



District of Chetwynd

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January 12, 2024

Honourable Bruce Ralston,
M.L.A., Minister of Forests
Re: Chetwynd NIFAC Base Relocation

Dear Minister,

This letter is to express our serious concerns and opposition to the arbitrary decision to remove the Northern Initial Fire Attack Crew (NIFAC) based at Chetwynd and relocate it to Dawson Creek. This decision was made without any consultation with local stakeholders and increases the potential risk to area residents in this time of drought and extreme wildfire danger. Some of the communities imperilled by this move include Chetwynd, West Moberly First Nations, Saulteau First Nations, Hudson's Hope, Tumbler Ridge, rural communities like Jackfish Lake, East Pine, and Hasler Flats, as well as the main highway, rail, and utilities corridor through the Pine Pass. ***The loss of this vital service will result in an additional minimum of one hour of road travel for initial attack crews to respond to wildfires in our area and directly impacts thousands of people and many millions of dollars of infrastructure.***

The BC Wildfire Service within the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource website states: "Initial attack crews are often the first to respond to a wildfire. Due to the quick and effective response of this 3 to 4 person crew, approximately 94% of all new wildfires in B.C. are suppressed."

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/wildfire-response/wildfire-personnel-and-response-tools/wildfire-crews/initial-attack-crews#:~:text=Initial%20attack%20crews%20are%20often,quickly%20using%20vehicles%20and%20aircraft.>

Our region sees many wildfires each year, and some of these have directly threatened our homes, lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure. The most rapid response possible is necessary to suppress these fires efficiently and we highly value the extraordinary efforts of our NIFAC team to help us with these suppression efforts.

Our data on local wildfires for the last ten years is:

2013-2023

Within 5km of Chetwynd - 14

Within 10km of Chetwynd - 8 (22 total)

Within 25km of Chetwynd - 65 (87 total, and 13 of these were in the 2023 fire season)

All available climate projections indicate that the threat to our communities posed by wildfire will continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

We urge you in the strongest possible terms to revisit this decision and help keep our NIFAC base located in Chetwynd to continue to effectively serve our region.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the District of Chetwynd,

[Redacted Signature]

Allen Courtoreille
Mayor
District of Chetwynd

[Redacted Signature]

Steve McLain
Chief Administrative Officer
District of Chetwynd

Vision Statement

Chetwynd exists in order that area residents have sustainable opportunities for
Security, Health, Safety and Prosperity
in surroundings that display the best of our natural environment.



Reference: 277626

March 22, 2024

VIA EMAIL: SMcLain@gochetwynd.com

Allen Courtoreille, Mayor
District of Chetwynd
PO Box 357
Chetwynd, British Columbia
V0C 1J0

Dear Mayor Courtoreille and Council:

Thank you for your letter of January 12, 2024, regarding the relocation of the Chetwynd Northern Initial Fire Attack Crew (NIFAC) Base.

I understand your concern regarding the closure of the base. The portion of the Chetwynd facility with staff lodging closed on December 15, 2023. This closure is due to the current absence of full-time staff, as well as ageing infrastructure of the base itself.

It is the intention of the Province of British Columbia to replace the current Chetwynd facility with a forward attack Facility. This will enable BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) to position initial attack resources in the Chetwynd area during times of increased wildfire hazard.

However, the closure of the existing facility will not result in a reduction of service. The Dawson Creek Fire Zone, within which Chetwynd is located, assigns staff and resources based on hazard and fire activity levels, and though personnel will not be stationed in Chetwynd full-time, they will be available when their capabilities are needed. When crews are not located at the Chetwynd forward attack base, travel by helicopter would be 20-30 minutes from the crew's assembly point in the Dawson Creek Fire Zone.

If you require further information on the planned facility and its capabilities, please contact Shane Greenlees, Acting Fire Centre Manager, BC Wildfire Service at shane.greenlees@gov.bc.ca.

Again, thank you for writing and sharing your concerns.

Sincerely,

Bruce Ralston
Minister

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Allen Courtoreille, Mayor

pc: Shane Greenlees, Acting Fire Centre Manager, BC Wildfire Service



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April 5, 2024

VIA EMAIL: FOR.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Honourable Bruce Ralston,
M.L.A., Minister of Forests

Re: Chetwynd NIFAC Base Relocation

Dear Minister,

Thank you for responding to our January 12, 2024 letter regarding the closure of the Chetwynd Northern Initial Fire Attack Crew (NIFAC) base. Please note that your letter does not alleviate our concerns and we will continue to protest this arbitrary decision that significantly increases the risk to our region. We have already seen three out-of-control fires in the immediate area this spring as well as several grass fires, and as you are aware, we are facing an exceedingly grim forecasted fire season. A rapid response is critical in fire suppression and minimizes risk to residents.

Comments on specific points in the letter:

- ***“This closure is due to the current absence of full-time staff, as well as ageing infrastructure of the base itself.”*** We know our local base staff as they are a welcome part of our community. The year-round crew love this area, asked to be based here, and just prior to the closure had no intention of leaving. During the March 27 Seasonal Update for Mayors and Chairs you referred to increasing permanent wildfire staff by 50% and doubling the number of new recruits. Staffing would not seem to be an issue. The base infrastructure is in deplorable condition due to age, lack of life cycle planning, and a presumed low maintenance budget. Given the extended life of the facility and its constant use, replacement is a reasonable expectation. While this is admittedly an additional expense, it would be considerably less expensive than replacing infrastructure destroyed by fire due to delayed response times.
- ***“However, the closure of the existing facility will not result in a reduction of service. When crews are not located at the Chetwynd forward attack base, travel by helicopter would be 20-30 minutes from the crew’s assembly point in the Dawson Creek Fire Zone.”*** The Dawson Creek mustering point is roughly an additional 10 to 15 minute drive to the airport, where the helicopters are. This means that fires past Chetwynd, in the Pine Pass for example, can expect at least a one-hour delay for “rapid” response.

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Most people whose home was on fire would offer that a one-hour delay in first response would seem like a very long time. Regardless, any new delay in response times is in fact a “reduction in service”. We understand that we have a lower population density in the North. We also strongly believe that as taxpayers and constituents our cultural structures, homes, lives, property, and livelihoods are every bit as important as those of our Southern neighbors.


- ***It is the intention of the Province of British Columbia to replace the current Chetwynd facility with a forward attack Facility.*** The BC Wildfire Service does not provide a definition for a “forward attack facility” on their website and a definition along with service level expectations would be helpful. At this time nothing has been “replaced”; our NIFAC base has been removed.

Also, during the March 27 Seasonal Update for Mayors and Chairs you stated that “this past fall, winter, and now spring, BC Wildfire has focussed on improving their community partnerships.” Many of us who live in the Northeast region of our Province do not feel that this significant reduction in service has in fact improved our mutual relationship. Likewise, we have not experienced what you refer to as the “expansion of the BC Wildfire Service” nor do we feel that the BC Wildfire Service considers us to be in any way a priority. We have included two aerial pictures for reference. Please note while Dawson Creek is surrounded primarily by farmland, Chetwynd has forest to our doors. Having a NIFAC base centralized in a region where it will be needed most, seems to be the most logical course of action.

We urge you once again in the strongest possible terms to revisit this decision and help keep our NIFAC base located in Chetwynd to continue to effectively serve our region.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the District of Chetwynd,


Allen Courtoreille
Mayor
District of Chetwynd


Steve McLain
Chief Administrative Officer
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