

2021: A YEAR OF CLIMATE ACTION AND RESPONSE

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Response is costly and often investment decisions are made according to the number of people affected. How do we prepare our communities for this and allocate funds equitably?

1 Helicopter fighting BC forest fires near Port Alice, Vancouver Island, BC 2 Extreme heat Cooling Centre in Vancouver 3 Image of Fraser Valley flood, Global News



REMEMBER THE WEATHER STORIES OF THE “OLD DAYS”?

Our grandparents and community elders tell stories of a 100 year flood, an exceptionally cold winter, or that particular scorching summer. These events took place over the course of a lifetime. And then there was 2021. What will we tell our grandchildren about that one year?

In the second half of 2021, BC reported a list of unprecedented weather and climate-related impacts. Although these events are shown as a list, we acknowledge that each event carries extreme emotional toll and sadness. Our sympathy is extended to the families of lost loved ones and to the communities dealing with post-event restoration and healing.

- An extreme heat dome caused over 590 deaths between June 18 and August 12, 2021 in BC.¹ Temperatures reached above 40 degrees Celsius and tragically we learnt how inadequate our housing stock is for keeping seniors and people with disabilities safe in times of high heat. Over 70% of heat victims were over 70 years old.
- A massive wildfire from the extreme temperatures and tinder dry land destroyed the town of Lytton on June 30.²
- A summer of relentless poor air quality caused by the smoky skies of wildfires. The dryness of the spring and extreme heat of summer raised the fire danger to extreme levels. A provincial state of emergency was declared on July 21, 2021 and stayed in effect for 56 days until Sept. 14, 2021. There were over 300 active wildfires in BC with 67 Wildfires of Note.³
- A tornado, with wind speed up to 110 kilometers per hour, roared through the

University of BC campus on November 6, 2021, leaving a trail of tree and property damage and downed power lines.⁴

- An atmospheric river flowed across the southwest corner of the province during a long weekend in November. In some places, more than 200 mm of rain fell. Washouts and landslides closed all highways leading to the Lower Mainland and caused massive flooding and evacuation orders across the Fraser Valley, Hope, Merritt and Princeton. Travellers were stranded and lives were lost.⁵
- An extreme cold snap in December from an arctic air mass with minimum temperature records broken only six months after the maximum temperature records.⁶ Community volunteers now worked to keep vulnerable people warm.
- The cold snap was followed by a “snow-maggedon” across the province, with the City of Nelson reporting an unprecedented snowfall in the early hours of January 4, 2022, with snow accumulation between 65 – 80cm overnight.⁷

Planners work for the health and wellbeing of people, regions and communities in an effort to address the public interest. As professional planners, how do we support communities in the present and coming years to prepare for the next storm?

To understand, manage and prepare for the effects of global climate change, the Province of BC has developed a climate risk assessment framework. *Preliminary Strategic Climate Risk Assessment for British Columbia, 2019* identified, analyzed and evaluated fifteen scenarios of climate vulnerability, including flooding, water shortage, heat waves, severe wildfire season and increased incidence of vector-borne disease.

The “extreme precipitation and landslide scenario” was identified as an event

in the area of Hope BC.⁸ The imaginary scenario was rated as ‘unlikely’ at present, and ‘possible’ in the future, with consequence being assessed as ‘minor.’ In 2021, the scenario analyzed in the Assessment report became reality. Damage to infrastructure and property was severe, and lives were lost. Supply chains were impacted for weeks.

The events of 2021 make it obvious that extreme weather events and climate change are now reality. Planners need to be on guard and take it into account as part of our work. Climate impacts threaten community health and wellbeing, damages local property and infrastructure, causes significant capital costs, negatively affects the natural environment and our local economies and, worst of all, we mourn the loss of fellow citizens.

A Climate Action Policy has recently been endorsed by the PIBC Board of Directors and affirms PIBC believes that addressing climate change is an essential part of planning in the public interest. The Climate Action Policy recommends the following actions to ensure PIBC contributes to the advancement of climate change-informed planning:

1. Capacity Building and Education:

Promote climate change planning in PIBC communications, educational standards and development activities. Ensure that all practicing planners have access to the resources, data, training, and other support they need to fully integrate climate change considerations into their work. Regardless of the area of planning speciality, all planners need to be able to see the value of, and consistently make, climate-informed decisions.

2. Partnerships:

Develop and deepen formal partnerships with other professional organizations to support climate mitigation and adaptation planning efforts.

3. Engage and Provide Expertise:

Inform the development of future policies and regulations by identifying PIBC representatives to participate in external advisory bodies and committees.

4. Advocate:

In accordance with PIBC’s Advocacy Policy, proactively advocate to the Province of BC, Government of Yukon and Government of Canada for

policies and actions that contribute to more robust climate change planning and plan implementation.

5. Carbon Neutral and Climate Resilient Operations:

Strive to achieve carbon neutrality in its corporate operations through a combination of emissions reductions and the purchase of carbon offsets. Encourage low carbon resilience in built spaces and services, such as conference planning and chapter activities.

Within the tragedy and despair of the 2021 weather events, we saw evidence of support and immediate mobilization of resources to respond and quickly recover from some events, especially the atmospheric river that impacted the supply chain for most of the province. But can the same be said for all climate-related disasters? How has the Village of Lytton rebuilt after its fire devastation? Response is costly and often investment decisions are made according to the number of people affected. How do we prepare our communities for this and allocate funds equitably?

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The words of veteran CBC journalist Carol Off in a recent interview rang true for planners:

Not paying attention... is the ultimate act of privilege. If you have the ability to check out, it's because you have nothing at stake. You know you are not running for your life. You are not about to be arrested. You are not in trouble. You are not in the line. You're not about to lose your house. You're not about to lose your job. So, I urge: stay engaged. Not because you need to be there, but other people need you to be.⁹

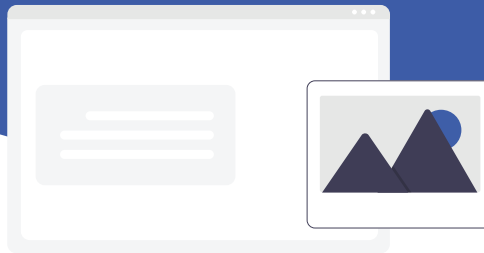
We encourage all planners to stay engaged and continue to prepare the public for climate uncertainty and ultimately for climate preparedness and adaptation. ■

PIBC established the Climate Action Subcommittee in 2019. With oversight from the PIBC Board and PIBC's Policy & Public Affairs Committee, the Subcommittee's role is to build strategic partnerships, conduct research, and advocate on matters related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Authors of this article are Subcommittee members.

- 1 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-heat-dome-sudden-deaths-revised-2021-1.6232758>
- 2 <https://globalnews.ca/news/8270545/lytton-mayor-fire-report-tsb/>
- 3 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-history/wildfire-season-summary>
- 4 <https://www.saanichnews.com/news/environment-canada-confirms-low-grade-tornado-hit-vancouver-over-the-weekend/>
- 5 <https://theconversation.com/how-an-atmospheric-river-drenched-british-columbia-and-led-to-floods-and-mudslides-172021>
- 6 <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/b-c-town-breaks-105-year-old-temperature-record-amid-cold-snap-1.5794327>
- 7 <https://www.nelson.ca/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=640>
- 8 Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy (2019). Preliminary Strategic Climate Risk Assessment for British Columbia. Report prepared for the Government of British Columbia, Victoria, BC. Accessible at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/climate-change/adaptation/risk-assessment>
- 9 <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-feb-18-2022-1.6356555/friday-february-18-2022-full-transcript-1.6357926>

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