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Beyond the Flames

A First Nation Perspective
on Wildfire Preparedness
and Recovery

FIRST NATIONS RESILIENCY COLLECTIVE -
WAABANG-GIIZHIG



ActionCanada

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Magnolia Perron is a proud member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte from Tyendingaga Mohawk Territory. She is the Director of Strategy and Partnerships at the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association and a 2024 Ottawa Business Journal and Ottawa Board of Trade Forty Under 40 recipient. Magnolia holds a master's in Indigenous Nationhood and a Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Policy and Administration. She is a strong advocate for Indigenous entrepreneurship and economic growth, with extensive experience in policy, research and partnership development.



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Taylor Behn-Tsakoza is a Dene and Dunne Zaa woman from Fort Nelson First Nation, with roots in Prophet River First Nation, Treaty 8 territory. She holds a bachelor's degree in Health and Physical Education and completed a master's in Indigenous Land- Based Education. Taylor is an elected Councillor for her Nation and works as Community Liaison for Tu Deh-Kah Geothermal. A former national youth leader, she advocates for climate action, youth leadership, food sovereignty and meaningful community engagement.



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Terri Cardinal-Nayawatatic is a nehiyaw iskwew (Cree woman) from Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6 territory. She is a Community Learning Coordinator and Instructor in the Social Work program at University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimákanak Blue Quills. Terri holds a Master of Indigenous Social Work and has extensive training in social work, leadership and early childhood development. An Esquao Award recipient, she is deeply committed to supporting children, families and community wellbeing.



POSITIONALITY OF THE AUTHORS

We approach this work with humility, respect and ongoing reflection when engaging with First Nations communities. We do not speak on behalf of any First Nation; all interpretations presented are our own.

This project is grounded in a First Nations rights-based framework that recognizes inherent rights, sovereignty and jurisdiction over emergency management, land stewardship and climate resilience. Our approach is informed by the Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP®) Principles and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), prioritizing Indigenous knowledge alongside Western emergency management practices and engaging community members as experts. We followed an iterative process, immersing ourselves in the subject matter to identify relevant literature, publicly available materials, experts, professionals and community representatives with wildfire experience in Canada.

This work relied on the generosity, knowledge, and lived experiences shared by First Nations leaders, community members, and experts. Within the project timeline, we interviewed key stakeholders with permission to incorporate their words into this work and remain accountable for representing their contributions with integrity. We also acknowledge the broader colonial context shaping

emergency management systems and reaffirm the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty, community protocols, and Indigenous-led research approaches.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Action Canada acknowledges that its work takes place on the traditional lands and territories of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples across what is now called Canada. We recognize the enduring connection between Indigenous peoples and these lands, and we are committed to contributing to reconciliation through our learning, partnerships, and leadership development work.

DISCLAIMER

This project was undertaken pursuant to an Action Canada Fellowship, a national policy engagement and leadership development program delivered in partnership with PPF and Action Canada. The views, opinions, positions or strategies expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, positions or strategies of PPF, Action Canada, the Action Canada Foundation or the Government of Canada.

About the Artist



KEELY THOMPSON COOK

Keely Thompson Cook is a proud Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) woman from the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory in Southern Ontario and Northern New York. She is a self-taught graphic artist and is visually inspired by woodland themes, nature and waterways to create motifs and designs through a Haudenosaunee lens. Keely is also inspired by her late father and artist, Derek Cook, who she is reminded of every day and credits her talents and creativity to. Cultural symbolism plays a large part in the direction and visual storytelling of her designs.

FIRE BAND

This design element is a custom rendition of a Haudenosaunee Sky Dome Band that carries deep symbolism of the Creation Story. The flame at the centre of each dome represents fire's vital role in sustaining life, culture and community, while inviting reflection on its enduring importance within Haudenosaunee traditions. Also featured in each dome are symbols of water or waves to represent the balance these two elements bring to our ecosystems.

KINDLED CHANGE

The design is a symbolic representation of what fire usually brings – transformation. Featured in the shape of a leaf, this design draws a connection to our woodlands during the transitional season of autumn, highlighting a period of renewal. The flowing forms within the leaf, combined with its ember-lit colour palette, echo the living energy and movement of flame as it dances, bends and spreads.

BALANCE

The design reflects the interconnectedness between the land, water, sky and all living beings. At the centre stands the Tree of Peace, symbolizing the theme of unity, drawn directly from the Great Law of Peace. Surrounding the tree are representations of life across our ecosystems: fish moving through water, plants and medicine emerging from the roots, and an eagle soaring above. The sun radiates life and energy, while the circular form enclosing the design represents continuity, cycles and the balance of the natural world.

THE CARRIER

The design centres on the shell of a turtle, a powerful symbol of our land and the responsibility we have to protect it. Rising above the turtle are mirrored plant forms bearing motifs that connect back to the Celestial Tree, emphasizing balance, growth and reciprocity within the natural world.

Executive Summary

Across northern First Nation communities, wildfires have caused disproportionately significant loss of homes, infrastructure, cultural resources and livelihoods.

ACCOUNTS FROM FIRST NATION communities and community-led organizations, along with findings from Public Safety Canada and Indigenous Services Canada, reveal significant gaps in preparedness, including outdated emergency plans, limited local fire response capacity and complex funding processes. Slow disbursement of funds through the Emergency Management Assistance Program (EMAP) and other federal programs has delayed rebuilding efforts and prolonged displacement and disruption for residents. Coordination challenges among federal, provincial, and First Nations governments have resulted in uneven response timelines, exacerbating existing inequities between communities.

Overall, the problem is twofold: First Nations communities are insufficiently supported to proactively prevent and prepare for wildfire emergencies, with inadequate resources for wildfire prevention and mitigation, and a lack of integration of Indigenous expertise. And when wildfire disasters occur, existing emergency response systems often create additional social, cultural, psychological and economic harms. Emergency needs in First Nations communities are distinct and shaped by cultural, linguistic, geographic and historical contexts. For some evacuees, wildfire displacement means leaving their home territory for the first time, often for unfamiliar urban settings. These circumstances underscore the importance of culturally relevant supports in mitigating trauma and maintaining community cohesion. Access to traditional foods, ceremonies, youth programming and culturally grounded wellness supports helps evacuees cope with displacement and loss.



Innovative Indigenous-led emergency management initiatives, such as Rez Cross and the Turtle Team, emerged as effective models for ensuring culturally appropriate response and recovery, strengthening trust, and supporting more equitable outcomes for affected communities. Their experiences offer principles that can be translated into practice for community-driven models in emergency response and recovery, centring Indigenous leadership, relationships, and ways of knowing and doing.

The communities we spoke with demonstrated remarkable adaptability and strength. Their responses highlight the need for emergency management systems that recognize and support Indigenous governance, cultural practices, and community expertise. Addressing these gaps requires policies and programs that strengthen Indigenous-led emergency management of natural disasters such as wildfires, and the prioritization of holistic recovery processes that integrate cultural knowledge to provide culturally relevant wrap-around services. The following recommendations address the specific realities of northern and remote First Nations communities. Together, they point toward a more effective, humane, and people-centred emergency management approach that is relevant beyond these contexts.

1. Strengthen Indigenous-Led Emergency Management Capacity

- Provide stable, multi-year funding to support permanent Emergency Management Coordinators, updated emergency plans, comprehensive training, and a national peer network for continuous capacity building.
- Ensure stable, year-round funding for Indigenous-led emergency response models that deliver coordinated, culturally grounded, wrap-around support through regional crews, rapid response teams and emergency hubs.

2. Shift Federal Funding Toward Prevention, Preparedness, and Rapid Response

- Invest in FireSmart protection programs, defensible perimeters, structural fireproofing, and essential equipment such as water tenders, fire shelters and air support.
- Ensure funding parity with neighbouring municipalities, provide upfront flexible funding through programs like EMAP, and establish regional emergency contingency funds accessible directly by First Nations.
- Prioritize procurement and contracting with Indigenous-owned businesses to strengthen local economies, reduce delays and improve emergency response efficiency.

3. Ensure Culturally Grounded Supports During Evacuations and Recovery

- Fund Indigenous-led emergency services year-round to provide culturally safe supports, including traditional foods, ceremonies, counselling and Indigenous healing practices.
- Ensure evacuees remain together and close to home when possible, with wrap-around support for Elders, youth and families, and integrated mental health, addiction and trauma-informed care.
- Develop shared situational assessment tools and integrate climate and wildfire forecasting into emergency planning.
- Ensure full First Nations representation in provincial and federal Emergency Operations Centres and joint decision-making processes.

4. Invest in Critical Infrastructure and Access

- Improve roads, bridges, water and air access, prioritizing year-round and climate-resilient routes.
- Build resilient community infrastructure, fireproof housing, defensible perimeters, and evacuation staging areas.
- Incorporate future climate projections into all infrastructure planning to ensure long-term safety.

5. Strengthen Coordination Across Jurisdictions

- Appoint permanent local coordinators to connect community knowledge with provincial and federal systems.

Introduction & Background

Canada is home to 1.8 million Indigenous peoples, including over one million First Nations people across more than 630 communities representing more than 50 Nations.¹

THESE COMMUNITIES ARE RESPONSIBLE for preparing for and responding to emergencies using local resources, supported when needed by federal, provincial and non-governmental organizations such as Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Canadian Red Cross.

Wildfires are increasing in frequency, severity and duration in Canada and globally, driven by climate change.^{2,3} Longer wildfire seasons and extreme fire events pose serious threats to human health, food security, ecosystems and natural resources, particularly in northern and remote communities.⁴ Many First Nations are in geographically remote areas, increasing their susceptibility to wildfire hazards and the likelihood of evacuation. During the 2023 wildfire season, 93 First Nations were affected by 106 wildfires, with over 25,000 people being evacuated.⁵

Despite ISC spending \$828 million on emergency management support for First Nations between 2018 and 2022, wildfire impacts continue to deepen due to structural inequities such as chronic infrastructure deficits, health disparities, limited access to emergency services, and the ongoing impacts of colonial policies.⁶ Outdated or poorly adapted emergency plans can worsen existing inequities, leading to harms such as family separation, disrupted cultural ties, and long-term distress.^{7,8,9} These effects are often intensified in urban evacuations due to language barriers, discrimination, culturally inappropriate responses, and limited access to health services.^{10,11,12}

Beyond social and cultural harms, repeated wildfire emergencies create significant economic costs, especially at regional and territorial levels where

evacuations can halt local economies.¹³ In northern and remote areas, prolonged evacuations lead to business closures, lost income, and broader community impacts. Natural Resources Canada estimates wildfire costs can be 1.5 to nearly 20 times higher than protection spending, with federal support covering only 6 – 20 percent of losses and the rest falling on households, local businesses, and non-profits.¹⁴ Additional impacts include health harms from smoke exposure, disrupted local economic activity, and long-term declines in quality of life and environmental conditions.^{15,16}

The evidence points to a clear problem: current wildfire management systems are not designed to meet the realities of First Nations communities. This report begins by outlining the broader context and challenges facing First Nations communities during wildfire emergencies. It then highlights community perspectives and lived experiences to show how existing systems fall short. Next, the report explores Indigenous- led approaches to emergency preparedness and response. Finally, it concludes with key insights and policy recommendations to support more effective, culturally relevant, and community-centred emergency management.

25,000

people evacuated during the 2023 wildfire season.

Policy Gaps & Challenges

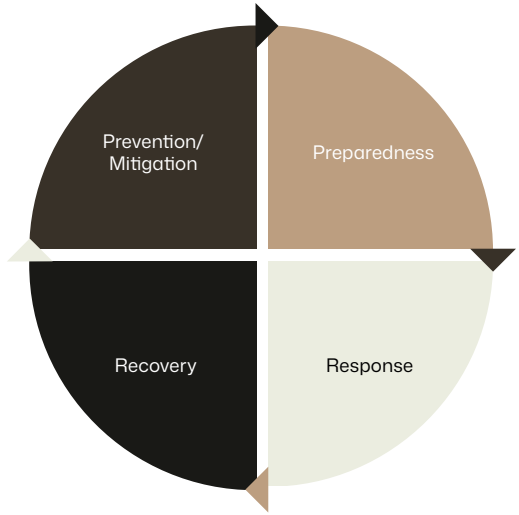
The gaps faced by First Nations communities in wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery stem from historical and structural inequities, and the system's reliance on one-size-fits-all approaches create challenges that affect all four phases of the emergency management cycle.

1. Insufficient Funding for Preparedness and Mitigation

There is substantial evidence that every dollar spent on preparedness can save between \$7 - \$10 in response and recovery costs.¹⁷ According to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada,¹⁸ funding has prioritized response and recovery over proactive preparedness and mitigation, with real costs to communities. While Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) provides funding for preparedness and mitigation through EMAP, most funds continue to flow toward disaster response. Proposal-based funding mechanisms further disadvantage communities with limited administrative capacity, leaving highly vulnerable First Nations under-resourced for cost-effective mitigation interventions despite repeated wildfire exposure.¹⁹ Compounding these challenges, the federal government has not consistently used risk-based assessments to identify the First Nations most exposed to wildfire threats, which means funding for preparedness and mitigation often does not reach the communities that need it most, leaving them under-resourced despite repeated wildfire exposure.²⁰



FIGURE 1:
Emergency
management cycle



2. Limited Integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Leadership

Although Indigenous communities have long-standing fire stewardship practices, these are frequently undervalued or excluded from wildfire management plans.²¹ Western-centric emergency management approaches often conflict with Indigenous priorities, undermining community self-determination and resilience. Indigenous-led practices, such as cultural and prescribed burning, have been shown to reduce fuel loads, protect culturally significant areas, and support ecological diversity, yet they are rarely incorporated into provincial fire management strategies.^{22,23,24} Evidence indicates that meaningful Indigenous participation in decision-making leads to more effective wildfire management and improved community preparedness.²⁵

3. Infrastructure Deficits

More than 70 percent of northern and remote First Nations communities report having to contend with significant infrastructure deficits, including inadequate housing, roads and fire protection systems, reflecting a legacy of colonial neglect and chronic underfunding.^{26,27} The Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030 report estimates the investment needed to close this gap at \$349.2 billion, underscoring the scale of underinvestment in basic community infrastructure.²⁸ Poorly maintained evacuation routes and limited access to water supply for firefighting amplify the effects of wildfire hazards, while post-evacuation recovery is hampered by damaged housing, community centres, health facilities, and power and water systems.²⁹ As the Office of the Auditor General of Canada noted in 2022, these gaps compromise the ability to mitigate, prepare for and respond to wildfire emergencies, leaving communities reliant on reactive measures rather than proactive solutions.

4. Weak and Fragmented Emergency Response and Evacuation Planning

Emergency response plans are often outdated or not aligned with community realities, leaving First Nations underprepared for rapid evacuations. In some cases, regions moved from no evacuation planning to full evacuation within 24 hours, forcing tens of thousands into urban centres that were unprepared to receive them. Evacuation processes frequently overlook social, mental and cultural needs, and relocations may place communities in distant urban centres that trigger past trauma.

In urban settings, Indigenous evacuees may face culturally inappropriate supports, discrimination, and barriers to health services, compounding displacement trauma.³⁰ Mainstream relief organizations, including the Canadian Red Cross, may also lack systems that align with Indigenous needs or timelines, leading some First Nations leaders to resist external involvement.³¹

These challenges are further compounded by jurisdictional tensions between federal and provincial responsibilities, particularly for First Nations that are federally funded but rely on provincially led emergency services. This “push-pull” dynamic can delay action and create inequities when neighbouring municipalities are mobilized and compensated more quickly. Ultimately, these gaps disrupt family and community cohesion, undermine cultural practices, and contribute to long-term stress.^{32,33}

5. Inadequate Post-Evacuation Recovery

Recovery planning is often underdeveloped or absent, leaving communities to rebuild homes, infrastructure, and community facilities with minimal support. The lack of structured post-event mental health, social and financial assistance programs exacerbate trauma and delays recovery.³⁴ Many First Nations also face structural barriers to affordable insurance: premiums and availability are tied to local fire protection services, so communities with limited fire protection receive lower insurance grades, higher costs or limited coverage. Underinsurance and uncertainty about eligibility for compensation frequently delay rebuilding and increase pressure on federal assistance programs and community resources.³⁵ As a result, many communities continue to face fiscal, emotional and social challenges years after evacuation.

While these gaps reflect systemic and policy-level failures, their impacts are most clearly felt in the lived experiences of First Nations communities. The following section presents key findings from community perspectives, highlighting how wildfire preparedness, evacuation, displacement, and recovery are experienced on the ground across Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories.

Key Findings: Community Perspectives

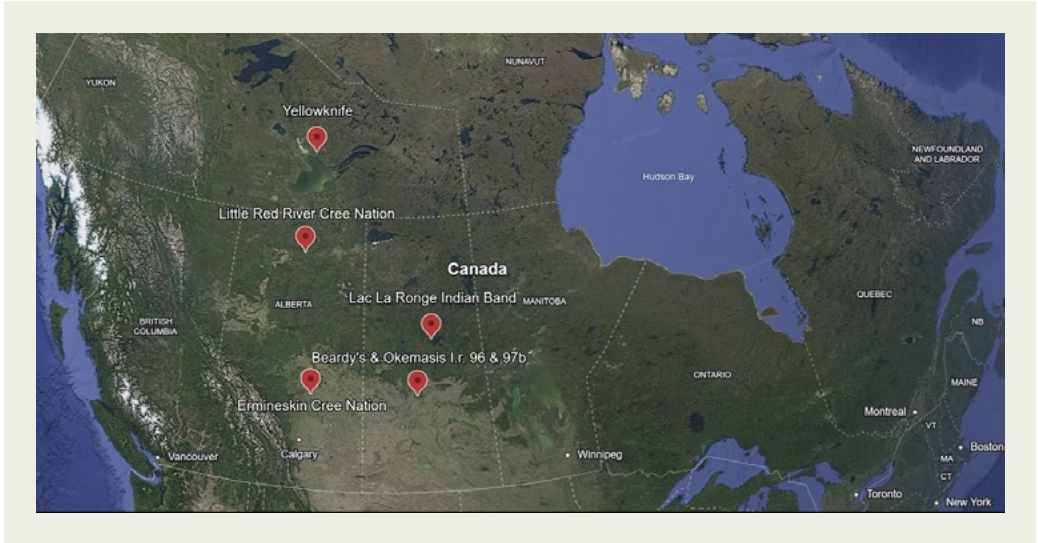


FIGURE 2: Map of the geographic distribution of the communities consulted in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories.

Beyond the Flames: Impacts of Wildfires and Displacement

In the Northwest Territories, the 2023 wildfire season brought upheaval on an unprecedented scale: over 3.4 million hectares burned, and up to 70 percent of the NWT population experienced evacuation displacement that year.^{36,37} Residents were relocated to southern urban centres and even neighbouring provinces.

“People were all over – the government had headquarters set up in Edmonton to help situate people until they could come home safe,” recalled a community member. Among the 19 communities evacuated was Behchokò, the territory’s largest First Nation community with more than 1,700 citizens. Beyond relocation, the fires disrupted access to traplines, medicines, and traditional foods, underscoring the broader cultural impacts of evacuation.

In May 2023, in northern Alberta, the Paskwa Fire forced the evacuation of over 4,000 residents from Fox Lake, the largest and most remote community within Little Red River Cree Nation. The Nation consists of three Cree communities, with the majority of its 5,500 members living in Fox Lake. The only means of evacuating Fox Lake was by barge along the Peace River, and at one point, that single evacuation route was under immediate threat. Amid the chaos, volunteers rescued between 150 and 160 abandoned animals.



FIGURE 3: Geographic area of the Behchokǫ Dene Nation and Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories during the 2023 wildfire.

Source: Razu Ahmed, [Fire situation map, 2023](#)



FIGURE 4: Map of wildfires across Alberta in 2023, with location of the impacted community of Little Red River Cree Nation.

Source: D. Huggard, B. Allen, & D. Roberts, [Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute, Effects of 2023 wildfires in Alberta, 2024](#)

Fox Lake alone lost nearly 90 homes and critical infrastructure, including water treatment and local stores. Beyond the immediate danger, the emotional and cultural toll was profound. One community member described the loss vividly: “You lose personal belongings, family heirlooms ... memories of your child’s home being blown up in flames.” They also reported that wildfires destroyed access to traditional medicines and food sources, disrupting subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering, and threatening cultural practices deeply tied to these lands and resources.

In Saskatchewan, the Pisew Fire of 2025 prompted evacuation orders for La Ronge, Air Ronge and surrounding Lac La Ronge Indian Band reserves, threatening over 141,000 hectares. According to local reporting, losses included 13 homes, businesses and cultural landmarks such as the historic Robertson Trading Post, illustrating that wildfire consequences extend to economic and cultural security.³⁹ Emergency support, coordinated by local leadership and the Canadian Red Cross, provided cots, blankets and prepaid transportation cards for residents. Physical support alone could not address the psychological and cultural impacts: “Even if the houses stand, the trauma doesn’t leave,” one community member said.

Meanwhile, the Ermineskin Cree Nation in Maskwacis, Alberta, confronted a wildfire in 2025 when a fast-moving grass fire spread out of control, destroying several homes and prompting evacuations. Although the incident was smaller in scale and did not involve mandatory, large-scale evacuations, it nonetheless exposed serious challenges in emergency response capacity and coordination, underscoring the vulnerability of First Nations communities to rapidly evolving wildfire threats.



FIGURE 5: Map location of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in Saskatchewan amid wildfire impact.

Source: [SaskLakes, 25LA-PISEW Fire, 2025](#), with data from [Canadian Forest Service](#)

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Emergency Preparedness and Response Challenges

Across communities, emergency preparedness gaps amplified the impact of wildfires. “We were never prepared to evacuate 4,000 people ...” a member of Little Red River Cree Nation reflected, “and then 8,000 people the next year.” In 2024, the Nation faced another fire and another evacuation order. By then, the complexity of evacuation had doubled. Although evacuation plans existed prior to the fires, they were not designed for an event of this scale, underscoring the need for a more robust, detailed plan.

Members of the Behchokò Dene Nation identified outdated emergency plans and insufficient local resources as critical gaps in wildfire preparedness. As one community member explained, “You can’t just spend money during an emergency ... we need permanent funding for training and equipment.” Similarly, a community member of the Ermineskin Cree Nation emphasized the absence of accessible emergency response systems during the 2025 fire: “There was no way to call ISC when our house was under threat of flames ... local knowledge was all we had.” The community member also pointed to significant gaps in emergency planning capacity, noting that “emergency preparedness often meant knowing who worked in band offices ... but there was nobody with that job title.”

An Ermineskin Cree Nation community member echoed these concerns, describing how response teams were overstretched during wildfire events: “Every hour counts when evacuating vulnerable populations like Elders and children.” Collectively, these accounts highlight the importance of trained local responders, dedicated emergency management roles, and pre-established protocols to ensure timely and culturally appropriate emergency response. The community member stated: “Emergency decisions should not be made within frameworks of environmental racism ... our lives are not worth less than others.”

On the ground, effective emergency response depends heavily on local coordination and leadership. Members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band emphasized that while outside partners provided support, decision-making power ultimately remained beyond local control. In response, the communities of La Ronge, Air Ronge and Lac La Ronge Indian Band established a shared, tri-community Emergency Operations Centre, where key information on fire behaviour, response activities, and evacuations was consolidated, enabling more coordinated and timely local action.

Coordination, Funding and Housing Gaps
Coordination challenges during emergencies were reported by community members. A community member from Ermineskin

Cree Nation noted that access to federal and provincial support was unreliable: “Federal support promises often vanish, leaving families homeless and dependent on relatives.” Further, the community member explained, families are exposed to impact because “insurance is prohibitively expensive – sometimes double the amount of federal funding for all programs in a year ... leaders are caught between a rock and a hard place.” A member of Little Red River Cree Nation observed, “The federal government was faster than the provincial government ... the province said, you’re federally funded, we’re not responsible.” Many leaders stressed the need for more responsive and flexible systems and “the human perspective.” Both Behchokò Dene Nation and Lac La Ronge Indian Band stressed the importance of community-centred governance for culturally relevant decision-making during crises.

Accessing funding in the aftermath was a shared challenge that impacted housing and recovery. A community member of Little Red River Cree Nation explained: “Painfully difficult to deal with ISC ... but that’s who we have to work with,” noting that rigid program requirements and slow funding timelines hindered recovery efforts. Similar frustrations were echoed by a community member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, who emphasized that the lack of upfront, flexible funding

forces Nations into reactive crisis management. They explained that with adequate funding and a proper evacuation plan in place, communities would not be “scrambling so much,” noting that while their Nation has an emergency response coordinator, there is limited capacity to act without resources. They questioned why emergency capacity is often built within external organizations rather than within Nations themselves, especially as evacuations become more frequent.

Delays in disbursement from federal programs through EMAP and ISC created bottlenecks in recovery and reconstruction. As one community member from Little Red River Cree Nation explained, “The biggest barrier is that building houses has come to a screeching halt ... the money’s just not moving through the channels fast enough to help.” They further explained the scale of displacement and overcrowding: “Housing shortage already – 20 plus people living in one home, very overcrowded, living in make-shift cabins.” While temporary housing solutions were implemented, rebuilding permanent homes has stalled: “There should be a faster process for reimbursement for what community costs are incurred.” A member from Ermineskin Cree Nation noted: “Losing the security of a home is monumental ... my siblings had only the clothes on their back – everything else was lost.” They further critiqued performative

support: “First Nations leadership are caught between promises of support and the reality of being left to manage crises alone.”

Culturally Relevant Supports

Cultural continuity and mental wellness were central concerns during evacuations. Behchokò Dene Nation highlighted these as: “Wrap-around supports, traditional foods, hand games ... it gives people comfort in a stressful situation.” Additionally, the Little Red River Cree Nation emphasized the importance of access to traditional medicines and food sources. A member from Lac La Ronge Indian Band explained that “Other Nations ... took our people in ... One Arrow has a culture camp ... they had all of our home care clients there the first day. I would cook breakfast for all the Elders out there ... they’re comfortable and safe.” They went on to further state, “They have no obligation to us ... but they still went out of their way to help us out because they saw we were in need.” Both Lac La Ronge Indian Band and Ermineskin Cree Nation reinforced that culturally safe approaches are essential as they reduce trauma and help maintain community cohesion.

Indigenous-Led Models of Emergency Preparedness and Response

Rez Cross and the Turtle Team illustrate two complementary Indigenous-led emergency response models: Rez Cross demonstrates community-controlled evacuation coordination and infrastructure rooted in local authority, while the Turtle Team exemplifies a mobile, wrap-around support model that addresses the cultural, emotional, and practical needs of First Nations evacuees during displacement.

Rez Cross: Community-Led Emergency Coordination

As a volunteer grassroots initiative, Rez Cross emerged in July 2015 in Beardy's & Okemasis Cree Nation (BOCN) in response to large-scale wildfires that displaced thousands of people in northern Saskatchewan. It became an Indigenous-led response loosely modelled after the Canadian Red Cross, where evacuees were hosted in the BOCN hockey arena, emphasizing community authority, culturally grounded decision-making, and local control. Over time, it evolved into a recognized community-based emergency coordination model, with the arena certified by the Prince Albert Grand Council as an official evacuation site, activated during wildfire events. Although modest in size, it has rapidly adapted to meet basic needs and demand, including food preparation, showers, family sleeping areas and a communal space, eventually including hired local cooks, reinforcing both reliability and cultural familiarity.

Rez Cross prioritizes keeping families and community members together as a central value in First Nations emergency experiences. As former BOCN Councillor Kevin Seesequasis stated, "It's great that we're able to provide that service and ensure that people can stay together ... and offer the type of hospitality that they're used to."⁴⁰ For evacuee Clarence Morin, who arrived at the BOCN hockey arena in 2015 after being displaced from Hall Lake, the Rez Cross approach offered dignity and reassurance: "They've actually made us feel at home here ... They don't tell us what to do," Morin told CBC News.⁴¹

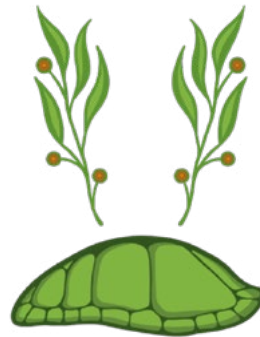
Rez Cross has the ability to act independently during emergencies. A member notes they could “make the decisions as we need to make them” without relying on external permission. Having the team and resources at home allows communities to proactively plan for recurring wildfire threats and potential evacuations they would face, rather than waiting for external agencies unfamiliar with local conditions.

Rez Cross also highlights the importance of culturally safe environments during evacuation. Interviewees noted that they knew of Elders and families placed in unfamiliar urban settings and subjected to surveillance or lineups. Community-led centres enabled families to remain together and provided wrap-around support, including food, hygiene supplies, youth programming, mental health services and recreational and cultural activities. “First Nations people take care of First Nations people the best,” the interviewee stressed.

Funding and jurisdictional fragmentation create major barriers to replicating Indigenous-led emergency response models like Rez Cross. Emergency funding is often inadequate, slow, and tied to reimbursement processes, forcing communities to front costs, making it difficult to sustain operations during predictable wildfire seasons. As one representative of Rez Cross asked, “Why isn’t there a pot of money that’s always just available specifically for wildfire season, when it happens every year?”

They further noted, “You can have the idea of Rez Cross and want to do it, but if you don’t have the funding in place, it’s going to be tough. It’s expensive.”

Despite these constraints, Rez Cross demonstrated the effectiveness of Indigenous-led evacuation infrastructure during the 2015 wildfire response. By contrast, evacuees housed in nearby urban centres often encountered confusion, overcrowding and inconsistent access to services. Rez Cross interviewees described cases in which evacuees were turned away from urban evacuation sites due to documentation requirements, miscommunication between agencies, or rigid eligibility rules – barriers that are especially harmful during rapid evacuations when individuals may flee without personal belongings.



Turtle Team: Holistic Support for Evacuees

Founded in Manitoba in January 2021 as part of the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba (FNHSSM), the Turtle Team began as a COVID-19 response unit, offering wrap-around emergency, cultural, advocacy and family supports to First Nations people displaced from home. In the years since, it has evolved into an Indigenous-led emergency support service for wildfires, floods, and other evacuations (FNHSSM, 2023).

DURING COVID-19 and subsequent emergencies, the Turtle Team has provided on-the-ground support to evacuated First Nations individuals and families, including coordination with health and social services, emergency housing and basic needs support, advocacy and system navigation. It also provides culturally specific wellness supports such as access to Elders, ceremony and sweat lodges. In non-pandemic emergencies, the Turtle Team continues to support evacuees before, during and after displacement, navigating housing, income assistance, child and family services, and addressing racism and safety concerns. Advocacy is a key part of the mission. One staff member noted, “If we didn’t have to spend so much time trying to make people treat us with respect, we could have targeted more of our time and energy to our people.”

Although the Team does not operate evacuation transportation, it supports evacuees once relocated by helping secure appropriate accommodations, addressing safety concerns, facilitating reimbursement processes, and mediating with external agencies such as emergency social services, health authorities and the Canadian Red Cross. This model addresses a key gap in conventional emergency response, which often treats evacuation as a logistical issue rather than a cultural and emotional disruption.

The Turtle Team’s approach is grounded in Indigenous governance and the Seven Sacred Teachings: *Courage, Honesty, Humility, Love, Respect, Truth, and Wisdom*. As one staff member explained, “The only thing we could do was operate with the foundation of our teachings.” Choice, dignity and community

TABLE 1: REZ CROSS & TURTLE TEAM

| FEATURE | REZ CROSS | TURTLE TEAM |
|----------------|--|--|
| Focus | Operational coordination | Holistic evacuee support |
| Scope | Regional: infrastructure & planning | Community-level: cultural & emotional care |
| Key Services | Evacuation centres, training protocols | Health, housing, safety and spiritual care |
| Core Principle | Community-led operational authority | Seven Sacred Teachings: Courage, Honesty, Humility, Love, Respect, Truth, and Wisdom |

participation are central principles: “We really focus on what communities need, what individuals need, what they want. They have to be part of the plan.”

Despite strong political support and unanimous First Nations resolutions calling for permanent funding, the Turtle Team faces chronic funding instability. Short-notice mobilizations create safety and operational challenges: “We were called on a Sunday and asked if we could pull up the Turtle Team the next day ... It’s too difficult.” Their experience highlights why culturally grounded, Indigenous-led response models are needed, and why they must be sustainably funded. The Turtle Team’s vision is to support First Nations in establishing local Turtle Teams, creating a network of rapid, culturally safe responders: “We really need an Indigenous, First Nations-led organization to do this.”

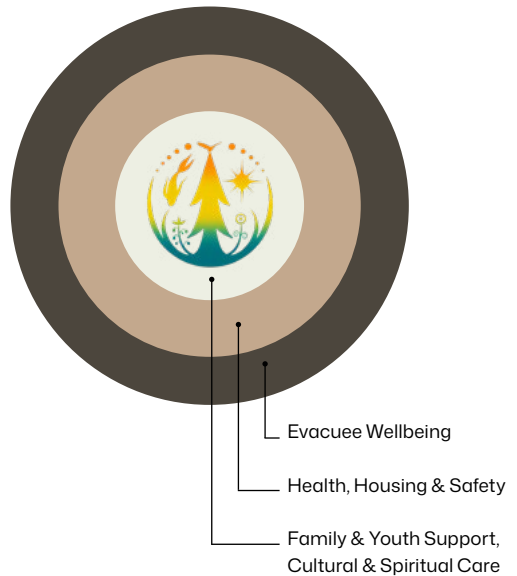


FIGURE 6: Diagram of Turtle Team culturally grounded support flow of wrap-around care

So what now?

First Nation organizational attempts to reform emergency response signify progress and promise. As part of its National Climate Strategy unveiled in 2023, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) identified a priority area: “Ensure First Nations are equipped to mitigate, prevent, respond, and recover from all emergencies.” The following recommendations are the first step in heeding this call.

Policy Recommendations

Based on evidence from community case studies, federal audits and best practices, we propose the following recommendations, which prioritize actionable steps to reduce risk, improve response, and strengthen resilience for northern and remote First Nations communities. All policy, funding and operational decisions should be co-developed with First Nations and recognize Indigenous governance, knowledge, and priorities.

01

Strengthen Indigenous-Led Emergency Management Capacity

First Nations emphasized the need for trained local responders and Indigenous leadership in emergency decision-making, stressing that communities should “fight our own fires” with locally grounded knowledge, staffing and infrastructure.

Key Actions

- Provide stable, multi-year funding to all First Nations communities to support permanent Emergency Management Coordinators, develop and regularly update emergency plans, and offer comprehensive training in risk assessment, forecasting and evacuation coordination, along with access to a national peer network for sharing best practices and continuous capacity building.
- Ensure stable, year-round funding to strengthen Indigenous-led emergency response models to deliver coordinated, culturally grounded, wrap-around support to evacuees through regional crews, rapid response teams and emergency hubs.

02

Shift Federal Funding Toward Prevention, Preparedness, and Rapid Response

Reform funding mechanisms to be proactive, flexible and equitable, ensuring resources are immediately available to meet rapidly evolving crises and prioritize First Nations communities.

Key Actions

- Invest in FireSmart protection programs, defensible perimeters, structural fireproofing, and essential equipment such as water tenders, fire shelters and air support.
- Ensure funding parity between First Nations communities and neighbouring municipalities, provide upfront flexible funding through programs like EMAP, and establish regional emergency contingency funds that First Nations can access directly.
- Prioritize procurement and contracting with Indigenous-owned businesses to strengthen local economies, reduce delays and improve emergency response efficiency.



Source: iStock Illustration ID: 2216151380, 2025

03

Ensure Culturally Grounded Supports During Evacuations and Recovery

Evacuations disrupt not only physical safety but also mental health, cultural practices and community cohesion, so emergency responses must be culturally relevant and grounded in local context, traditions and community values.

Key Actions

- Fund Indigenous-led emergency services (e.g., Rez Cross and the Turtle Team) year-round to provide culturally safe support, including traditional foods, ceremonies, counselling and Indigenous healing practices.
- Ensure evacuees remain together and close to home whenever possible, with wrap-around support for Elders, youth and families, and integrate mental health, addiction and trauma-informed care into all evacuation and recovery services.

04

Invest in Critical Infrastructure and Access

Limited infrastructure magnifies wildfire risks and slows safe evacuation, particularly in northern and remote communities.

Key Actions

- Improve roads, bridges, water and air access to communities, prioritizing year-round and climate-resilient routes.
- Build resilient community infrastructure, fireproof housing, defensible perimeters, and evacuation staging areas.
- Incorporate future climate projections into all infrastructure planning to ensure long-term safety.

05

Strengthen Coordination Across Jurisdictions

Coordination breakdowns reduce emergency effectiveness, so communities need reliable situational awareness and integrated decision-making supported by government partnerships that include First Nations perspectives.

Key Actions

- Appoint permanent local coordinators to bridge community knowledge with provincial and federal systems.
- Develop shared situational assessment tools and integrate climate and wildfire forecasting into emergency planning.
- Ensure First Nations are fully represented in provincial and federal Emergency Operations Centres and joint decision-making processes.



Source: [iStock Illustration ID: 1134501990_2019](#)

These recommendations prioritize capacity, funding, culture, infrastructure and coordination while operating under a rights-based, Indigenous-led framework. Implementing them will reduce risk, support recovery and strengthen resilience for First Nations communities facing increasingly severe wildfire threats.



FIGURE 7: Illustration of the pillars of First Nations-led wildfire emergency management

Conclusion

THE EXPERIENCES of First Nation communities affected by wildfire emergencies reveal both acute vulnerabilities and profound resilience. Losses extend beyond property and infrastructure to cultural heritage, subsistence resources, and community wellbeing. While federal and provincial systems provide critical support, gaps in coordination, funding, and culturally appropriate services persist, often delaying recovery and compounding trauma.

The lessons learned underscore that meaningful collaboration with First Nation communities demands proactive planning, flexible funding, and recognition of local knowledge and leadership. A coordinated approach that centres Indigenous voices, prioritizes cultural continuity, and invests in both mitigation and preparedness is essential. Although these findings are grounded in the experiences of a selected group of First Nations communities in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories and do not capture every regional context across Canada, they offer valuable lessons for strengthening disaster preparedness and response nationwide.



Appendix

List of Interviewees

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