

Cell site on truck links emergency crews: Satcolt can connect 1,000 cellphones

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TELUS's million-dollar Vancouver-based emergency communications system on wheels almost didn't make it to its official unveiling in North Vancouver on Thursday.

The Satcolt (which stands for satellite cell site on a light truck) system was on standby to go to Tumbler Ridge to help in the battle against forest fires, but wasn't needed after rain and a change in wind direction reduced the danger.

If it had been needed, the Satcolt would have been driven from Vancouver to Tumbler Ridge in about 15 hours.

There it would have been deployed to allow emergency workers, including police, firefighters and government officials, to communicate using as many as 1,000 modified cellphones that also have walkie-talkie capabilities.

As well, Satcolt permits services on as many as 12 different communications systems to plug in to the truck and be in touch with one another. And it can do it for seven days without needing to refuel.

"You would drive it into Tumbler Ridge, set up your satellite dish, set up your antenna and within about 40 minutes you have communications for up to 1000 first responders, say 300 firefighters and 700 community people," said **TELUS's** director of emergency response support, Colin Belshaw.

"So it's very powerful. What you've got here is the largest cell site that **TELUS** has in Canada, sitting here on wheels."

If necessary, the 10-ton truck could be loaded aboard a Hercules transport plane and flown to the site of an emergency.

The Satcolt -- which will be moved to Kamloops for the summer to be closer to potential wildfire hotspots -- is also equipped with GPS, as are its handsets, so the whereabouts of first responders and volunteers can be tracked as they go about their duties.

The handsets were used in New Orleans by the Vancouver Search and Rescue Team when it went there to aid hurricane victims.

North Vancouver RCMP Supt. Gord Tomlinson said that a similar, but smaller unit to the Satcolt -- one of two that **TELUS** has in Canada and one of five in North America -- was used in 2005 when mudslides hit the district.

"We had problems with our communications systems working in that area and we called **TELUS** and they came out and supplied something similar to this for our services there," said Tomlinson. "We find that in any disaster our biggest concern is always communication, so we see this as being extremely helpful for all first responders."

Belshaw said that **TELUS** hasn't worked out how it might be compensated for the use of the emergency system.

"I'm not sure we've nailed our cost model yet," said Belshaw. "We'd love to recover our costs, but that's not a discussion you want to have when things are burning or the ground is shaking."



Illustration:

• Photo: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun / RCMP Supt. Gord Tomlinson makes a call via Satcolt, **TELUS**'s mobile cell site that can link 1,000 emergency responders at a disaster site.