



# Stories from the Atmospheric River

March 14, 2022

The series of atmospheric rivers that hit southwestern British Columbia in late November caused flooding and mudslides that affected the lives of many HSA members, with those living in Merritt and Princeton among the worst hit. HSA's Board of Directors created a flood relief fund to assist members with immediate expenses caused by evacuations.

We spoke to a few members about how they were impacted by these recent events. These stories highlight how these events brought out the best in many, and include some ideas for how we can prepare for future natural disasters, while helping those affected by this one.

## Trapped on the Highway

When Region 8 Director Cher Hylands left her home in Peachland, she expected her drive down to a meeting in New Westminster would take her around four hours. Instead, she and her husband spent the next three nights sleeping in their car after they became trapped between two mudslides on Highway 7 east of Hope. "It was quite the experience", says Cher, "but it wasn't the worst thing."

For the first two nights, she was stuck with what she estimates were almost 1,000 other vehicles. The rain was intense, but stranded travelers shared food, water, and other supplies. Hylands had some supplies in her car, as she'd been worried about the risk of snow, but not enough for multiple days. She refilled her water by leaving a container on the roof of her car to catch rain, and luckily had enough fuel to be able to run her car engine every few hours to warm up.

Unfortunately, her group was stranded in an area with very little cellular reception. The only information they were able to receive was through occasional text messages from family. After two nights, Highway 7 was cleared through to Hope, a fact they only realized when vehicles in front of them began driving.

She and her husband drove to Hope, realized they couldn't go any further, and spent a third night in their car, this time in the parking lot outside the Flying J. Late the next afternoon, they heard that Highway 7 from Hope to Vancouver would be open for a few hours to allow stranded travelers to leave Hope. They travelled in a slowmoving convoy, and took about five hours to drive from Hope to their hotel in Burnaby.

Once she arrived in the Lower Mainland, she realized that there was no road open to allow her to get home. She stayed in a hotel for the weekend, participated in the HSPBA Bargaining Proposal Conference the next week, and waited for a route to open up. Eventually Highway 99 was opened, allowing Hylands and her husband to take a seven and a half hour drive home via Cache Creek. On her to-do list today? Adding more supplies to her car emergency kit.

## Isolated in Hope

Deb Cline lives in Hope and works in the Imaging Department at Fraser Canyon Hospital. She, her colleagues, and her community were entirely cut off from the rest of the province for several days as a result of highway damage caused by the atmospheric river. Approximately 1500 travelers were also stranded in the town, adding 25 per cent to the usual population.

So many travelers were stranded that many of them were housed on the floor of the Hope Secondary School, while others slept in their cars. Grocery stores sold out of food and gas stations ran out of fuel. As many stranded travelers hadn't brought a multi-day supply of their medication with them, Deb reports that the emergency department at the hospital was inundated with medication requests.

There were also problems getting staff to work, as staff who lived in nearby communities like Chilliwack and Agassiz were completely unable to make it into Hope. Staff members who did live in Hope stepped up and kept things working for the first several days. The storm was so severe that it initially wasn't possible to fly staff or patients in or out of Hope; a team from Surrey Memorial Hospital, including a respiratory therapist, made it in after being driven down the train tracks by a CN employee. Later, more staff and supplies were brought in by train from Agassiz before Highway 1 reopened.

When she spoke with *The Report*, Deb was grateful that things turned out well for both her worksite and her community. The people of Hope worked together, shared what they had, and ensured that both local residents and stranded travelers made it through several very challenging days.

## Helping in the Fraser Valley

When flooding hit the Fraser Valley, HSA steward Kris Lally and her brother Pambir Lally wanted to help. As long-time Abbotsford residents, they used their connections in the community to start providing much-needed help. Along with friends and family, their group grew until it became the Kirpa (Punjabi for kindness or blessing) Collective.

The Kirpa Collective grew quickly into a group of more than 100 volunteers working all across southwestern BC. Members of the collective, working with other community groups like the Gurdwara Dasmesh Darbar in Surrey, provided food to evacuees and first responders, fundraised to buy much-needed supplies, and mobilized volunteers to help with sandbagging. That wasn't enough, however, and the group reached out to local pilots to begin shipping supplies by plane and helicopter. So far, they've been able to help out in Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Hope, Merritt, Kamloops, Lytton, Boston Bar, Nooaitch Band, Nicomen Band, Coldwater Band, Chawathil First Nation, Seabird Island Band, Sts'ailes Community, and Princeton.

The tough reality is that those most affected by the floods won't be able to return to their homes any time soon. Many people in many communities have lost nearly everything, and others will be completely cut off until highways are repaired. The Kirpa Collective has continued their good work and, as we move into late December 2021, has started a holiday toy drive to ensure every child affected by the flooding has a toy to open during the holiday season.

It is heartening to see the Kirpa Collective move from a small group figuring out how to respond to an emergency into a larger organization that shows us the power of coming together to support our communities. HSA's Board of Directors wanted to support the Collective's mission, and recently donated \$5000. If you'd like to help

*This article originally appeared in the [Winter 2021-22 issue of The Report magazine](#).*

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