

GovTalk

Get to the Point.

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1.5 Briefing Note to Inform Or Update on an Event

Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister mid-20th century, when asked what he most feared, replied, 'Events, dear boy, events'

In governments, events can move quickly and many events can happen that are not anticipated. In addition, Ministers and senior officials will need to be kept up to date as events unfold, often forcing them to reconsider strategies or be prepared to respond to questions. Often, especially in the event of a major disaster such as a flood or accident, the government's response will be unfolding as these occur. Keeping the decision makers up to date is crucial. Part of their accountability will be to ensure that they were in fact kept up to date, were made aware of events as soon as possible and acted appropriately on them. Translate that into the often asked question: "What did you know, when did you know it and what did you do about it."

An effective Briefing Note dealing with a situation update or event will have the following elements:

- **Purpose Title:** Information Note on Negotiating with the Fire Hills First Nation or Status Update on the Nova Scotia Hurricane Response.
- **Summary:** Treat this as an elevator brief. What can the reader learn quickly about the topic that she needs to know or has asked for information on.

- **Link:** If this is the result of a reader's request for information, link that here with a simple reference such as "As you requested..." or "In response to your question..". If it is a situation update, link to the last Briefing Note with "Since we last briefing you on .."
- **Headline:** Simply summarize developments or the facts. This section should not be more than three lines long.
- **Update:** Give more detail either on the information item or developments as known.
- **Relevance and Impact:** This section should advise on the reader's specific interests as a government official. Do developments directly impact the responsibilities of the reader? Is the reader required to make some decisions as a result of this information? If so, will recommendations be forthcoming? Who else is involved and has anything changes in their situation? Does the information bear direct relevance or risk to the reader's roles or is it only for background? This later advice is important as this will certainly a question the reader will ask herself.
- **Response Recommendations:** An information note will seldom require a response unless the reader is not satisfied with what he has read and wants more information or recommendations. With respect to events, this will depend on who is responsible and must respond both operationally or in communications. However, an event update should only address any needs to change the approved strategy for managing the event. These should be highlighted.
- **Next Steps:** For information notes, it is best to simply state that the note is submitted for information only and no further action is required. For events, if they are ongoing, you should inform the reader of the next planning Briefing Note and assure the reader that she will be informed immediately of any developments. For important events for which the reader has not direct responsibility but has an active interest, once again, indicate that further developments will be brought to their attention.

Example # 1: Quick Update on Events Briefing Note

Briefing Note

For Information

Update on the Forest Fire Situation in Northeastern Ontario

Summary

This updates the note given to you 8 hours ago. The fire continues to grow in size. It is now 30% larger than the last report, covering 12,500 hecatres near Bearskin Lake. However, rain is expected in part of the affected area. Relief crews are on the way. We are continuing to evacuate the First Nations residents to Sioux Lookout. That is 80% complete.

Considerations

Containment of this fire will be difficult given the distances to be covered. The evacuation process remains the Ministry's priority. We are working with First Nations leaders to ensure a safe process. Co-operation with National Defence as well as private air services is excellent.

Risks and Concerns

It is unlikely that we can contain this fire given the distance and logistical problems. We believe that three communities – Bearskin Lake, Elk Harbour and Winston – are in danger of being overtaken by the fire. We are also concerned that some First Nations leaders will say that we are not doing enough. To that end, we have talked and met with the key leaders several times and kept them up to date. Their concerns remain the safety of the people first.

Public Awareness

The continual display on various media of the satellite pictures have kept public interest high, but not negative. Our operational spokesperson, Commander Allison Szwarc, has given over 25 interviews with little counter-criticisms.

Next Steps

It is hoped that the evacuations will be complete by tomorrow. Welcome centres have been set up. All requests from the Sioux Lookout and the Nishganski First Nations Council for logistical support are being met to this point. We suspect that, if the evacuation is prolonged, additional needs will arise. In anticipation of that, Commander Szwarc is meeting with both parties

tomorrow morning. After that meeting, we will brief you again with an eye to a statement or press conference.

We recommend your staff brief the MPPs and MPs in the affected areas. We will be happy to support them.

We recommend that Commander Szwarc not be involved. She needs to focus her attention on the operational response.

Main Response Points

We have modified your response comments as a result of this update. We suggest the following lines should you wish:

- The fire continues to grow and is of concern.
- It has grown by 30% since yesterday.
- The weather holds out some hope but it is not yet clear.
- The logistics of fighting this fire are challenging.
- Our priority is the safe evacuation of all residents of the three communities in danger.
- We are working with officials from the First Nations affected, the Nishganski First Nations Council and Sioux Lookout to ensure that the evacuation centres are well supported.
- We are meeting the needs of those affected and are ready to respond as circumstances change.
- Our hearts go out to all involved, those affected who have to move, and our fire fighters and their families.

Prepared by the Operational Response Centre, Ministry of Natural Resources, Jason Drake, 705-233-5466, Jason.drake@ontario.ca

Copied to the Deputy Minister and Senior Executive for Information.

Example #2: A Longer and More Detailed Information Note From Johnson-Shoyama School Resource Package- sourced from the Government of British Columbia

***Background to the Note:** This detailed note is written by an analyst in the Government of Norway's Ministry of Climate and the Environment. A new minister, Ms. Inger Bensen, was appointed last week. She was formerly the minister of Children, Equity and Social Inclusion. Minister Bensen will be attending the 2015 United Nations Climate Change conference in Paris. The Ministry has been asked to brief her on Norway's recent divestment from coal. Of course, as a member of the government, Ms. Bensen knows about the divestment. However, she is not familiar with all the details, nor with the responses of other European countries and officials to Norway's decision. The Ministry wants to inform Minister Bensen of the issues surrounding the divestment, especially those that are likely to be raised at the meeting in Brussels and by the Norwegian and world press.*

Briefing Note

For Information

Subject: Responses to Expected Questions on Norway's Divestment from Coal

Issue

Norway is divesting its sovereign wealth fund from coal, with the goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Whether the divestment will affect emissions is disputed, and criticism may be directed at Norway at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris (COP21). This note will explain the divestment scheme, outline criticisms of it and response strategies presently in place.

Background

Basic facts and general development of the Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG).

- GPFG manages state revenues from Norway's oil and gas industry.
- GPFG, worth 7 321 billion NOK, is the world's largest sovereign wealth fund. The fund owns 1.3 % of the world's listed companies through its assets in over 9000 companies.
- Norges Bank Investment Management (NBIM) manages GPFG.
- Ethical guidelines for companies to be included in GPFG were approved in 2004. A Council on Ethics advises NBIM whether investments are from companies in violation of the guidelines.

- The NBIM excludes companies from the GFGP that violate human rights or expose the public to health risks. Violators include the tobacco and arms industries.
- The environmental movement in Norway is pressuring Parliament to include environmental ethics in the guidelines. It has called for all fossil fuel industries to be banned from investment in the fund.
- In April 2014, a panel was formed to determine if divestment from coal and petroleum companies is more effective than ownership strategies in addressing climate change.
- In December 2014, the panel delivered its recommendations. It concluded that the GPGG is effective when using the weight of the Fund to negotiate with companies to become green.
- The panel also recommended new conduct-based criteria that would allow for the exclusion of companies with unacceptable levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

Current Status

On June 5th 2015, after lengthy negotiations, all political parties agreed on a set of recommendations on how to follow up on the panel's report:

- The parties reaffirmed the political consensus that GPFG's goal is to secure long-term investments and stressed that a requirement for this is sustainable development.
- Parliament asked the Government to create a conduct-based and a product-based criterion for exclusion from the fund. Divestment should occur if a company bases 30 % or more of its activities on coal or derives 30 % or more of its revenues from coal.
- The recommendation leaves a window for companies who can show GPFG that they have plans to reduce their use of coal. This window will be ensured through a policy mechanism chain that will reward companies who wish to take green steps.

Critical Reactions to the Divestment Policy

- The EU welcomed the divestment policy outlined above, but spokesperson Miles Sykes said it is hypocritical of Norway to only point fingers at coal producers because Norway is Europe's biggest producer of fossil fuels such as oil and gas.
- Director of Norwegian Coal Bjorn Arne argues that it is hypocritical of Norway to itself extract coal in the northern archipelago of Svalbard while continuing to allow mining waste to be dumped into its fjords.
- Don Drummond, spokesperson for the World Coal Association, claims that the coal industry is committed to reducing emissions and that Norway's divestments from the coal industry will not impact the industry. He maintains that there are plenty of investors because growing economies are increasingly relying on coal.
- Other predictions from the coal industry show that coal will soon surpass oil as the biggest single source of energy.
- A 2014 United Nations report concluded that divestment movements have limited effect as companies can easily attract new investors.

Positive Reactions to the Divestment

- Director of the IMF Christine Lagarde applauded Norway's move. The IMF claims that divestments do create unease in the market, as shown by a fall in coal prizes.
- Head of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC), Joseph Lambert says that the GPFG divestment strategy is an important step in building momentum. He claims that the strategy is one of "moral shaming," and that long term, the coal industry will lose investors.
- Rosalie Penetta, Director of United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), claims that divestment from coal is morally right. She views the divestment as a good departure point for the eventual international rejection of coal.

Response Strategy

To date, the Minister and Ministry have responded to criticisms of the strategy in the following manner:

Response to claims of hypocrisy:

1. Focus on all the other issues that Norway is working for in the Paris agreement.
2. Maintain that Norway has started to prepare for a green shift domestically, and that the coal production in Svalbard will be phased out.
3. Remind the critics that coal remains the single biggest source of greenhouse gases.

Response to claims that divestment does not work:

1. Urge other nations to follow Norway's example to reduce the attractiveness of coal.
2. Call for a global agreement to commit resources to reduce coal dependency through research and technology development.

Next Steps

Should the Minister require more information or wish to discuss the response strategy, this will be arranged.

Note prepared by Runar Larsen, Analyst

Note approved by Elga Svenson, Permanent Secretary

Date: November 1, 2015

