

The City of Nelson: Super Storm Review

It was a stretch of summertime that started with record breaking temperatures all across the province, then ended in a meteorological blaze of glory that the residents of Nelson won't soon forget.

On Saturday, June 27, high temperature records were broken in 30 BC communities — Nelson's high of 37C shattered the old daily high of 33.9C, set in 1932. Under hot blue skies, the mercury bubbled to near record heights the next few days too. But then, late Monday afternoon, the skies to the west darkened, the wind whipped to a frenzy and wild rains broke lose. The storm of the summer was upon the Heritage City, with literally no warning.

Winds topped 100 km/h. Sheets of rain flooded the city's streets and parks. Trees toppled. Everyone simply took cover, and watched in awe.

Then, within 20 minutes it was over. The skies cleared, revealing shocking damage from Blewett through Nelson to Procter and beyond, northward up Kootenay Lake.

"It was an unprecedented weather event that resulted in damage like we've never seen," says Nelson Mayor Deb Kozak.

As of 7 p.m., 10,149 homes and businesses were without power. Hydro poles and wires were snapped and stretched, buildings were flooded, storm sewers surged. An astonishing 20 millimetres of rain had fallen. Residents were stunned.

"And that's when our City crews — Nelson Hydro, Nelson Fire and Rescue, Public Works, the Nelson Police Department, and dozens of other staff pulled on their boots and went straight to work," says Mayor Kozak.

And work they did, alongside Nelson citizens of all ages and sizes. Seemingly Ground Zero for the storm, Lakeside Park's playgrounds and giant trees were bent and battered.

But within a day and a half, like much of the City, the park's landscape of debris was chopped down, swept up and trucked away.

Thousands of people were kept up to speed on the storm clean up through the City's social media and news media updates. The City of Nelson's Facebook page reached over 10,000 readers.

"And judging by the feedback we received from the public," says Mayor Kozak, "we did remarkably well."

The show indeed went on. Only 36 hours after the winds abated and the deluge stopped, thousands of residents young and old joined City dignitaries and dozens of City of Nelson staff for a beautiful Canada Day celebration in the heart of a park that only a few days before had been in the eye of the storm.

This is a recap of the summer's super-storm, as seen through the eyes of five of the City of Nelson's departments.

Nelson Fire and Rescue: Experience from floods and firestorms

Last week, senior staff and department heads gathered in Council Chambers to review the City's reaction to the unprecedented disaster.

The review was led by Fire Chief Len MacCharles, who managed the Emergency Operations Centre set up for Calgary's massive 2013 flood, and was Incident Commander for the fire storm that destroyed most of Slave Lake, Alberta in 2011.

MacCharles says that there was, miraculously, only one injury reported when a tree crashed

The Calm After The Storm

June 29, 2015 will be remembered as the day Nelson was struck by one of the most severe summer storms the city has ever endured. But it was the days that followed the wind and deluge that might well be more historically noteworthy. The City of Nelson takes a look back at an extraordinary act of civic pride, and a tribute to the power of people.



Are you prepared?

If an emergency happens in Nelson, it may take workers some time to reach you. You should be prepared to take care of yourself and your family for at least 72 hours.

- Stay calm.
- Have a 72-hour Emergency Preparedness Kit ready which includes: At least two litres of water per person per day; food that won't spoil (canned food, energy bars and dried foods, a manual can-opener, a crank or battery-powered flashlight (and extra batteries), crank/battery-powered radio (and extra batteries), first aid kit, extra keys to your car/house, cash in smaller bills, family contact information
- In the case of an evacuation order, have: essential items such as medications, eyeglasses, valuable papers (i.e. insurance), immediate care needs for dependants and, if you choose, keepsakes (photographs, etc.).
- Monitor the City of Nelson's Facebook page and website for information updates, and local media.
- In the case of downed hydro lines remember!: Downed or damaged electrical lines can be deadly. Treat any downed line as if it is live; never assume the power is off. Stay well clear of the area and warn others to also remain clear of the area.
- Call 9-1-1 or the 24-hour Nelson Hydro toll-free line, 1-877-324-9376 (1-877-32-HYDRO).

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through a mobile home's roof.

"But for the first 30 minutes following the storm, the scope of the damage was basically unknown," says MacCharles.

Nelson Fire Rescue (NFR) responded initially with a total of seven career fire fighters and 10 auxiliary members. Three of them had to staff phone lines to field and prioritize over 70 calls in the storm's first hours. (The department responded to 1,350 calls all of last year). Two fire engines, one tender, the department's ladder truck and both utility vehicles were deployed.

"Our fire fighters did a fantastic job prioritizing the calls," says MacCharles, "and making sure residents were safe before moving on to the next locations."

Over the four-day period following the storm, NFR received over 2,000 calls relating to hydro outages, downed trees and other storm related issues.

"This event is a good reminder to folks that we do a lot more than fight fires," says MacCharles. "It's also important to note that wherever we went in our community, there were neighbours helping neighbours. That's how a community best deals with something like this – and Nelsonites really stepped up."

Nelson Hydro: Extensive damage, impressive turn around

It's the lone statistic that best tells the remarkable tale of the City's reaction to the super storm: 10,149 versus 505. As of 7 p.m. Monday evening, there were over 10,000 locations without power in the Nelson Hydro service area. By Tuesday night, there were a few more than 500.

"There was extensive damage and power restoration work required over the few days that followed the storm," says Nelson Hydro's General Manager Alex Love. "But we had an excellent effort by the Nelson Hydro staff and all of our power line contractors."

Over 20 crew members, including two crews from Nelson Hydro, and another five from contractors Arctic Arrow, Martech and a third company from Langley, Alltech, were called in. Many crews worked through the night replacing snapped lines, broken conductors and downed power poles.

There was a huge swath of terrain to survey, from Blewett west of Nelson to Harrop/Procter to Coffee Creek. With the nearby forest and bush bone dry, main lines were patrolled to ensure there were no potential fire hazards once power was restored, and through close contact with media, locals were well-warned to stay away from dangerous downed lines.

As Love and his veteran line boss Doug Pickard tell it, Nelson Hydro staff and contractors worked into the wee hours Tuesday and were able to start re-energizing the downtown core and other main line power feeds around 1:45 am. Most main lines were re-energized by the morning.

"But some of our customers were without power for up to four-and-a-half days," says Love, "and that's a very long time."

"Despite their frustration, we found most customers to be very understanding of the circumstances. Our weary crews very much appreciated their patience."

Love paid thanks to other City departments who greatly assisted in making areas safe around downed lines and quick clean up, and noted that Nelson Hydro's tree trimming

campaign, launched earlier this year and last, proved very effective.

Nelson Police Department: Securing locations, looking out for looters

Nelson Police Department officers were the first on a number of scenes, controlling traffic, barricading dangerous areas and patrolling ink-dark streets to prevent looting.

The department rolled out two dispatchers, a 911 overload call taker, a Victim Services expert and nine officers all together, six full time and three reserves.

In addition to responding to criminal code and public disorder calls — there was a break and entry and a violent domestic disturbance under way when the storm hit — officers attended 26 locations to determine if anyone was injured, and assess the need for ambulance, Nelson Hydro, Fire and Rescue or Public Works. In total, 160 calls were answered.

"Things could have gone smoother and been done better," says Police Chief Wayne Holland, "but not much. Everyone did a great job."

"The employees in all of Nelson's departments generally are self-sufficient people who know what to do when events like this occur."

Public Works: On the job 'til midnight, back on at dawn

"It was like a tornado had gone through town," recalls Public Works Supervisor Karen MacDonald.

The veteran public works pro was on her way to play softball at Lakeside when the storm struck with a vengeance. Like a number of other Public Works staff who were around town, she hightailed it back home, then to the Public Works yard.

The department deployed 16 staff immediately, and deployed two backhoes, two front end loaders, a boom truck, then, as crews do during major snow storms, split town into quadrants and went to work.

Trucks were loaded down with barricades and cones, blown-off manhole covers were replaced, jammed catch basins cleared, and downed trees checked under all over town.

Public Works staff laboured until midnight, one through the night monitoring the sanitary lift station, and many were back on the job at 7 a.m., armed with shovels, chainsaws, rakes and plenty of community pride — more than enough to ultimately save Canada Day celebrations a scant 36 ours later.

Finance/Development Services: Disaster strikes on deadline day

Call it Murphy's Law. The storm hit on deadline day for City property taxes, when City Hall front end staff were wrapping up one of their busiest days of the year.

"The storm came at a time when our staff was already essentially maxed out," says Chief Financial Officer Colin McClure. The City itself received 160 storm calls after hours.

As for the storm's costs and coverage, McClure says some of the damage costs could be absorbed by the Province's Emergency Management Program. That will take some time to calculate. The Development Services department is anticipating a spike in development permits in the months ahead, as folks rebuild destroyed property. McClure says while totals are still being tallied, he's hopeful some of the storm's impact on the City's budget will be eased by the fact the City had a mild winter, with surplus left over.



Chief Len MacCharles



Karen MacDonald