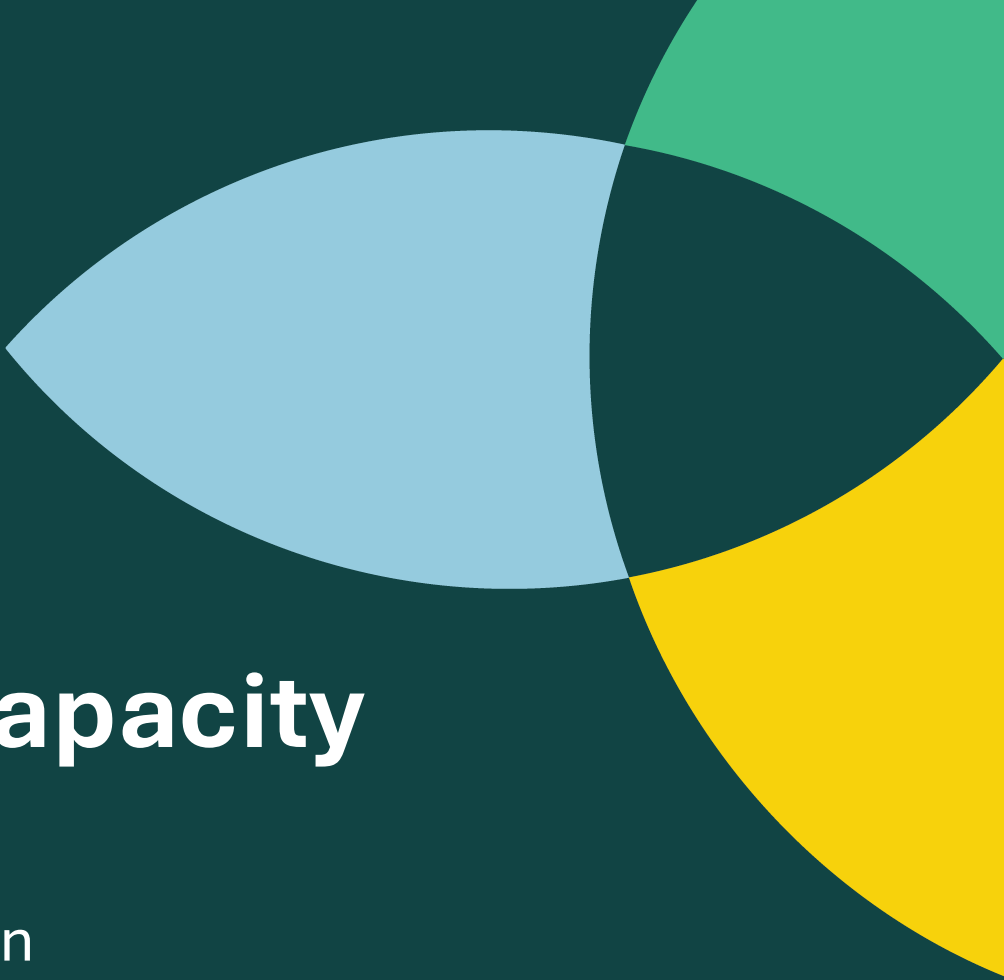




Strengthening Municipal Capacity for Emergency Readiness

2026 AMO Annual Conference Concurrent Session

Reasonable Preparedness: Building Municipal Capacity Under Constraints



Daniel Henstra
University of Waterloo
Prepared for AMO Conference
August 2026



Climate Risk
Research Group



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Preparedness

- not about eliminating all risk
- **objective**: credible, risk-based decisions

Constraints

- rising climate risks
- staffing shortages
- constrained resources
- higher public expectations



Municipal readiness depends on:

- council and senior management **attention**
- staff time and professional **expertise**
- usable **hazard** and **vulnerability** information
- cross-department **coordination**
- **relationships** with neighbours, agencies, and the Province
- ability to **learn** from exercises, near misses, and events



A reasonably prepared municipality:

- understands its **most consequential risks**
- allocates effort in **proportion** to those risks
- knows where **internal capacity** ends
- has arrangements for **mutual aid** and provincial support
- communicates honestly about **residual risk**



Flood readiness connects:

- emergency management and warning
- stormwater and drainage systems
- infrastructure renewal and maintenance
- land use planning and development approvals
- asset management and capital planning
- public communication and recovery planning



Can your municipality answer these questions?

- which emergencies would have the **greatest consequences**?
- which people, assets, and services are **hardest to recover**?
- is **readiness integrated** across departments?
- do infrastructure and land use decisions **reduce or increase** future risk?
- what **assistance** would we need, and how would we get it?
- what **Provincial support** is needed to make readiness achievable?





WRCC | CRFFC

Strengthening Municipal Capacity Through Regional Collaboration: Wildfire & Community Resilience

Hillary Winstanley

Regional Coordinator – Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada, Boreal East

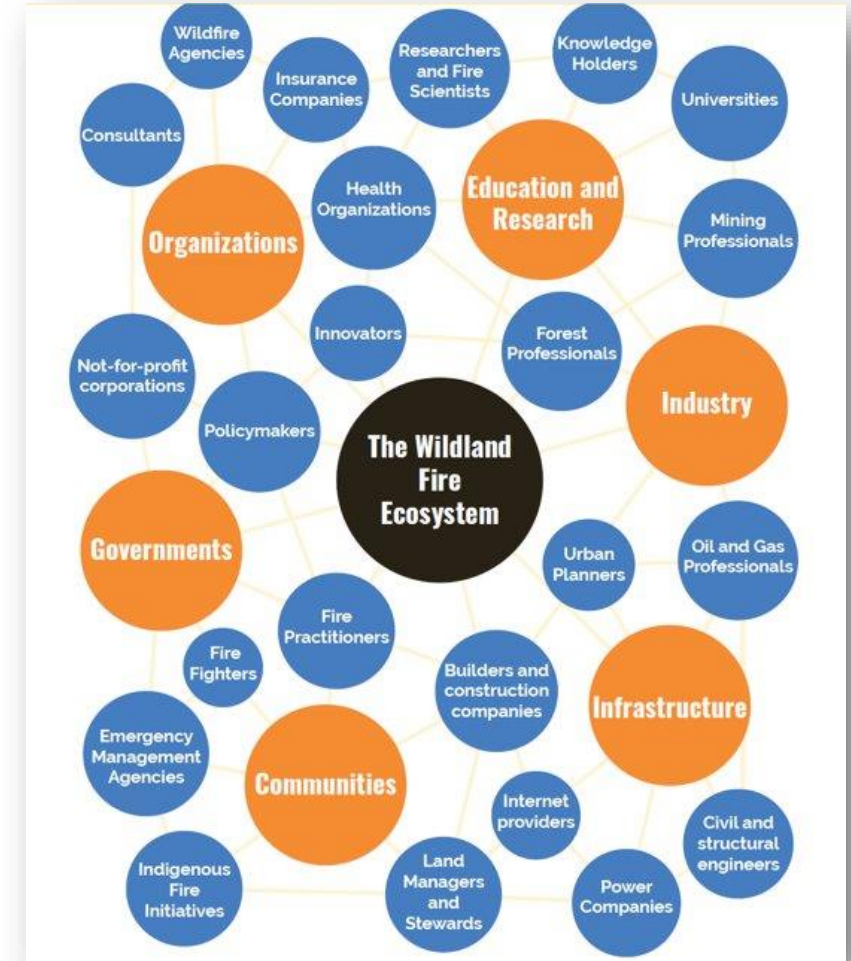
August 2026

Outline

- Overview of the Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada (WRCC)
- What is Wildfire Resilience & Reasonable Preparedness?
- Emergency preparedness gaps, challenges and opportunities
- Wildfire supports for municipalities
- Recommendations & next steps

What is the WRCC?

- The Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada (WRCC) is a purpose built, not-for-profit organization that officially launched in fall 2025
- Goal of establishing a wildland fire centre of excellence designed to:
 - Reduce “silo” effect across wildfire and wildfire-adjacent agencies,
 - Enhance connectivity of stakeholders, and,
 - Share knowledge



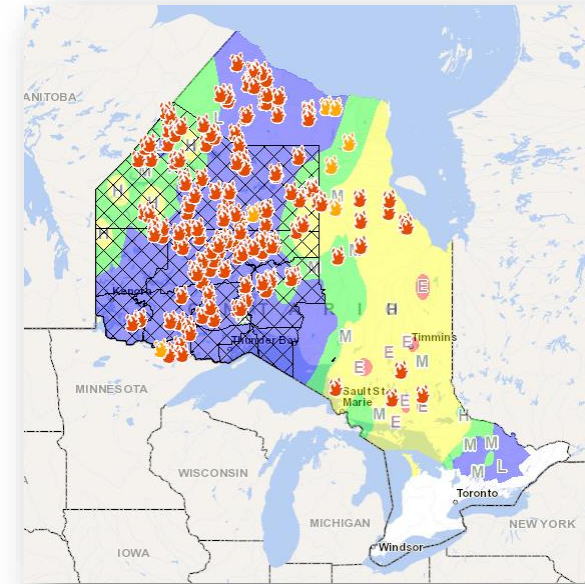
What is Wildfire Resilience?

- Wildfire resilience is the capacity of ecosystems, communities, and infrastructure to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from wildfire while maintaining essential functions.
- In wildfire management, resilience goes beyond resisting fire. It includes:
 - Preparation before fire,
 - Effective response during fire, and,
 - Recovery and adaptation after fire.
- A resilient system does not necessarily avoid fire, but continues to function and improves its ability to cope with future wildfires.



2026 Wildfire Season in Ontario*

- In 2026, 674 wildfires have been reported
 - 2025 to date: 407
 - 10- year average: 457
- More than 7,250 km squared of forest has burned, making 2026 Ontario's worst wildfire season on record
- The largest fire, THU36, burned ~318,000 hectares, making it one of the largest wildfires ever recorded in Ontario
- Most of the burned area within roughly 10 days in July
- More than a dozen communities were evacuated as a result of wildfire activity in Northern Ontario



Toronto

Ontario is in the middle of its worst wildfire season, early estimates suggest

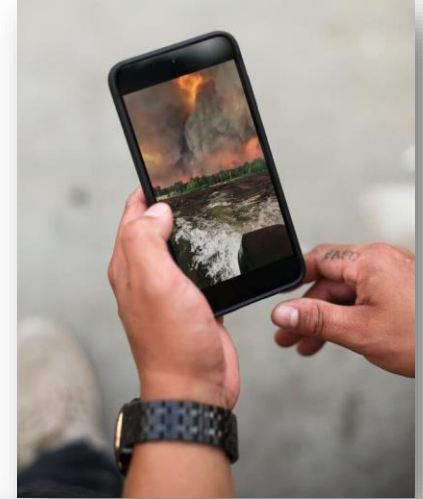
Province's numbers suggest fires have already burned more than 7,250 square kilometres, surpassing 2021 record

[Jordan Omstead](#) · The Canadian Press · Posted: Jul 21, 2026 7:43 AM EDT | Last Updated: July 21

**Statistics accurate as of August 4, 2026*

The “New” Wildfire Reality Facing Municipalities

- More frequent and complex wildfire management challenges:
 - Larger fires with more extreme fire behaviour
 - Communities expanding into forested areas, increasing risk in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI)
 - Increased smoke impacts
 - Compounding emergencies/natural hazards
- Pinch points for municipalities:
 - Limited resources, capacity
 - “Wearing many hats”
 - Staffing shortages and volunteer fatigue
 - Increasing public expectations for immediate response
- Frequent community evacuations & increased need for host communities
- Municipal emergency management is becoming a continuous operational responsibility



What Does “Reasonable Preparedness” Mean?



- Moving beyond perfection
- Preparedness should be :
 - Achievable,
 - Scalable,
 - Sustainable, and,
 - Proportional to a community's risks and resources.

Lessons From Recent Wildfire Emergencies

What Works	Existing Challenges
• Establishing and fostering existing relationships with partners before wildfires occurred • Practicing and supporting multi-agency coordination (municipal/provincial/regional/federal scales) • Establishing models for regional resource sharing, mutual aid agreements, etc. • Building community organizational capacity to support vulnerable populations • Sharing and promoting wildfire prevention and mitigation resources in communities • Clear, consistent communication across many mediums	• Staffing limitations, volunteer considerations, burnout, and knowledge loss through retirements • Managing (dis)information management/social media • Limited planning capacity, including for recovery planning • Multi-agency jurisdiction and coordination • Mental health impacts on responders



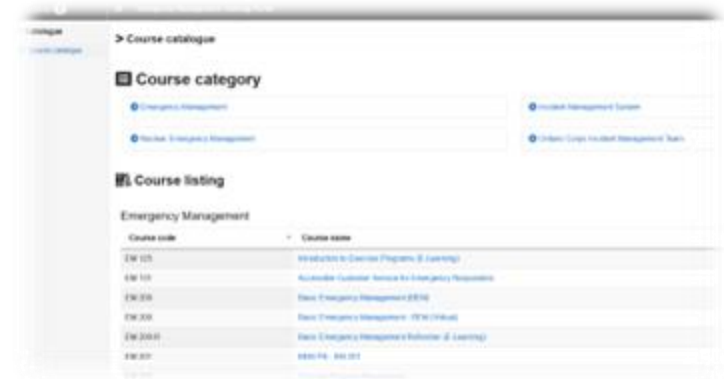
How WRCC Supports Municipal Readiness in Wildfire Resilience

- Foster connections & build whole of society networks to support communities:
 - Bridge municipal leaders, emergency managers, Indigenous communities, and NGOs and community organizations together
- Coordinate opportunities for knowledge sharing:
 - Knowledge sharing
 - Resource awareness
 - Regional planning conversations
- Build Capacity:
 - Support training opportunities, peer-to-peer learning
 - Support the development of best practices



Existing Supports for Municipalities

- Emergency Management Ontario (EMO) training and guidance
 - IMS training & community preparedness frameworks
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) funding for climate adaptation projects
- FCM Wildfire resilience toolkit for small municipalities
 - Provides step-by-step guidance, templates, and examples to help municipalities reduce wildfire risks, protect infrastructure and ecosystems, and build community resilience using practical, nature-based and strategic solutions.



Final Thoughts

- Wildfire response is one piece of the puzzle; prevention, mitigation, preparedness are critical
- Collaboration multiplies capacity,
- Whole of society action and relationships are the foundation of resilience, and;
- Regional coordination strengthens municipal readiness.

The question is not whether wildfire emergencies will happen. The question is whether we have built the relationships, partnerships, and capacity needed to respond together.





WRCC | CRFFC

Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada
Consortium pour la Résilience aux Feux de Forêt du Canada

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Visit wrcc-crffc.com Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

Supporting the community in times of crisis.

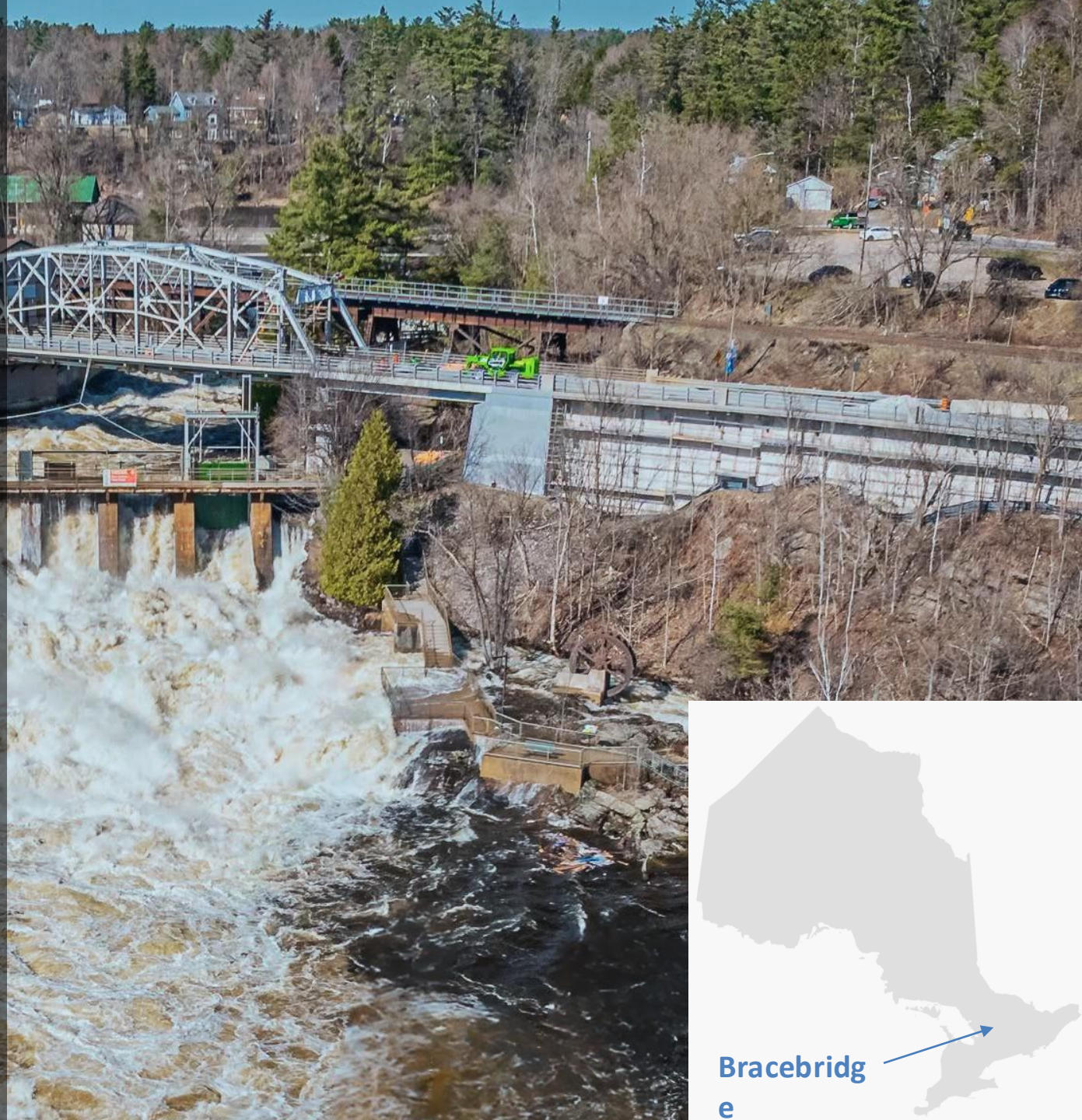
Presented by: Mayor Rick Maloney, Town of Bracebridge
Stephen Rettie, Chief Administrative Officer, Town of Bracebridge



BRACEBRIDGE

About Bracebridge

- Population – 17,305 (2021 Census)
- Population doubles in the summer
- Strong construction, hospitality and professional services sectors
- Key river system of the Muskoka watershed
- Known as Santa's Summer Home



Events of Major Significance

2013

- Flood Emergency Declaration April 19, 2013 - duration 10 days
- Impacts included significant flooding, hydro cuts, and road closures
- Action Items:
 - Short and long-term road infrastructure repairs, including bridge and roads
 - Debris clean-up on roads and within parks
 - ODRAP funding for private and public impact
 - MNR Request to review flood event prevention and mitigation





Events of Major Significance

2016

- No emergency declaration was made
- Water volumes matched historic high thresholds, but quickly receded
- Action Items:
 - Enhance communications
 - Faster engagement of 211
 - Proactive production and availability of sandbags
 - Further investment for infrastructure failure points

Events of Major Significance

2019

- Devastating flooding event - State of Emergency Declaration April 23, 2019 - duration 20 days
- New water level records throughout watershed that were sustained for weeks
- Required extensive external support, including Canadian Armed Forces, Emergency Management Ontario and other external agencies
- Extreme community generosity and support
- Takeaways:
 - Stronger education and communications initiatives
 - Need for recovery plan





Spring Freshet and Major Flooding

- Hazard identification and risk assessment
- Spring and major flooding, is a seasonal weather event known as a freshet, driven by:
 - Rapid snowmelt
 - Heavy rainfalls
 - Interconnected waterways
- For Bracebridge, surges typically peak between April and May
- Inundates low-lying areas, closing local roads, and impacting properties



Ice Storm

- An ice storm is a winter weather event caused by freezing rain that coats surfaces with 6.4 mm (0.25 inches) or more of ice, creating hazardous conditions
- The supercooled rain freezes instantly on contact with surfaces at or below 0°C, forming a layer of ice
- Ice storms can have widespread impacts on public safety, transportation, utilities, and infrastructure. Preparedness and timely response are essential to reducing community impacts



Ice Storm Event

2025

- Ice storm hit March 28th and 29th
- March 30th District of Muskoka declares State of Emergency lasting 15 days
- 15,000 residents in Bracebridge were without power
- March 31st facilities open for respite
- Community facing:
 - Power outages
 - Fuel shortages
 - Cellular communication disruptions and outages

Invest and Prepare

In response to the flood events of 2013, 2016, and 2019, as well as the 2025 ice storm, the Town focused on strengthening preparedness and community resilience through four key activities:

- Infrastructure Improvements
- Resources availability
- Communication Enhancements
- Community Education

Building a more resilient community through investment, collaboration, and proactive preparedness



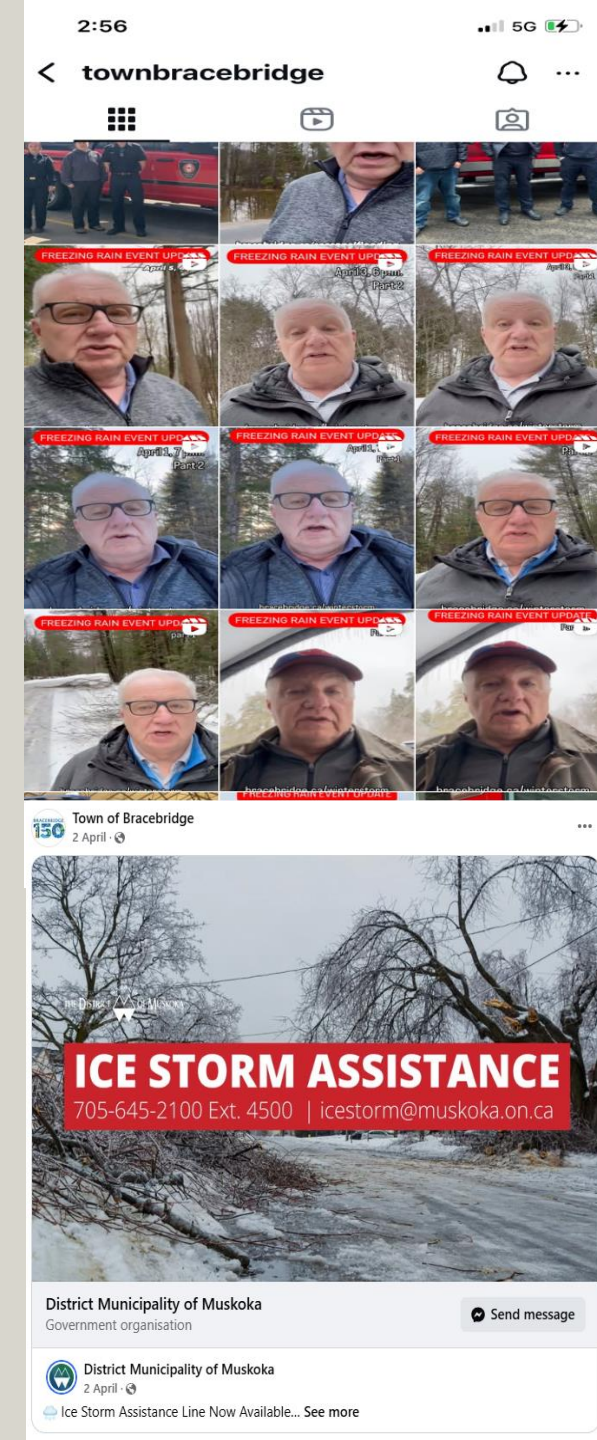
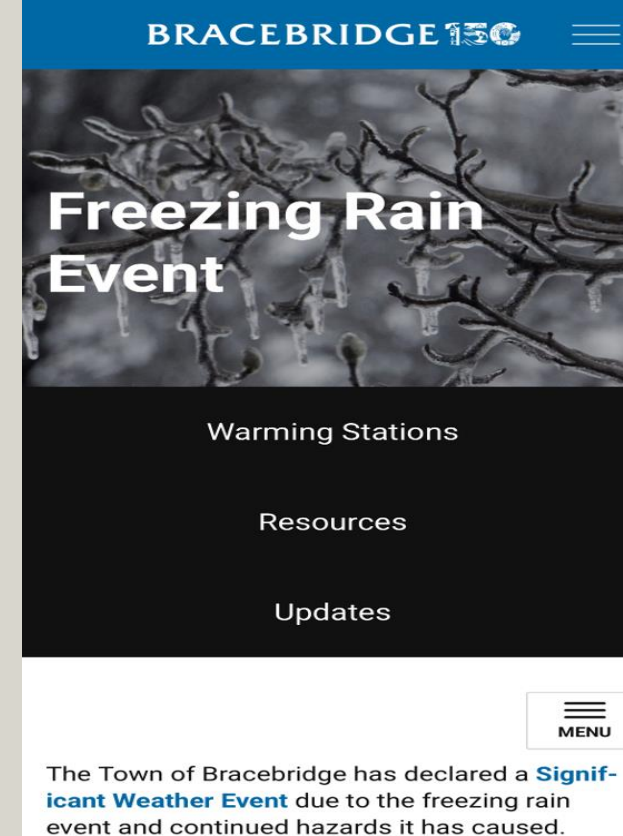
Communicate and Support

Communications Preparedness

- Developed dedicated emergency information pages
- Pre-populated website content and created preparedness education materials for residents
- Built social media following through previous events

Strengthened Partnerships

- Collaborated with municipal and agency partners to support coordinated messaging and response activities
- Leveraged partner networks to expand the reach and consistency of public communications across the community



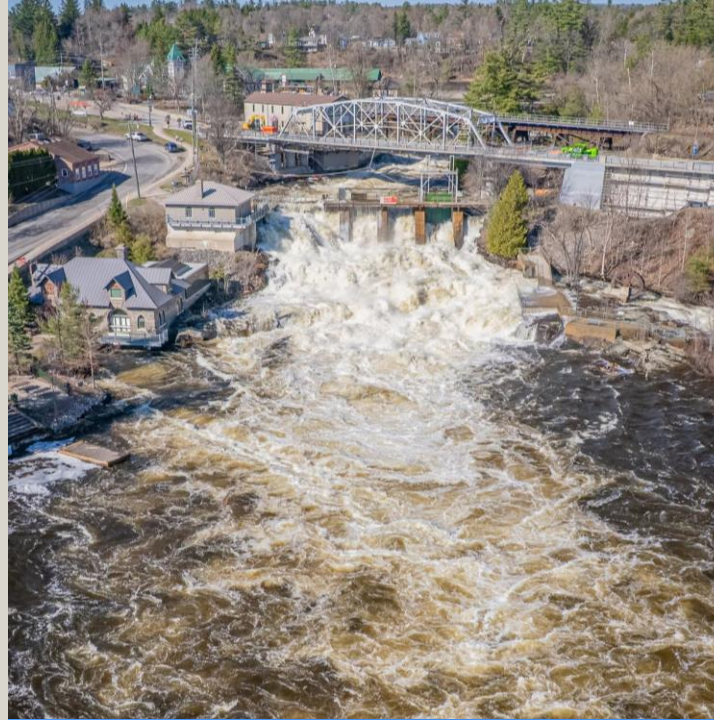
Put to the Test

Public Preparedness

- Proactive sandbag production and distribution
- Ongoing emergency preparedness messaging – “protect your property”
- Residents better equipped to be prepared and remain safely in place

Enhanced Communications

- Clear, timely public information throughout the event
- Fewer requests related to sandbags, flood information, and evacuations
- Significant reduction in public inquiries:
2019: 120 inquiries and support requests
2026: 8 inquiries and support requests



Put to the Test

Infrastructure Performance

- Granite retaining wall protected the shoreline and trail infrastructure
- Elevated roadways remained open and passable
- Portable flood barriers protected critical road infrastructure

Investments in infrastructure, preparedness, and communications improved community resilience and reduced the overall impacts of the 2026 flood event

The reduction in reactive activities allowed for more deliberate and target response, including wellness checks





What More Can Be Done?

- Regular review of risk assessments (HIRA)
- Establish inventory of resources addressing HIRA
- People are resilient – help them be prepared
- Build back better!