

Emergency Preparedness on Cortes Island

Presentation by Sarah Rosen, Strathcona Regional District

Transcript edited for clarity and length. Filler words and repetitions removed. This edited version was prepared with the assistance of Claude, Anthropic's LLM — but has been proofread and copy-edited by a human.

About this transcript

Sarah Rosen works for the Strathcona Regional District's emergency services group, travelling to communities across the region to deliver emergency preparedness workshops. This presentation was given on Cortes Island on May 3, 2026. The session opened with a Q&A discussion — including a substantial conversation about wildfire risk — before Sarah launched into her formal presentation, which begins here. A separate transcript will cover the wildfire discussion.

Opening: The Three Questions

[~00:27:00]

Before launching into the slides, Sarah explained the framework that underpins her whole approach:

In the first week of my job, I was given an amazing insight by one of my former coworkers, which forms the basis of everything I'm going to share today: *Should I stay? Should I go? How do I know?*

Basically there are only two types of disaster and emergency in terms of how you actually want to prepare for them — situations where you need to stay put or shelter in place, and situations where you need to evacuate, typically fast. So instead of becoming an expert in every kind of disaster, if you're looking for the first steps you can take right away, prepare for those two scenarios. And then the third question — *how do I know* — is about receiving official emergency information to make that decision.

Common Misconceptions

[~00:33:00]

I want to address two misconceptions that I hear a lot.

The first is: 'There are many emergencies I just can't prepare for.' My sense is that some people feel so overwhelmed by the scope of all the disasters that can happen

that they choose — consciously or subconsciously — to just not open their minds to the preparedness process, and I really understand that. If you have this sense of a wall of fire bearing down on your home, or a catastrophic earthquake, and that's what's in your mind when you think of preparedness, it's pretty easy to feel powerless. But with those three questions — *should I stay, should I go, how do I know* — I'm going to walk you through how you could prepare for everything. It doesn't mean you won't experience it, it doesn't mean it won't be hard, but there are steps you can take to prepare for every category of disaster you might encounter.

The second misconception is that preparing *takes too much time*. I really believe if you carve out half a day on the weekend, you can fill out your home emergency plan. Maybe one other dedicated day of running around your house gathering supplies for a kit, and you can really have all of that ready to go. Then just review and restock every six months. It does take time and effort, but I know everybody's capable of it — people move much bigger mountains every day.

Local Hazards

[~00:35:00 – 00:43:00]

Power outages

Has anybody ever lived through a power outage?

[Room responds with laughter — 'That's not a disaster, that's an endurance.' / 'That is not a disaster. It's an opportunity.']

The reason I love bringing that up is because technically a power outage is classified as a disaster, but it's one that most of you are so well prepared for that it doesn't register as one. You have wood heat, you have ways to cook, you have community. That's an example of where the level of preparedness you already have allows you to get through something that would be devastating in a high-rise in Campbell River — no elevator, no sewage, no water, no heat, no cooking, no open grocery stores.

It doesn't register as a disaster because of the level of preparedness you have. That's the goal for everything else.

Tsunami

Tsunami is not a real risk in these inland waters, north of Juan de Fuca. The run-up potential here is less than two metres — so what you'd see is something like an unusually high tide, surging back and forth. The real advice is: after a strong local earthquake, don't go on the water. Tides and currents are going to be weird in ways that can't be modelled precisely. The same applies if there's an earthquake in

Alaska — there could be tidal and current weirdness here too. No big wave like on the West Coast, but don't get on the water until there's an all-clear.

Earthquake

Not common on Cortes, but possible. The protocol is drop, cover, and hold on for sixty seconds. If shaking continues, count to sixty again. Then you do need to leave the building — even if you can't tell from inside, the building may have shifted off its foundation. Wait for someone trained in rapid damage assessment to clear it.

The Campbell River Dam — something most people don't know

This one surprises a lot of people. They are seismically upgrading the dam in Campbell River right now, but until that's completed — around 2028 or 2030 — if there's an earthquake strong enough to knock you off your feet in downtown Campbell River, the dam will break and water will be released. We're talking roughly a metre and a half of water at Shoppers Row about an hour and a half after the earthquake. The City of Campbell River has actually mapped the floodplain and the arrival times for different areas.

So for those of you who go to Campbell River for shopping or appointments: if you feel a strong earthquake, count to sixty, then head uphill immediately. You don't need to go very high — just above the SRD offices on the hill is above the high water line. Help others if you can. The fire department will be going around to assist people.

[Several people in the room said they had never heard this before.]

Wildfire

We've had a long conversation about wildfire risk already. The short version for this slide: it's on the list, it's a real concern, and it's covered in more depth elsewhere.

Extreme heat

Not something that registers as a disaster for most people here yet, but it's becoming more of an issue — finding places and ways to stay cool in summer is an increasing challenge.

Air quality

Specifically fire smoke during fire season. Even if you're not directly affected by a fire, having either the ability to go somewhere with filtered air, or a good dust mask, is something to think about more and more.

Chemical spill

Could be anything from an oil spill in the ocean to a chlorine leak at a pool — that actually just happened at the Crystal Pool in Victoria. You might get a notification

about something like that through *Alertable*, a service which we will talk about later.

Building Your Emergency Plan

[~00:43:00 – 01:04:00]

The whole point of a plan is to be your prefrontal cortex — the reasoning part of your brain — on the day when you can't access that reasoning clearly.

There's a story about a woman evacuating during the Fort McMurray fires. She had maybe fifteen minutes to leave her house, ran around grabbing things, and later realized she'd grabbed a snorkel and mask. When your brain is in panic mode, you just grab whatever. A plan you've written in advance does that cognitive work for you in advance, so that on your most scattered day, you've already made the decisions you need.

You can use the physical workbook on the table — the Strathcona Regional District supplies these for free, so take as many as you want to give to family and friends. Or there's an online form through Prepared BC — search 'Prepared BC emergency plan' and it'll come up. You can fill it out online and print a copy for your kit.

What a good plan includes

Two contacts: One person nearby (on Cortes or close), and one person far away who won't be affected by the same emergency — ideally outside BC. The idea: even if local communications are down, you may be able to text out-of-province. Text rather than call — calling jams up lines. Text your aunt in Ontario that you're okay; she relays to your brother in Victoria. Everyone finds out who's safe without overloading local infrastructure.

Health information: BC Services Card number, family doctor contact, list of medications and medical equipment. The BC Services Card app also allows the province to send you direct deposits if you're displaced from your home — they'll cover living expenses for up to 72 hours. You also need your BC Services Card to get any new ID. Have a physical copy; don't assume you'll have phone or internet access.

Home and utility information: Where are your emergency exits? What's your route out of your neighborhood if the main road is blocked? Contact info for your utility companies, insurer, and landlord. Know how to turn off your main breaker, your water, and your gas — especially important if you're evacuating for wildfire and the BC Wildfire Service instructs you to.

Meeting places: One close to home for getting out of your house quickly (the big rock at the end of the driveway, the fire hydrant). One outside your neighborhood

in case the whole area is unsafe — a friend's place in Whaletown, or even somewhere on Quadra.

Children: Know the school's emergency policy. Designate someone to pick up your children or grandchildren — and make sure the kids know that person and are comfortable going with them.

Pets and animals: Pet-friendly shelters or hotels where you could go if you need to leave. A designated person with a house key who could come get your animals if you're not there. How to pack a grab-and-go bag for pets. (A separate workshop covers this in more depth.)

Accessibility and additional needs: Manual backup for electric wheelchairs. Extra batteries for hearing aids. Pen and paper if verbal communication is difficult. And comfort items — a favourite book, a child's toy, anything that helps bring your nervous system down from total freak-out. It can't be the worst day of your life if you've got something in there that you love.

On the value of community connection

Research increasingly shows that communities that are connected to each other before a disaster do much better afterward. It seems obvious to anyone who's felt connected to a community — a lot of good comes from that. So knowing your neighbors, knowing who might need help, being willing to both offer and ask for help — that's preparedness too.

If you're concerned about a neighbor who might have difficulty evacuating, proactively ask them: what's your plan if there's an evacuation? Seed it into their head. We all know one or two people on our street who would need help. Talking to them does more good than any driveway colour-coding system.

Gathering Supplies: The Grab-and-Stay Kit

[~01:04:00 – 01:18:00]

Think of this as camping at home. Either you're camping in your house, or you're camping in your yard. Whatever camping gear you already have, you're probably more prepared for a shelter-in-place emergency than you think — camping is basically sheltering in place for fun.

You want a minimum of seven days of supplies. Three days is the absolute minimum, but seven is the real target — that's how long it would take for the army and interior provinces to arrive and start establishing supply bases after a major earthquake.

Keep it in an accessible location — the coat closet by the front door, not the attic. Everyone in the household should be able to move it.

What goes in it

Water: Four litres per person per day — two for drinking, two for cooking and basic hygiene. Don't rely only on a filter or purifier; if water has flowed over roads it may contain tire toxins and other contaminants that filtration alone won't address. Have stored water. (Canned water with a 50-year shelf life is a real thing, if plastic-free storage is a priority.)

Food: Non-perishable — freeze-dried, cured, canned, preserved. Don't forget a manual can opener.

First aid kit with any personal medications.

Power: Phone charger, power bank, or inverter. A solar charger works well for extended outages. Your car radio works as long as you have gas — a useful backup if you're in a garage, just don't run the car in an enclosed space for extended periods due to carbon monoxide.

Battery-powered or hand-crank radio. Still available, still important. The Iberian Peninsula power outage a couple of years ago — all of Spain, Portugal, and half of France went dark due to a solar energy grid overload — was a reminder of how many things stop working when the power is out: cards, ATMs, gas pumps, trains, electric car garages. A battery radio was one of the few things still working.

Documents: Physical printed copies of your emergency plan, will, BC Services Card, bank information, birth certificate. Don't assume you can access these online in a disaster.

Cash in small bills. Cards may not work. A \$100 bill may not be breakable if cash registers can't open.

Dust mask / respirator: N95 at minimum. Mike Brown (Cortes fire department) recommends a half-face respirator with HEPA filters for serious wildfire smoke protection — available at tool supply places, Home Depot, or Brogan Fire Supply in Campbell River. Note: HEPA filters capture particles (smoke) but not vapours from burning building contents — for that you need activated charcoal filters in addition. But a well-fitted half-face with HEPA is significantly better than an N95.

Garbage bags and moist towelettes — your DIY shower, and for managing waste when normal disposal isn't possible.

Seasonal clothing, emergency blanket, extra batteries, personal toiletries.

Comfort items. A favourite book, a candy bar, a child's or pet's toy. Make it a kit you'd be somewhat glad to open, not just bare-bones survival gear. Nervous system support counts.

Help / Okay sign. The SRD provides double-sided signs — 'Help' on one side, 'Okay' on the other. Keep in car or near exit. If leaving your home during an evacuation, 'Okay / Gone' in the window helps responders know you're out.

A note on organisation

Keeping it all in one container matters — after an earthquake the kitchen may be inaccessible, or the power's out and you can't find things in the dark. If you can't duplicate everything into a kit right now, at least get a container and write a list inside it of where everything is located in the house. That list does half the work of the kit.

Should I Go: Evacuation and the Grab-and-Go Bag

[~01:18:00 – 01:30:00]

Evacuation is typically required during or after floods, wildfires, tsunamis, or landslides — any disaster where conditions can change fast and move into your area quickly. The grab-and-go bag is a smaller version of the home kit that you can actually carry with you.

The operative phrase is 'you can carry with you.' Every person in the household should have their own bag. Give children a small one that's reasonable for their size. If you can't carry your bag, it's not a go bag. If you end up evacuating by bus or ferry, you want a bag you can take on your lap.

You won't carry seven days of water. One to two days' worth is realistic — four litres maximum, probably less. The assumption is you're being evacuated to somewhere with supplies, not heading into the wilderness. But given that Cortes is two ferries from Campbell River, a bit of extra water isn't a bad idea if your bag can carry it.

Evacuation alert vs. evacuation order

An evacuation alert (orange on the BC Wildfire Service app) means get ready — gather your things, be prepared to leave. An evacuation order (red) means leave now.

In an ideal world, you get an alert before an order. But sometimes conditions change so fast that you go straight to an order — possibly with only ten minutes' notice. That's why the kit needs to be accessible and ready.

When you get an evacuation order, the message from the SRD will tell you specifically what to do: leave your lights on so firefighters can locate your house in the smoke, close doors and windows, make sure your house number is visible from the road. Follow those instructions — they're tailored to the specific situation.

How Do I Know: The Alertable System

[~01:30:00 – 01:34:00]

You don't need to guess. We're going to tell you. In Strathcona Regional District, emergency notifications come through Alertable — but you have to sign up. It doesn't come to you automatically like a province-wide Amber Alert.

Once you're signed up, you choose how you want to be reached: phone call, text, email, or through the app. Set your area as Cortes Island / Electoral Area B, and also add the broader SRD so you'll be notified if there's a situation in Campbell River when you're over there for appointments or shopping.

If you're travelling elsewhere in BC in wildfire season, it's worth checking which notification system that regional district uses — not all of them use Alertable. Comox Valley uses Connect Rocket; some others use Wind Alert. You can sign up temporarily while you're in an area, then remove it when you leave.

Don't rely on Facebook for official information in an emergency. The SRD doesn't update its Facebook pages as quickly as Alertable. The notification system is how you know.

[An attendee plugged Alertable from personal experience: 'You get warnings like wind warnings the night before a windy day. Last summer I got a notification about smoky skies arriving overnight and closed my windows — I would never have done that otherwise. It's not just for emergencies.']

I didn't know you had to sign up for this before I started working here. When I found out, I went — oh my gosh. This is how you know. This is how you know.

Wrapping Up: Three Steps, Four Things to Do

[~01:33:00]

To summarise: three steps to emergency preparedness.

1. **Know your hazards.** You don't need to become an expert — just understand what risks are relevant to where you are.
2. **Build a plan.** Write it down. Have it somewhere you can find it when you can't think clearly.
3. **Gather supplies.** Grab-and-stay for sheltering in place, grab-and-go for evacuation.

And a fourth bonus step: review and restock every six months to a year. Check expiry dates, update contact information, make sure the plan still reflects your household.

Once it's done, it doesn't need to live in your head anymore. You get ahead of it, you get it done, you revise as things change. That's the basics.

Resources

Prepared BC emergency plan: Search for 'Prepared BC emergency plan' — fill out online, or download to print.

Alertable: Sign up at alertable.ca or through the SRD website. Select Electoral Area B (Cortes) and also Strathcona Regional District.

BC Wildfire Service app: Shows evacuation alerts (orange) and orders (red) as polygons in real time. Useful during fire season.

FireSmart program: SRD staff can visit your property and advise on reducing wildfire risk. Contact SRD for details.

The Eleventh Relative: A documentary about tsunamis from an Indigenous perspective, available on the SRD website.

Neighbourhood Emergency Preparedness (NEP): The SRD can help communities set up formal neighbourhood preparedness structures — from communication relay to check-in systems for vulnerable residents.