

The government of British Columbia has 'a shelf full of reports' by experts warning of inadequate flood protection and preparedness, but dragged its heels

[By Justine Hunter, columnist, *Globe and Mail*, Nov 21, 2021](#)

In 2017, the year John Horgan and the New Democratic Party formed government in B.C., the urgency of preparing for climate change was laid bare. Rainstorms on top of snow melt brought unprecedented flooding in the Okanagan in the spring. Months later, the province was in the grips of one of the worst wildfire seasons in British Columbia's history. The amount of land burned was – here's that word again –unprecedented.

Last week, the province declared a state of emergency, the third one of 2021. A weather phenomenon known as an “atmospheric river” of rain unleashed floods and mudslides in what is expected to be the costliest natural disaster in the province's history.

Mr. Horgan said last week the latest disaster could not have been forecast or averted. “There was nothing – nothing – that could have been done [for] a three-times-the-historic-high volume of water travelling through Merritt in one day,” he said. Residents of Merritt faced record-shattering heat, drought and wildfire threats six months ago, and now the city of 7,000 has been evacuated after flooding wiped out its sanitation systems.

But his government has a shelf full of contemporary reports from experts, warning that disasters like this are going to hit with greater frequency and with bigger impact, and that the province is not prepared.

B.C.'s auditor-general, Carol Bellringer, [cautioned in a February, 2018, report](#) that the provincial government “may not be able to manage flood risks given a number of factors including a lack of staffing and technical capacity, outdated flood-plain maps, and roles and responsibilities that are spread out across many agencies and levels of government. Similarly, government's wildfire prevention activities are not sufficient, and to date, have not substantially reduced the risk.”

In 2019, a [preliminary report on climate-change risks](#) to the province highlighted the threat of wildfires and flooding – among others – and warned that the majority of risk events would have “catastrophic” economic consequences.

Similar studies from academics and environmental organizations have piled up, each urging the province to prepare for catastrophic events related to climate change. Just this spring, [a report by the Fraser Basin Council](#) specifically warned that the province's model for managing flood risk is broken. “The province continues to face damages, losses and misery associated with flood events, and the system clearly breaks down on best practice principles for good governance.”

Last week, as residents were evacuated in Abbotsford, Princeton, Merritt and a dozen other communities because of flooding, that report appears prophetic. Each local government and Indigenous community now facing disaster was responsible for its own flood management plan.

Mr. Horgan was once one of the critics calling for action. “I remember talking, as an opposition member, to the local mayors in the [Fraser River] region about the need to invest billions of dollars in diking and other remediation efforts in the event of such an event as we’ve just had,” he said in an interview, just hours after signing off on the latest state-of-emergency order.

The Premier maintains that the scale of this disaster, which disabled major highways and railways, and submerged multiple communities all at the same time, could not have been foreseen. But he also acknowledged that his government has not focused enough on the complex requirements to adapt and mitigate climate change.

In part, that’s because there have been other, immediate challenges that have absorbed the focus of government, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, wildfires and the deadly heat dome last summer. The crises have been relentless.

Mr. Horgan quoted a line attributed to former British prime minister Harold MacMillan about what can knock governments off course: “Events, dear boy, events.” But as the province now faces the long and costly task of rebuilding in the wake of last week’s storm, those events are what matters.

“The task for this government, and the governments that follow it, is to make sure that we take those early warning signs, put them up against the reality that we’ve just experienced,” he said. “That means aggressive climate adaptation strategies and I feel pretty confident that the people will be here with us on that, based on the experiences they’ve had over the past couple of years.”

The province has started the work: It has an as-yet-unused Alert Ready System, which allows government officials to issue public safety alerts through major broadcasters, as well as compatible wireless devices. The Emergency Program Act, which is 25 years old, is being revamped, with a focus on disaster risk reduction. A new B.C. Flood Strategy is drafted and out for consultation.

All of these changes would have been timely this year. But presently, they are set for implementation in 2022.