

FIRST NATIONS WILDFIRE EVACUATIONS

**A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITIES
AND EXTERNAL AGENCIES**

TARA K. MCGEE and
AMY CARDINAL CHRISTIANSON
with the **First Nations Wildfire
Evacuation Partnership**



Sample Chapter UBC Press

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Foreword

AS THE PRESIDENT of the Tahltan Central Government, it is an honour to be given the opportunity to welcome readers to this book on First Nations wildfire evacuations. This is an incredibly important topic and one that our Nation is unfortunately all too familiar with.

The Tahltan Nation is located in northwestern British Columbia, covering a vast territory the size of Portugal, where we and our ancestors have lived for thousands of years. Tahltan people, who boast a population of about 4,000, are easily outnumbered by grizzly bears, mountain goats, wolves, and other iconic Canadian species in our homelands. Prior to the exposure of foreign diseases and colonization, Tahltans lived a nomadic lifestyle in the subarctic climate and environment. Our territory is vast and rich in natural resources and culture, but the remoteness coupled with climate change create geographic vulnerabilities when faced with an environmental crisis.

The local Tahltan communities of Dease Lake, Iskut, and Telegraph Creek have no cell service or other common facilities and stores that most Canadians take for granted. Each community has one gas station, a small school, and a clinic. Telegraph Creek, known as Tlegohin in the local language, has no paved roads and is nearly seven hundred kilometres away from the nearest commercial airport, bank, or fast-food restaurant. It usually has around three hundred and fifty residents, most of whom are Tahltan people living on the federal reserve lands administered by the Tahltan Band Council under the Indian Act.

It was August 3rd, 2018, when I received the call about an emergency quickly developing near Telegraph Creek. A lightning strike from the evening before had created a fire which was picking up

momentum from the coastal winds and high temperatures. Due to the lack of properly trained emergency personnel, equipment, and facilities in the community, the local leaders found themselves in a difficult position as an imminent threat suddenly became more serious. As is the case for many of the First Nations communities profiled in this book, word of the fire spread quickly on social media and around the camping grounds that everyone might be forced to evacuate if the situation worsened overnight. To make matters worse, Tahltans from all over BC, the Yukon, and even the United States were arriving in Telegraph Creek to visit relatives and attend the local annual music festival.

Less than two days later, on August 5th, Chief Rick McLean of the Tahltan Band and his team worked alongside the RCMP to evacuate all the local residents – an experience that is familiar to the wildfire evacuees who share their stories in this book. My father, a Tahltan Elder born and raised in the community, was one such evacuee who left his home just a couple of hours after the RCMP went door-to-door posting notices and telling everyone to get prepared to leave town. In the final hours leading up to the mass evacuation, other Tahltans tuned in attentively on Facebook to watch live videos being posted of the bright orange waves of fire spilling over top of the mountainous terrain and heading directly toward Telegraph Creek. Everyone in the community, aside from three stubborn and heroic men, were shuttled out in vehicles toward Dease Lake.

Julien Du, Mickie Ferguson, and Marty Nole were the three men who decided to stay behind to help save what they could. The trio worked as a unit to utilize a handful of sprinkler systems and whatever other resources they could find. If the fire pushed them to the edge of the community, they each had access to a motorized boat stocked with fuel and other goods which could lead them to safety. As the authors of *First Nations Wildfire Evacuations* make clear, often some community members feel the need to remain behind to try and protect their communities, and they should be allowed to do so when they have a plan that enables them to safely escape, because of our inherent right to protect our territory.

The Tahltan Nation Development Corporation (TNDC), well-known for its expertise with earthworks construction, quickly responded and worked with the province to ensure Tahltan crews were in the field contributing. Their crews built fireguards and did everything else they could to save homes, cultural sites, and other important infrastructure. The TNDC team risked their lives and long-term health while enduring smoky conditions for 12+-hour shifts for several weeks. The province also deployed aircraft and additional firefighter support to Telegraph Creek from multiple jurisdictions. Helicopters scooped up water from nearby Sawmill Lake and the Stikine River, while other aircraft dropped fire retardant all over the hillsides surrounding the community.

As several brave teams battled the fires together, most of the displaced evacuees stayed in the neighbouring communities of Dease Lake and Iskut with family members. Others travelled to nearby cities with high concentrations of Tahltan people, such as Smithers, Terrace, and Whitehorse. Some stayed with family and friends while others choose to live in hotels. Extra support systems were put in place for Elders and those with young children. As this book makes clear, having a strategy in place for where to evacuate to, and how to support Elders and young families once evacuated, is an important part of planning for evacuations.

Fundraising efforts and own-source revenues from industrial projects allowed Tahltan governments to provide additional funding to evacuees. From the early stages of the evacuation, public donations of every sort – including food, water, fuel, clothing, and household items – started arriving by the truckload from across BC and the Yukon to distribution centres where evacuees had fled.

Over twenty homes, cultural sites, and many community structures – including a church and the nursing residence – were destroyed in the fires. Additional fires in the area eventually joined together to create further challenges throughout the summer. About 150,000 hectares of Tahltan territory were affected by the fires that year and British Columbia had the worst wildfire season in its history, with over 2,100 fires burning through 1.3 million hectares of land.

Once the BC Wildfire Service downgraded the fire in late August, power and telephone lines, drinking water, and septic facilities all needed extensive assessment and repairs. Crews had to clear dangerous trees and other hazards, while others inspected slope stability and repaired portions of the community's only access road. During a visit to Telegraph Creek in the fall, Canada's Minister of Indigenous Services at the time, Jane Philpott, noted that "the Tahltan Nation itself incurred the worst structural damage caused by wildfires of any First Nations community in recorded Canadian history."

The evacuation order lasted a total of 102 days, as it took a couple of months to sort through the logistics of replacing hydro poles/lines, testing the banks of the Telegraph Creek road for stability/safety, fixing waterlines and so on in the community, and cleaning the remaining homes and properties because of the smoke and ash that found their way inside via ventilation systems or open windows.

Although the losses were considerable and historic, we must acknowledge the incredible and heroic efforts of the crews who saved the essential infrastructure and the vast majority of homes in and around Telegraph Creek. Had it not been for TNDC's capacity and timeliness, along with some very collaborative Tahltan leadership and partnerships, the majority of Telegraph Creek would not be standing today. Most residents were back in their homes or moved into new residences in time for Christmas and the children were attending the local school again shortly thereafter.

Over the past two years, Telegraph Creek's clean-up, recovery, and rebuild expenditures have totalled nearly thirty million dollars. The environmental impacts are apparent with more flooding and landslides along the areas with displaced forests and root systems; several wildlife populations and species have relocated too. Many areas formerly known for their immense beauty and greenery, such as the forests along the Stikine Canyon, remain blackened and unrecognizable due to the fires.

As this book shows, Indigenous peoples across Canada – and around the world – are incredibly adaptable and able to rise to the challenges wildfires may bring to their communities. Like the

burned landscapes, the cumulative impacts of the fires has changed the Tahltan Nation and the ways that we will prepare ourselves and deal with future environmental emergencies. We are rebuilding our community and healing from the pain with each passing day. Like our ancestors before us, we remain proud, strong, and resilient people who will continue to thrive in Tahltan territory for generations to come.

Chad Norman Day

President, Tahltan Central Government

Preface

INDIGENOUS NATIONS in Canada have lived since time immemorial with wildfire threats. In recent years, they have been evacuated when threatened by either fire proximity, wildfire smoke, or interruptions to essential services (such as power loss caused by a wildfire burning a power line or electricity substation). People who live in urban settings in Canada may be affected by wildfire smoke when it drifts in. They are told to limit their time outdoors and to avoid participating in extreme physical activities. Few realize that Indigenous Peoples often live on the frontlines of this hazard.

In 2011 alone, 4,216 wildfires burned 2.6 million hectares of forest throughout Canada. First Nations communities were severely affected. Thousands of residents from thirty-five communities were forced to evacuate their lands because of their proximity to wildfire or smoke. Many went to nearby towns; others evacuated to towns and cities a considerable distance away; some stayed in their own or another First Nation. Some left by road, others by air.

This book is the result of research from the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership, which was formed shortly after the 2011 wildfires. Tara McGee, a non-Indigenous professor at the University of Alberta who studies the human dimensions of wildland fire, was speaking with Larry Fremont of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Environment. Larry mentioned that one of the First Nations in his province had experienced difficulties during its evacuation. Shortly after the phone call, Tara contacted Amy Cardinal Christianson, a Métis research scientist at the Canadian Forest Service whose research focuses on wildfire and Indigenous Peoples. Amy enthusiastically jumped on board, and the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership was born.

From its inception, two key questions guided the project:

- How have First Nation peoples and communities been affected by wildfire evacuations?
- How can the negative effects of these evacuations be reduced?

Because the 2011 wildfires caused the evacuation of many First Nations in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, we focused on these three provinces and identified six First Nations that had been recently evacuated: in Ontario, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation, Sandy Lake First Nation, and Deer Lake First Nation; in Saskatchewan, Onion Lake First Nation; and in Alberta, Whitefish Lake First Nation 459 and Dene Tha' First Nation (Taché community). We then contacted community leaders in these Nations, introduced ourselves and the partnership, and invited the First Nations to become involved in developing and carrying out the research. Community leaders in all six Nations expressed interest and invited us to meet in person with their band councils. During these meetings, we discussed the research, learned about the First Nations, and heard about their evacuations. One year into our research, in 2014, Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Stanley Mission, in Saskatchewan, was evacuated. We invited them to join the partnership, and they agreed, bringing the number of participating communities to seven.

To ensure that our research would make a difference, we also involved government and nongovernmental agencies. Amy recruited the following partners:

Indigenous

Assembly of First Nations
(David Diabo and Irving Leblanc)
First Nations' Emergency Services Society
(Shane Wardrobe)

.....

Alberta

Alberta Emergency Management Agency
(Fran Byers)
Agriculture and Forestry (Chad Morrison)

Saskatchewan	Ministry of Environment (Larry Fremont) Ministry of Government Relations (Carl Friske and Deanna Valentine) Ministry of Health (Garnet Matchett)
.....	
Ontario	Emergency Management Ontario (Aadu Pilt and Rebecca Hanson) Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (Rob McAlpine and Bill Cole)
.....	
Federal	Indigenous Services Canada (Dianne Carlson, Eileen McCarthy, and Michelle Ring) Health Canada (Wadieh Yacoub and Wojciech Drobina)

Once we secured funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council’s Partnership Development Grant competition, the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership officially started. Two graduate students, Kyla Mottershead and Henok Asfaw, then joined the research team.

Each band chose community advisers to represent them in the research, and seven community research assistants were hired to help recruit interview participants and conduct interviews (see “A Note on the Partnership” for a full account). We interviewed more than two hundred former evacuees, but we also talked to people who had helped carry out or provide support during the evacuations, and we talked to residents who chose to stay behind despite evacuation orders.

Rather than simply reporting on what we learned from the seven communities, we decided to present this knowledge in the form of a guidebook for First Nations, external agencies, and host communities. As we learned, each First Nation had a different experience: some were good, some were bad. Participants shared their stories openly with us, despite it being hard for many of them. A few told us it was the only opportunity they had to talk about what happened. Others said they wanted to make sure the outside

world knew what their experience had been like. There was a strong desire to share their experiences so that future evacuations of other First Nations (or their own) would go better. To make sure this happens, this book documents their experiences and offers a step-by-step guide to developing an evacuation plan and carrying it out – from how to decide to evacuate to what to do when community members finally return home.

Any profits from the sale of this book will be gifted to the Susan Jensen Indigenous Support Fund, Faculty of Science, University of Alberta.

Introduction

IT BEGINS WITH the smoke.

Someone from the nation will see a smoke plume, either nearby or far away, and almost immediately an image will appear on social media – “Did you see the smoke!?” A quiet unease then ripples through the community. Wildfires in the summer are nothing new for First Nations in the boreal forest, and everyone understands that the risk is real.

It often happens on a hot day, when warm winds gust. The smoke plume expands, and ash spreads through the upper atmosphere, turning the sun a disconcerting orange. In need of reassurance, people call the band office or their families. Band staff search for information and try to determine the position of the fire and whether it’s a threat.


When the ash starts to fall, everyone knows that things are getting serious. What was once beautiful – black ash floating like tiny feathers in an orange sky – now collects like ground grey chalk on car hoods, a platform for curious children to write their names. The day begins to darken as the smoke blocks out the sun. Day quickly turns to night, and visibility becomes limited to a few metres, at best. Those who have respiratory conditions such as asthma begin to experience difficulties breathing, and then ash and embers at ground level make it physically difficult for even healthy people to breathe.

The band reaches out to multiple agencies – local, provincial, and federal for advice on whether to evacuate. Although the smoke seems to be near and poses a threat to community members, they have no idea how close the fire is to the community. The actual flame front could be many kilometres away. But rumours continue to circulate. If the First Nation is accessible by road, some people might simply get in their vehicles and leave before an evacuation is called. For those

who live in fly-in communities, it's not that easy. In both cases, residents must depend on leaders and outside agencies to ensure their safety. There are often no set protocols or guidelines in place, even though First Nations are some of the most at-risk communities in Canada and it has been predicted that their at-risk status will only increase with climate change.

If you live in a First Nation and are responsible for or concerned about wildfire evacuations, or if you work for an outside agency and need or want to know about the special concerns and needs of First Nations, this book is for you, though it will also be a valuable resource for other Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada and beyond. Indigenous peoples around the world have lived with fire for tens of thousands of years and have specialized fire knowledge which has been passed down through generations. Unfortunately, as a result of colonization, many Indigenous communities have been unable to practice their fire management techniques to protect their communities from fire.

This is troubling because it is well established that climate change is causing more extreme wildfires around the world, and that many of these fires directly affect Indigenous communities. During the unprecedented Australian wildfires of early 2020, for example, Indigenous peoples in Australia in both New South Wales and Victoria were evacuated. Later the same year, the Slater fire in Northern California burned into the community of Happy Camp in the Klamath National Forest, home to many members of the Karuk Tribe. That fire killed two people and destroyed over a hundred properties.



The Ongoing Problem with Emergency Preparedness

In the mid-1990s, researchers examined the emergency preparedness of three First Nations in Manitoba. They found that past evacuations from wildfires and flooding had been hampered by communication difficulties, insufficient information, and

inadequate evacuation plans, which caused chaos, confusion, and delay, putting further stress on evacuees. There were instances where residents were separated from immediate family members during the evacuation. Almost twenty-five years after the initial research, emergency preparedness continues to be a problem.

In the 2010s, an evacuation from a remote fly-in community in Saskatchewan faced similar challenges, but the problems were compounded by the fact that the wildfire occurred during a band council election. There was no official government to lead the evacuation.

The 2013 fall report of the Auditor General of Canada's office included a chapter devoted to emergency management on reserves, which identified these issues:

- 1 Responsibility for emergency management on reserves among stakeholders was unclear.
- 2 Program authorities were out of date, and regional plans and supporting guidelines had not been completed.
- 3 A risk-based, all-hazards approach to emergency management was not in place.
- 4 The budget for the emergency-management program was not sufficient, and support focused on response-and-recovery activities.
- 5 The funding process was complex and contained internal control weaknesses.
- 6 The monitoring and reporting of performance information was incomplete.
- 7 Federal departmental roles and responsibilities and risk management for health emergencies could be strengthened.
- 8 Pandemic plans did not exist in all First Nations communities.
- 9 There was limited coordination between Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (now Indigenous Services Canada) and Health Canada.

Although Indigenous peoples around the world are incredibly diverse and the contexts in which they may need to evacuate can look very different, the experiences of the First Nations in this book offer lessons to anyone who wants to prepare for a possible wildfire evacuation. Government policies and the kind of support that is available to communities may vary from country to country, but the stages of an evacuation are often very similar. This book will help emergency planners think about what they can do to improve communication with community members, how to keep families together during evacuations, how to prioritize care for Elders and other vulnerable community members, and to think about what kind of food and activities would help evacuees feel more comfortable. Importantly, it also addresses the need to celebrate returns to communities after an evacuation.

Drawing on the evacuation experiences of residents from seven First Nations in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta between 2011 and 2015, along with a few other examples, this book offers a detailed account of what has happened, what can happen, and what should happen during the six stages of an evacuation:

- deciding to evacuate
- putting a plan in motion
- troubleshooting transportation
- finding accommodations
- taking care of evacuees
- returning home.

Each chapter corresponds to one of these stages and includes checklists and guiding questions for First Nations, external agencies, and host communities. Spotlights on each of the seven First Nations appear before and after each of the six chapters.

But before exploring the issues and experiences of particular First Nations, it's important to understand the special circumstances of First Nations in general when it comes to wildfires.

On average, 8,400 wildfires burn over 2 to 4 million hectares of forest every year in Canada. Although Indigenous Peoples make up

only 4.9 percent of the population, nearly one-third of wildfire evacuations involve Indigenous Peoples, who in Canada comprise three groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. This book focuses on the evacuation experiences of First Nations people who were evacuated from their communities.

Spotlights on Community Partners

Seven unique First Nations participated in the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership and lend their voices to this book. To read more about a particular First Nation, check out its spotlight.

Ontario Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation (p. 83)
 Sandy Lake First Nation (p. 103)
 Deer Lake First Nation (p. 67)

Saskatchewan Onion Lake Cree Nation (p. 121)
 Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Stanley Mission (p. 47)

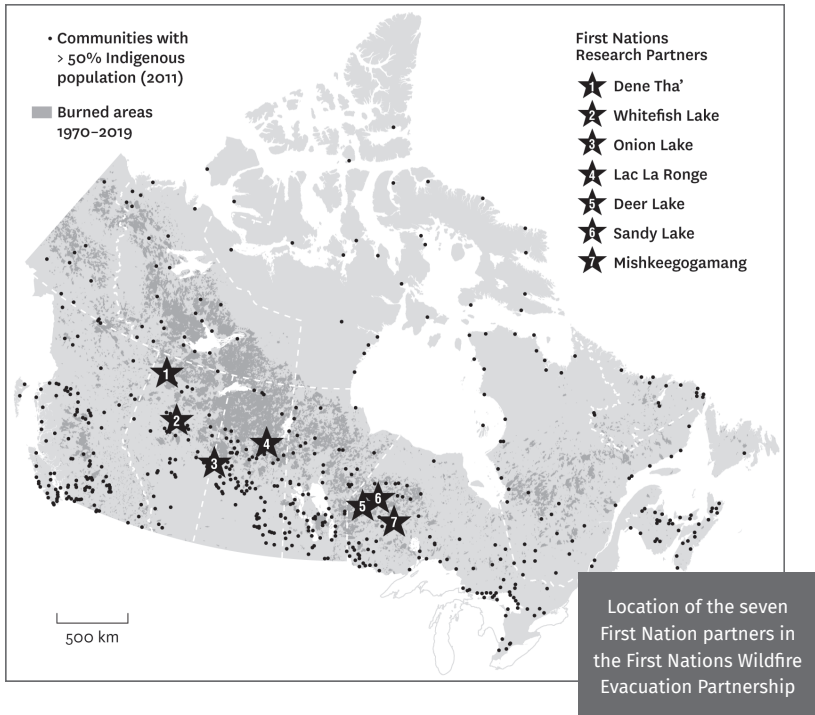
Alberta Whitefish Lake First Nation 459 (p. 11)
 Dene Tha' First Nation, Taché (p. 29)

First Nations have lived in the territory now known as Canada since time immemorial. There are currently 634 recognized First Nations spread throughout the country. Although people often talk about First Nations in collective terms, each First Nation is distinct in terms of territory, cultural practices, languages, spirituality, and traditions. European colonization, which began to spread across Canada in the 1600s, continues to this day. Land, children, and culture have been stolen from First Nations through various government programs such as the establishment of reserves (including the pass system), disenfranchisement, residential schools, child “welfare” programs like the Sixties Scoop, and the outlawing of cultural activities. First Nations people fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government in a relationship that has always been paternalistic.

Between 1980 and 2019, 389 First Nations communities were evacuated in Canada because of wildfire, with approximately 138,000 evacuees.

The majority of First Nations communities are located on reserves that may or may not be their Traditional Territory. There are also many First Nations people who belong to a specific Nation but live off-reserve, generally in more urban settings. The First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership focused on community members who live on reserve who were evacuated. The Canadian Forest Service reports that 60 percent of 3,105 reserves – that is, 1,871 reserves – either lie within or intersect with the wildland-urban interface, where communities are at higher risk from wildfire because of their proximity to boreal forest. Between 1980 and 2019, 389 First Nations communities were evacuated in Canada because of wildfire, with approximately 138,000 evacuees. In 2011 alone, twenty-nine First Nations communities were forced to evacuate, and some communities have had to evacuate multiple times. For example, one of the community partners, Lac La Ronge Indian Band, evacuated one or more of their reserves in Saskatchewan fourteen times between 1980 and 2017. In the same period, the Neskantaga First Nation and Nibinamik First Nation settlement of Summer Beaver, Ontario, were evacuated twelve times. Some First Nations may even be evacuated multiple times in one summer. Another community partner, Deer Lake First Nation, for instance, was evacuated twice in July 2011. Five hundred residents were evacuated in a partial evacuation on July 6. They returned home on July 13, but just over one week later, on July 21, a second partial evacuation occurred.

The Canadian Forest Service predicts that, with climate change, fire-prone conditions will increase by one and a half to four times and that First Nations will see an increased risk of wildfire compared to non-Indigenous communities because there will be shorter periods between fires.



Many First Nations are at risk from the effects of wildfire because of their location. But other factors connected to their history of colonization make them more susceptible to the impacts of natural hazards in general:

- *physical factors*: substandard housing and lack of evacuation plans and routes
- *social factors*: lower education levels, chronic health issues, and overcrowding
- *economic factors*: few paid work or business opportunities in communities.

Organizations that keep statistics on Indigenous Peoples such as Statistics Canada, the Assembly of First Nations, and the First Nations Information Governance Centre report that housing crises occur on

many reserves because of chronic underfunding by the federal government. Many residents live in homes that are built of substandard materials and suffer from mould issues, and because there are not enough homes to go around, homes are often overcrowded. Many reserves have only one access road, and some have none, which means that when wildfires force evacuations, residents must leave via boat or aircraft.

First Nations communities tend to be quite young, with young children outnumbering Elders. Education and income levels are generally low and unemployment rates high, trends that result in “poverty” in the Western sense. Many adults have not completed high school, and some reserves do not have in-class schooling options for all grades. In many cases, students can go to a local community elementary or middle school, but students who wish to attend high school may need to enroll in online distance-education programs or spend the school year living outside their community in a town or city with a high school. Chronic health issues are also common. First Nations have high rates of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and respiratory conditions.

Indigenous Peoples object when the term “vulnerable” is used to describe them. They feel that this word stigmatizes and overlooks their strength as peoples who have withstood centuries of colonial policies intended to destroy their cultures. Colonial governments and some non-Indigenous researchers employ the term in studies that emphasize the weaknesses caused by colonialism rather than Indigenous Peoples’ resilience. For example, many First Nations used to practise cultural burning; they used fire to manage natural resources and to reduce the impact of wildfire on their communities. Today, however, most aren’t allowed to burn in their Traditional Territories because of government fire-suppression regulations. Many statistics also reflect Western sensibilities regarding what is valuable in society. If Indigenous Peoples can live successfully off the land, does it matter if they have a high school diploma? Would having a high school diploma lessen the impact of wildfire? Not likely.

The Boreal Forest's Wildfire Cycle

The forest that breathes life into many First Nations is the boreal. If you've spent time deep in the boreal forest in the winter, you know it's a place that may seem barren but is in fact teeming with life, sustaining generations of people. During the winter, as cold temperatures and snow blanket most of Canada, the forest sleeps. The days are short, sometimes lasting only a few hours. In northern Plains Cree, also known as Y-dialect, the month of December is known as pawācakināsīpīsim (the frost-exploding moon), a time when the trees crackle with cold. It is a time of rest, but this rest is needed because the remainder of the year will be a busy time. When the cold lifts, the boreal forest springs to life as the water runs, the birds return from the south, and the leaves bud. When the forest awakens, so too does wildfire.

The boreal forest regenerates itself through fire. It needs to burn to stay healthy and grow. Pine cones pop open with the heat, releasing seeds that create new forest. In the absence of fire, the boreal forest becomes old and fuel-loaded. Animals have a hard time moving around. Ungulates such as deer, elk, and moose cannot find the fresh young grass they need to put on weight in the summer. This impacts the rest of the food chain.

Fires are necessary, but when they happen, they can be intense and damaging. Although most people think the most dangerous times for wildfire is during the summer, another dangerous period occurs in the spring, generally in May. This time is known as the spring dip, a time when vegetation greens up but the moisture content is at its lowest.

By raising the voices of evacuees, we draw attention to chronic, recurring issues that occur during wildfire evacuations. More important, we present positive examples of what First Nations have done, are doing, and can do to reduce the impact of wildfires on their members. Our case studies demonstrate that external agencies must

take a community's context into account in any evacuation plan. For example, a fly-in community will have a different experience leaving via Hercules aircraft than will a First Nation evacuating by road. Their experiences provide a good foundation on which to build recommendations for effective, seamless evacuations that place as little stress on residents as possible.



Cultural Burning

Indigenous Nations have lived sustainably in what is now Canada since time immemorial – for as long as their stories can remember. Indigenous Peoples used fire as a tool to help them manage their territories – to ensure that the ecosystems they lived in could sustain their communities. Many Elders from Indigenous Nations across Canada refer to using fire as “cleaning” the forest. Fire knowledge holders from the community would generally set fires of low intensity during the early spring or late fall, when the fire risk is low. These fires burned deadfall or overgrown underbrush, returning nutrients to the earth, which in turn promoted the quick growth of new grass, berry bushes, and medicinal plants. By reducing some of the fuel load, these fires ensured that fires that started in higher hazard periods (such as on a hot summer day) would have less fuel to burn, rendering them less likely to get out of control.

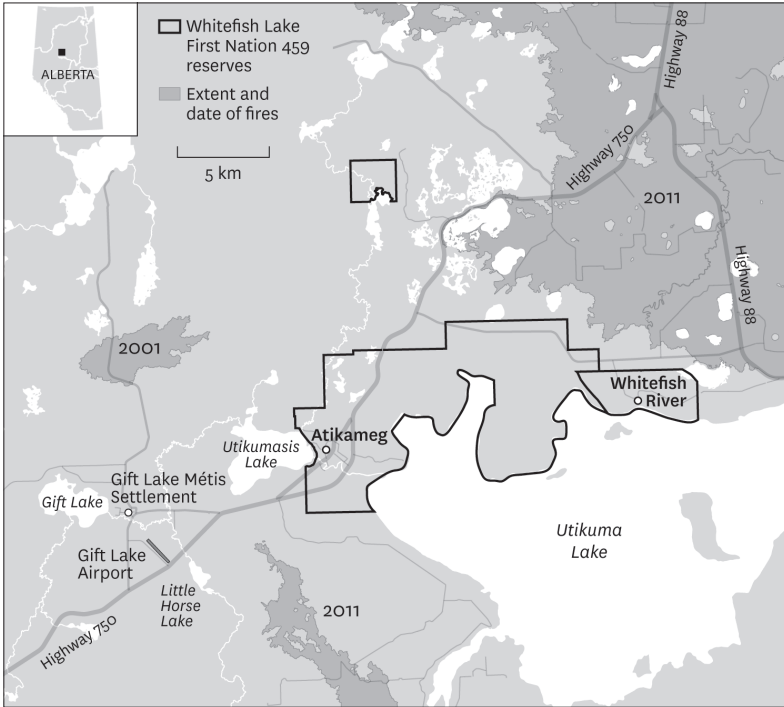
Community Spotlight

Whitefish Lake First Nation 459, Alberta

In May 2011, the Utikuma Complex Fires caused the evacuation of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459, which is located in north-central Alberta. The main reserve, Utikoomak Lake 155, spreads over 6,756 hectares and has two main settlement areas at Atikameg and Whitefish River. The reserve, located about one hour northeast of the more well-known community of Slave Lake, is accessible by Highway 750 and the Bicentennial Highway (AB-88). Two beautiful lakes – Utikuma Lake, located on the southeast border of the reserve, and the smaller Utikumasis Lake, immediately to the west – offer opportunities for subsistence and recreational activities. The surrounding forest is primarily deciduous, but there are pockets of thick spruce and pine throughout the territory. As in other First Nations communities, the spring dip can be a worrisome time when residents are on the lookout for wildfire.

Whitefish Lake has roughly 2,700 registered band members, and about 1,200 of them live on reserve. More than half of the population speaks Cree at home. The unemployment rate is high – around 35 percent – and income levels are considerably lower than the provincial average. Despite these challenges, the First Nation recently opened a stunning new school, Atikameg, which is K-12 and hosts about two hundred students from Whitefish Lake and nearby Gift Lake Métis Settlement. Fishing and hunting remain important activities in the community.

When wildfire threatened the community in 2011, the evacuation lasted two weeks for most evacuees and three weeks for pregnant women, families with babies, and residents with pre-existing health issues. No lives or homes were lost, but the community suffered significant damage to its infrastructure, including its water and sewage plants.



▼
 The Utikuma Complex Fires burned close to the communities of Whitefish Lake and Atikameg, and damaged important infrastructure.

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