question bank developed specifically for the purposes of this assessment. Interviews were automatically transcribed and manually coded using thematic analysis to identify common threads. Comments are shared here without attribution to allow interviewees to speak more candidly. Additional conversations provided context that helped frame the findings and understand potential gaps. Further insights and background information were gathered from secondary sources including after action reviews, news stories, and census data.



Social



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Tight knit communities pulling even closer together, flexibility of local government, increased number of organizations helping, availability of mental health supports

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Coordination

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Mental health and wellness, training for crisis navigation and recovery capacity

Broadly speaking, residents have come together to support each other in recovering and rebuilding. The 2023 fires were experienced as part of a chain of cascading and compounding events. Residents have had their minds on not just fires, but floods and threats of hurricanes too, which greatly impacts their outlook.

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Tight knit communities

One of the great strengths that was obvious in both areas of Nova Scotia is tight knit communities determined to help each other through hard times. This was evident in the frequently overwhelming support shown in the immediate response to the fires where everyone working in relief described receiving more food – and other donations, but especially food – than could reasonably be managed. Interviewees described communities that were drawn closer by coping with what they went through together. Local organizations expanded their activities and capacities to do more for their communities. For example, there have been more shared meals and dances in Barrington and two resilience trees were planted at a ceremony in Highland Park.

"The big thing about Nova Scotia is we all pull together; we got each other's back."

Pivoting to help

In Shelburne and Barrington, local government was able to pivot and devote many, many hours to finding solutions for displaced residents. HRM had the capacity to carry out assessments and is investing in mitigation for future disasters. This includes forest fire fighting equipment, better ways to alert the public to risk, ways of reaching out to diverse communities, and gaining expertise in Indigenous cultural burning, among other initiatives.

Another strength is the involvement of more organizations with complementary mandates bringing resources and expertise into assisting with disasters and climate change. This includes both very local community organizations who expanded their roles and operations, and those that are part of larger networks that had not previously provided services to the affected communities.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Coordination

Despite the strength of having more organizations with more resources step up, many interviewees expressed a wish for better coordination among the various actors in relief and early recovery. While many of the difficulties working together that emerged in response and early recovery have been resolved, good coordination and relationship building are an ongoing need that will continue to be important throughout long-term recovery and looking forward to preparedness for future events.

"There are a lot of organizations that kind of come in and we all have different expectations of what everyone is going to do without really clear, defined expectations of what everyone is doing."

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Mental health and wellness

One of the main topics discussed was ongoing mental health and wellness needs. There was a general feeling that people are sensitive to seeing smoke or fog on the horizon and are feeling nervous about hot and dry weather.

Those who work in the mental health field cautioned against pathologizing the normal expressions of grief that would be expected among people experiencing disasters. Interviewees expressed a desire for more group and community events that need not all be about the fires. In HRM, households who did not experience total losses but may still have had some damage or been evacuated are experiencing ongoing impacts and feel they would also like to be included in community-wide programming.

"People are afraid every time somebody has a backyard fire at this point. Every time they hear a fire truck, people comment on it. Every time we get an emergency alert on our phones, like every one of us, I would say, are triggered by that.

I'm sure that is people that didn't just lose homes ... it's probably anybody within a reasonable distance from us who were evacuated that would be feeling the same way."

There are some groups who may be having more difficulty coping. In Shelburne/Barrington, seniors were mentioned by virtually every interviewee as a group requiring special considerations. This extended from considering financial circumstances, to greater repercussions from displacement to difficulty navigating supports, to isolation and limited transportation options. Interviewees in Shelburne County and HRM also mentioned children, youth and young families, and people with intellectual disabilities as populations who could benefit from more tailored approaches. Another particularly affected group includes responders and the staff working for government and organizations involved in recovery, who have also been through a lot of stress and may be experiencing vicarious trauma.

Several interviewees stressed the importance of stability and the social determinants of health: mental health depends on having stable housing and other basic needs met. At the same time, interviewees emphasized the importance of moving at households' pace and how decisions can only be taken when people are ready to make plans.

Many felt the issue was not so much that mental health supports are not available, but that there were people who could benefit who were not seeking out existing services and resources. Interviewees highlighted the value of creativity in making supports more approachable and more embedded in normal community settings, as was successfully done for gift cards and clothing in the immediate aftermath of the fires.

Training and Capacity

Looking to preparedness for future events, local officials felt they were not adequately trained to address the unique challenges of early recovery. Interviewees expressed a desire for crisis navigation training and more recovery capacity as part of disaster preparedness. Local organizations are also interested in more training around managing influxes of volunteers, donation management and psychological first aid.

"So, things that were more about community gatherings are what worked best for those agencies in Shelburne, Barrington and for Hammonds Plains. I think trying to be creative and flexible with how the support was provided, because again, people there were not used to having to ask for support."

Economic



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Vast majority of affected households having insurance coverage, relatively limited impacts on businesses

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Expenses not covered by insurance, businesses that may not be insured or qualify for DFA, increased costs associated with rebuilding

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Addressing needs of uninsured households; addressing gaps in insurance coverage (ALEs, property remediation, moving and furniture expenses)

The economic environments of the affected communities in HRM and Shelburne County had marked differences, notably in income, savings, activities and share of the population that is retired. Particularly for those who are seniors or nearing retirement, there is a limited ability to use savings or take on more housing-related debt to finance amounts not covered by existing supports. More broadly, many households are living paycheque to paycheque, regardless of address, meaning that there is limited capacity to absorb additional disaster-related costs or wait for reimbursement.

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Insurance

A significant majority of households impacted by the 2023 fires had some amount of insurance. Of the 211 total loss properties, only 10 did not have any insurance coverage.

Insured households have varying levels of coverage and varying levels of ease in dealing with their insurance companies. Some neighbours formed a peer support group for those working with the same adjuster and found being able to lean on each other with insurance questions to be extremely helpful.

Livelihoods

Local businesses frequently came up in the interviews as helpers throughout response and recovery. They contributed donations of food and lumber, offered low-cost tree removal and labelled saplings to indicate where they could be safely planted. A number of businesses did have their operations disrupted during the evacuations, losing revenue and labour, but interviewees did not identify the commercial sector as an area experiencing major struggles at this point. Some exceptions, namely woodlots and damaged fishing equipment are addressed below.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Insurance

Some gaps in insurance coverage are already becoming apparent at the household level. Some homeowners believe that households with any insurance are ineligible for additional supports but people who are insured do have unmet needs. Some households, unable to fund the gap between insurance and rebuilding costs, have been living in housing situations that are not adequate long-term dwellings. Coverage is also falling short of the costs of lot remediation including burnt tree removal and landscaping.

Other gaps are anticipated to emerge in the next year. Even for those with seemingly broad coverage, alternative living expenses (ALE) are expected to run out before many of the rebuilds are complete. ALEs are allowances that make up the part of insurance coverage that pays for the additional expenses associated with having to live somewhere other than a policyholder's home, like rent for a temporary apartment and extra costs for food. Due to the high cost and low availability of rental accommodations, ALEs are likely to reach policy maximums around the 18-month mark. Coverage is also likely to be insufficient for moving expenses and furniture replacement.

All but one of the uninsured households were in Shelburne County and finding ways to assist these households continues to be the priority for several interviewees. Recovery has thus far been a much more difficult road with fewer options for those who did not have coverage for a variety of reasons, be it uninsurable locations, issues with paperwork, states of repair, or affordability considerations.

Age can be a complicating factor, limiting financing options for anything not covered by insurance. For example, housing solutions that require taking on a mortgage were not suitable for households on fixed incomes.

"An ongoing issue for people is not enough coverage, or insufficient coverage, for the level of damage to the property. The other one we have yet to hit that is, I would say, more than likely going to hit in the late fall, which will be the people that run out of their allowable living expenses."

Livelihoods

Fires are generally considered insurable events for businesses as well as households. Some assets, such as traps stored outdoors, were not insurable. The province offered a one-time \$2500 support and subsequently opened disaster financial assistance applications to eligible small businesses as well as households and non-profits. It is not yet clear how sufficient this assistance is for supporting livelihoods in Shelburne County. Woodlot owners were also unable to insure property they used for additional income or heating and may require assistance to cope with their losses.

Other populations with ongoing needs

Renters:

One interviewee mentioned renters as a group that has been challenging to assist and whose needs and available supports may be less visible. Renters make up a small proportion of the population of neighbourhoods where structure losses were concentrated – less than 20% of households in Shelburne County and less than 10% in the Hammonds Plains and Upper Tantallon areas in Halifax Regional Municipality – and there is less visibility on how they are doing and what supports are available.

Partial loss & evacuees:

A couple of interviewees brought up that households that did not experience a total loss are still in need of supports and to be included in recovery considerations. This includes racialized communities who were evacuated but had less damage to structures.

The people with no insurance and the renters have been the most challenging to support because I just don't know what was available for them."

Municipal tax reassessment

Homeowners who are rebuilding have lost the protection of a freeze on their property tax assessment and are facing dramatically higher annual property taxes as a result. The increased tax bill may cause financial hardship for some. Interviewees brought this up in both HRM and Shelburne County.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Support for gaps in insurance

The main economic priority is finding additional financial support for expenses that are not being covered by insurance. This includes ongoing support to uninsured households but also anticipated needs for rent once ALEs are exhausted, as well as help with furnishings and lot remediation.

Built



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Lack of major infrastructure damage, community capacity to rebuild

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Furniture and move-in support, communications infrastructure, availability of contractors

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Mitigation opportunities, finding permanent housing solutions for households currently in modular housing

Combined, the fires destroyed over 200 homes and approximately 200 other structures. Rebuilds are underway, with about 60% complete in HRM at the time of this report. Fortunately, there do not seem to be any remaining issues with critical public infrastructure damaged by the fires.

The rental vacancy rate for the province of Nova Scotia was about 1% in 2023, with vacancies for 2- and 3-bedroom units at record lows. A major theme in the interviews was the effect that this housing shortage had on the availability of affordable and viable options for displaced households and even for temporarily housing responders. Attempts to work with apartment listing services and exploring suitable land for temporary living arrangements by local agencies were unsuccessful. The province has supported programs with provincial campsites and modular housing that have been utilized, but with low uptake.

"So, unless people are clothed, have food security – I keep coming back to those basic social determinants - unless people have a roof over their heads, unless people have some sort of income, unless there is that stability, there are going to be continued needs and I think there are still a lot of people with that instability. The rest will really be band aids."

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Infrastructure

Around the one-year mark, interviewees stated there were no longer issues with infrastructure such as cell phone towers and roads having been damaged by the fires. Most properties were on wells, so damage to municipal water infrastructure was not an issue, and power had long since been restored. The radio communications system in Halifax Regional Municipality was already built with redundancy for the loss of a communications tower and damage has been repaired. The current concerns with infrastructure mostly have to do with pre-existing gaps.

Community capacity to rebuild

One service organization found that there was no shortage of volunteers to help with homebuilding in HRM and local businesses were supporting their staff's participation in corporate build days. While the demands are high with so many homes damaged, there is construction expertise in the Maritimes and one interviewee noted the absence of the kinds of problems with unscrupulous contractors that are commonly present in other disaster recovery situations. In some cases, families have been able to work on their own rebuilds, accelerating the timeline for getting back into their homes.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Furniture and move-in support

As households are moving into their rebuilt and repaired homes, those who are uninsured or have narrower coverage will need help covering the cost of furniture. This may be a larger gap because some insurance companies are deducting costs for lot remediation from the allocation for personal belongings.

"We've given content support, but it's very minimal, right? It's not going to get you all of your appliances, let alone your furniture, your welcome mat, your dishes, your bedding. There's so much to it that you have to replace and then if you have kids on top of it, I couldn't even imagine. I believe there could still be some identified gaps around that."

Communications infrastructure in Shelburne County

While there have been efforts to improve high speed internet access in the area, poor cell coverage was a preexisting issue going into the fire. Temporary cell towers were brought in during response and making this capacity permanent was identified as a priority that would make the region more resilient to future disasters.

Contractor availability

The main constraint on timelines for rebuilding that interviewees brought up was the fact that there are not enough skilled construction workers to rebuild and repair all damaged homes at the same time. While construction companies have been eager to participate in rebuilding, there is still something of a bottleneck given the number of repairs and rebuilds that so many households want to complete as quickly as possible.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Mitigation

Interviewees in all areas expressed a high degree of enthusiasm for mitigation by implementing more FireSmart programming. Communities would appreciate help to finance the additional cost of FireSmart measures, such as metal fencing, for individual households. There may be an opportunity to support efforts for a FireSmart certification for contractors and to extend this to landscapers. An incentive program for households to be given discounts on their insurance for taking FireSmart measures was identified repeatedly as a program that would be beneficial.

"Maybe some help or education or potentially funding for those who could do some risk mitigation around their property, like trimming their bushes back and their trees aren't touching the host. Make sure if they're shingling their house, maybe think about the metal roof...just some education on building and being more FireSmart"

Modular homes

Ultimately, a total of five (5) households, all uninsured, opted for modular homes. This was an option offered by the province for temporary accommodations to be rented and placed on the lots (if suitable) of affected households for up to two years. There is still confusion about whether the modular homes can be left on the properties permanently, how removing them will be financed and how decisions will be made.

Natural



STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Lack of widespread drinking water issues, no protected natural lands damaged, replanting efforts are underway.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Presence of burnt trees, testing for environmental contamination outside of drinking water.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Removal of burnt trees, future plans for firebreaks

The fires had an enormous impact on the natural environment, burning an estimated combined 24,504 ha of wooded areas and damaging septic and heating oil tanks, spilling their contents onto the land. No protected natural areas were impacted by the fires. People are more alert to fire risk and have heightened sensitivity to hot, dry weather. Fire bans bring up strong emotions.

STRENGTHS | POSITIVES

Lack of drinking water issues

Most properties in both the affected areas in HRM and Shelburne County get drinking water from wells. Testing was widely made available at no cost to homeowners and there are not any identified ongoing drinking water issues.

Existing tree removal service

In HRM, one company has been able to provide relatively affordable tree removal by defraying its costs through salvaging softwood trees. Lots with more hardwoods are still facing higher costs and there is a sense of unfairness between those with greater or lesser concentration of hardwood trees.

Reforestation

There are resources available and engaged for reforestation in HRM as part of larger initiatives to plant millions of trees. Shelburne County also has efforts underway to airdrop seedlings and replant.

GAPS | UNMET NEEDS

Financing tree removal

There are gaps in insurance coverage for tree removal, especially on large, wooded properties. Lot remediation is complicated in HRM by steep, rocky land requiring specialized equipment and quotes for arborists can be as high as \$140,000. There are total loss properties and properties with major damage who have received some funds to remediate their lots, but financial support for tree removal is an ongoing need.

Contamination

The fires caused some heating oil tanks to melt and damaged septic systems. The resulting need for lot remediation has extended timelines before rebuilding could take place on some properties. Further damage from these spills may still be affecting soil and lakes, but testing has been left up to private property owners.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Burnt trees

Virtually every interviewee mentioned the presence of burnt trees as a factor affecting people's sense of wellbeing, both on their own property and in public parks and trails. Some noted it was especially hard for children to see; others alluded to fears that trees would fall on buildings or be fuel for another fire. There was a general desire to have the burnt trees removed, though some questioned how financially realistic it would be to do so over the full burn area.

Interviewees expressed concerns that dead trees could still burn during a hot, dry summer. This echoes a broader concern across Nova Scotia about high fuel loads, especially with downed trees from Hurricane Fiona in other locations.

"All of the devastation, just seeing that everyday wears on them."

Fire breaks

There were also questions around maintaining fire breaks in Shelburne County and how this would interact with recreational activities such as deer hunting, and access to woods more generally. This is an ongoing area of discussion between levels of government as mitigation options are explored.

Limitations

This assessment is just one piece of ongoing engagement with affected communities and has some limitations. The participants that were selected know their communities well, but it is possible that the views represented here miss other valuable insights and perspectives. Additionally, some interviews were not able to be scheduled in time to be included in the report.

Conclusion

"I think that the community as a whole is healing... I think of how people are right now, but they're also supporting each other like on a different level that I've never seen before."

Around one year after the 2023 fires in Nova Scotia, we heard that community bonds are strong and people, businesses, organizations and governments have shown a great deal of resilience. There are ongoing needs for the handful of households that did not have insurance and emerging needs to fill the gaps for households whose insurance is not covering all of their expenses or may soon run out. Possible needs for renters, fishers and woodlot owners are currently an area of some uncertainty. Lots are still filled with burnt trees and the psychological impact of the fires is still very much being felt. Approachable supports and events that include the whole community remain a necessity. There is a strong interest in rebuilding in a way that is more resilient than how these areas used to be through mitigation measures and increased levels of training and capacity to respond and adapt accordingly.

As the complex process of long-term recovery continues, the strengths, needs, and priorities outlined in this report will evolve, but our hope is that this assessment will help these communities and those providing supports to target their efforts. We are grateful to those who contributed their insights throughout the course of this assessment.

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MLA of Shelburne County

Municipality of Barrington

Municipality of Shelburne

Nova Scotia Health

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