

Mock Disaster Tests Emergency Responses For Airport

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Red Deer Airport was a flurry of activity August 12th as emergency teams rushed to deal with a mock disaster. In accordance with Transport Canada certification requirements, the airport must test their emergency systems once every three to four years, and so a plane crash scenario was developed – the crash of a Boeing 737 complete with 51 passengers and a crew of six.

To make the mock disaster as realistic as possible, the airport brought out an old fuselage to set the stage. A group of Penhold Air Cadets were on site for summer camp, and so 51 acted as volunteer victims of the crash. Altogether, there were about 100 people involved in the scenario.

“In any disaster, mock or real, communication is absolutely critical,” said RJ Steenstra, Red Deer Airport CEO. *“There are so many agencies involved and a coordinated effort is required. Working through a staged disaster tests our emergency response plan and that of Red Deer County, and it went well.”*

As would be the case in an actual disaster, many partners were involved: Red Deer County and City of Red Deer emergency services, RCMP, County peace officers, search and rescue teams, Penhold Air Cadets and NAV Canada, the organization responsible for air traffic control in Canada.

“Red Deer area emergency services were put to the test in this exercise,” said Dave Laurin, Red Deer County District Fire Chief. *“It’s an important exercise because it allows us to work together with various agencies and sharpen our skills in a realistic environment.”*



The airport's role in the disaster was to provide a secure hub where each agency could operate in tandem, knowing what the other agencies were doing. *"Our role was to set up the command centre where the Transportation Safety Board would conduct their investigations,"* explained Steenstra. *"From there, in conjunction with the County, we would handle media communications, create space for the airline to conduct family briefings and follow protocols regarding the chain of information."*

Steenstra said the role played by the volunteer cadets was invaluable. Each was given an arm band and card designating their status, from deceased to specific levels of injury and mobility. *"It was great fun for them, but also a great learning experience,"* said Steenstra.

Red Deer County and The City of Red Deer hold mock disasters of various types to test their emergency response plans; sometimes they involve a natural disaster or a chemical spill. Their inclusion of the airport in this exercise was not only necessary for the airport's certification, it was an important and successful test of the careful systems and processes the airport has in place. At the same time, it allowed Red Deer County and City of Red Deer emergency staff to work through their own emergency systems, as their response would be similar regardless of the situation.

In between mock disasters, the agencies communicate regularly through table talks, where they review emergency response plans and identify any changes, such as the addition of new equipment or systems that need to be incorporated into plans. The airport shares detailed schematics for every type of aircraft that flies into Red Deer Airport, and grid maps of airport land. These documents allow partner agencies to know exactly how each aircraft is laid out and to quickly identify where they need to go.

"As we went through the process of the mock disaster, we identified some enhancements to our existing plan," said Steenstra. *"These kinds of items can only be discovered through simulating an actual disaster experience, which is why this exercise was so important. We're constantly revising and enhancing our plan to make sure it will work seamlessly so that we are fully prepared in the event of a real disaster. Safety and security are always our primary objectives."*

The day may have started out with staged chaos and fake blood, but it ended successfully with a barbeque and a debriefing session. Steenstra said the debriefing will continue in depth through September.