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Politics

Merritt leads way in fire suppression technology

By Heather Thomson

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When it comes to extinguishing fires Merritt is leading the way.

Thanks to a new toy other communities are using this fire department as an example of what they should be doing.

In the past few months the Merritt Fire Rescue

Department used a Dry Sprinkler Powder Aerosol 5 generator (DSPA-5) to extinguish the fire even before the trucks were on scene. This apparatus is thrown into the building and works to fight the fire and drop the temperature before the firefighters enter the burning building.

"It is just another tool in our tool box, but it is a major one for us," explained Merritt Fire Chief Dave Matteucci. "It can't do everything but so far it has made a big difference. We have used it twice and it worked perfectly both times."

When Zero Combustion, the company that produces the DSPA-5, approached Matteucci he thought it was just what the Merritt department needed to help them be more efficient in fire fighting.

"I thought this will change how we fight fires," he said. "It puts out the fire and then the guys can go in and mop it up."

It isn't always quite that simple, he explained, but it certainly makes their job a lot easier. He said one of the times they have used the generator the fire was in the roof so it still required a lot of firefighting, but the use of the DSPA-5 meant they could attack the fire much faster.

Matteucci added that in a department like Merritt, where the chief and deputy chief go directly from their house to the fire, it means there is something they can do as soon as they arrive on the scene.

"Typically it only takes a few minutes for the crew to come, but the

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fire can grow exponentially in that time," Matteucci explained. "We are the fire crew now because we have these."

The local fire department purchased five grenades last year. They have used two so far. Typically they keep two in both the deputy and chief's vehicles and one in each of the two main engines. Now that two have been used Matteucci is looking for ways to replace the valuable tool. He believes a natural partnership would be between the fire departments and insurance companies.

Not only do these grenades extinguish the fire faster, they also preserve the scene and save a lot of money for both the building owners and the insurance companies. Matteucci estimates that using these devices saves as much as \$300,000 to \$400,000. Each one costs only \$1,000 but could save insurance companies a lot more.

"These save lives, but unfortunately money pushes the system," he said. "If the insurance companies took the money they saved from a fire and bought 5,000 of these they could divide them up between the different fire departments across the province. This would save them millions."

At this point Merritt is one of about four communities using the DSPA-5, but Matteucci believes everyone should add them to their firefighting tool box.

"Why wouldn't you use them?" he asked. "It is safer for firefighters, preserves the scene, is more efficient and saves money."

Smithers is one of the other communities impressed by the success of the DSPA-5s. They recently used on on a fire in a trailer that the fire chief believes would have been lost if it hadn't been for the new device.

"We have deployed them once in a trailer fire that was four kilometres from the station," explained Keith Stecko, chief of the Smithers Fire Department. "It was close to a flash over and once we deployed it we had enough time to get in. Otherwise the fire would have progressed far more."

Like the Merritt department, in Smithers the chief and deputy chief carry the generators with them and deploy them once they arrive on the scene. Stecko agrees it gives them a jump on the fire.

Since using the device Stecko has been successful in convincing the insurance companies that it is worth the investment to replace the generators.

He said, at the end of the day, the devices save money for everyone involved and also save lives.

Jo Ann Prediger, area manager of Barton Insurance Hub International Brokers, agrees that a partnership between the fire department and the insurance agencies is a natural fit.

"The promotional material and testimony from Dave [Matteucci] indicated it was a useful tool that had great potential for saving money," she says. "Insurance companies to consider [paying to replace the devices]."

She says the Merritt fire department has submitted the expense of replacing the generators to the insurance companies as part of the claim.

"The insurance adjustors have recommended covering the replacement costs in the claim," she explains. "It seems like a natural part of the claim cost, but it will be up to individual insurance companies to approve it or not."

This is good news for David Sumner of Zero Combustion, the company that produces the DSPA-5 generators. He says replacement cost is one challenge they face in increasing the use of these fire fighting generators. Despite that, he says word is spreading that these are a useful tool for fire departments. The main reason these devices are getting more popular with people who have to deal with fires, not just fire departments, is that their successes speak for themselves. But he acknowledges that it took a few fire departments to take a chance and try the units in order for the

success to grow.

"Dave Matteucci has been very visionary in being able to see the value of these," he says. "He put value on putting safety first."

Zero Combustion is the only company to produce a hand-held unit like the DSPA-5. Sumner says the closest competition is a large 65 pound unit. When you consider that the DSPA-5 weighs only 10 pounds the advantages are instantly noticeable. He adds that they started producing these because they wanted a way to help make fire fighting safer and more efficient.

"We are not just trying to make money," he says. "This is about improving safety."

And he adds that these generators have proven they do that and much more.

Sumner sees a day in the not so distant future when everyone is following Merritt's lead in having a few DSPA-5 units in their trucks.

"This is an additional tool for firefighters to make their existing training stronger," he says. "Eventually everyone

will have them."
