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**Amateur Radio Emergency Service  
and the Fort McMurray Wildfire:  
An Inside Look**





## Amateur Radio Emergency Service and the Fort McMurray Wildfire: An Inside Look

*Submitted by Al Parsons, VE6RFM*

On the morning of May 2, Al Parsons, VE6RFM, the Interim Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) Emergency Coordinator (EC) for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, reported to the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) in the City of Fort McMurray. The time was 7:20 am.

After being briefed of the current situation, calls were made to the local ARES group that put them on alert for possible activation. Two of these ARES members, Matthew Lewis, VE6JI and Brian Willcott, VE6BEW, came by the REOC and offered their assistance.

A crossband repeater was set up in the parking lot to enable radio communication from inside the REOC to repeater VE6TRC on Stony Mountain, and hence, connect the Fort McMurray REOC to the Provincial Operations Centre in Edmonton via the IRLP link. This two-way link could not be established due to an apparent malfunction in the IRLP's modem.

Communications were established on May 2 via telephone between Al Parsons, VE6RFM, Curtis Bidulock, VE6AEW (Provincial Emergency Radio Communications Service [PERCS] Alberta Assistant Coordinator) and Garry Naylor, VE6FGN (ARES EC Cold Lake).

Over the next few hours Edmonton PERCS and the Cold Lake Amateur Radio Society assembled an experienced team of emergency radio communicators and equipment that could provide HF, VHF and UHF capability into Edmonton. The plan was for these teams to be self-sustainable for 5-7 days, placed on standby and ready to roll pending a request for their services from the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA).

Paul Giffin, VA7MPG (ARES EC for Nanaimo, British Columbia) was asked to monitor 3716 kHz for HF radio communications. He assigned monitoring tasks to Mike Hale, VE7DXD (Coordinator of Emergency Communications [CEC]) and Al Ross, VE7CYY. Later, because there was no HF communication coming out of Fort McMurray as there were no



**Fire threatens the Regional Emergency Operations Centre in Fort McMurray on May 4 at 12:30 pm prompting the initial evacuation to a temporary Emergency Operations Centre at Nexen/Long Lake. Photo courtesy of Al Parsons, VE6RFM.**

HF operators left due to the evacuation, Paul Giffin was asked to stand down.

Meanwhile, on the ground in Fort McMurray, the crisis situation rapidly escalated. On May 3, fanned by 40 to 60 kilometre winds and temperatures rising during the morning to 29°C, the fire crossed the Horse River and became a real and immediate threat to the Beacon Hill and Abasand subdivisions that prompted a mandatory evacuation of both subdivisions, soon followed by the entire city. This left the remaining local ARES members, caught in the gridlock of traffic, helping their families evacuate to safety.

On the morning of Wednesday, May 4, the wildfire continued its destructive path and by 1240 hours had prompted the evacuation of the REOC itself. Within 90 minutes all the REOC staff, including the three ARES members, evacuated safely and set up a

temporary Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) at the Nexen/Long Lake oil production facility approximately 20 kilometres to the south of Fort McMurray. During the REOC evacuations, telephone communications were maintained with Cold Lake and Edmonton by Al Parsons. However, the fire was relentless. Driven by the high winds and afternoon record temperatures of 31°C+, it gained width, it gained momentum, and was now threatening Anzac plus the Nexen/Long Lake facility itself.

At 2030 hours, the REOC team, including its ARES members, evacuated their EOC at Nexen and headed for Lac La Biche, 250 kilometres to the south of Fort McMurray on Highway 881. The plan was to regroup and head back north to the REOC in Fort McMurray when it was safe to do so.



A pyroclastic cloud rapidly advances toward Anzac and the Nexen/Long Lake facility prompting evacuation of Anzac, and the temporary Emergency Operations Centre, resulting in our retreat down Highway 881 to Lac La Biche some 250 kilometres south. This photo was taken on May 4 at 9:32 pm by Al Parsons, VE6RFM.

On the morning of May 5, the fire risk to the REOC in Fort McMurray had passed, and the REOC staff headed back to Fort McMurray on Highway 881 in two escorted convoys.

The first group made it through without incident. The second smaller group was turned back as the wildfire had forced the closure of Highway 63 at the 881 intersection.

At no time during this event did any radio or telephone communication system in the area totally fail. This was due to the redundancy of its communications infrastructure provided by the City's main communications' carrier, Telus.

The first responders used the provincial Alberta First Responders Radio Communication System (AFRRCS). As a result of the communication infrastructure, this major disaster did not become a communication event for ARES involvement. At 2313 hours on May 6, the Fort McMurray ARES group was asked to stand down by AEMA.



A combined ground and air attack successfully protects the REOC from the rapidly advancing wildfire.

Even though ARES did not get activated, the firsthand experience as well as observation of the well trained professionals handling this very dangerous and rapidly escalating event was priceless. Relationships were developed, ARES members met the leaders, and ARES members let them know why ARES was there and how ARES could help. Then ARES got out of their way.

Al Parsons said:

*"We had the privilege of being in communication with our mutual-aid partners in Cold Lake and Edmonton, who gave us their counsel, their technical expertise, a plan to secure a communications link into Edmonton, and people and equipment to execute that plan, should we have been activated. We were not alone."*

To that end, Al Parsons would like to say a sincere thank you to the following people:

- Brian Willcott, VE6BEW, for helping out at the REOC
- Garry Naylor, VE6FGN, for his counsel and inspiration
- Cold Lake Amateur Radio Society for being there for us with their EmComm Capability
- Curtis Bidoluck, VE6AEW, for linking plan, technical support and liaison with AEMA
- Keehan Dowd, VA6KD, for volunteering to tow a mobile communications unit to Fort McMurray
- Dave Devine, VE6DEV, who, on behalf of the Northern Alberta Radio Club, offered us the use of an HF mobile rig, AT and Power Supply
- Paul Giffin, VA7MPG, Mike Hale, VE7DX and Al Ross, VE7CYY, for standing by
- And last, but by no means least, his good friend Matthew Lewis, VE6JI, for assisting inside the REOC and returning with the REOC staff after ARES was asked to stand down. He continued to assist with logistics and as Al Parson's direct contact with ground zero until he was released by the REOC Logistics Team on Sunday, May 29 – after 28 consecutive days on site.

And to Ernest Clintberg, RAC Regional Director for AB/NWT/NU for all your patience and help in editing this article. Without your subtle inference that "something needs to be written" (my interpretation), this article may not have been written at all.

*Al Parsons, VE6RFM is a 40-year resident of Fort McMurray. He has been an Amateur for 29 years and associated with ARES for the past five years. His interests include DXing, contesting and experimentation and he is now experimenting with 60 metres as viable EmComm link between remote locations and centres.*

