



Resilience Rising:



Esquao

Institute for the Advancement
of Aboriginal Women

Indigenous Women Speak

Stories Shared and Lessons
Learned from the 2023
Northern Alberta Wildfires





Acknowledgment

Kinanâskomitin, marsi cho, thank you. We extend our heartfelt gratitude and deepest appreciation to all those who contributed to this research project.

Your insights, experiences, and wisdom have illuminated the path toward understanding the profound impacts of wildfires in our communities. We acknowledge the resilience, strength, and enduring spirit of your communities and the individuals who shared their stories to enrich our collective knowledge.

We honour Mother Earth, the sacred source of all life. In navigating the complexities of this research, we recognize the interconnectedness between our humanity and the natural world. Our

commitment to preserving and honouring her delicate balance is reaffirmed through Indigenous Knowledge gleaned from these invaluable contributions.

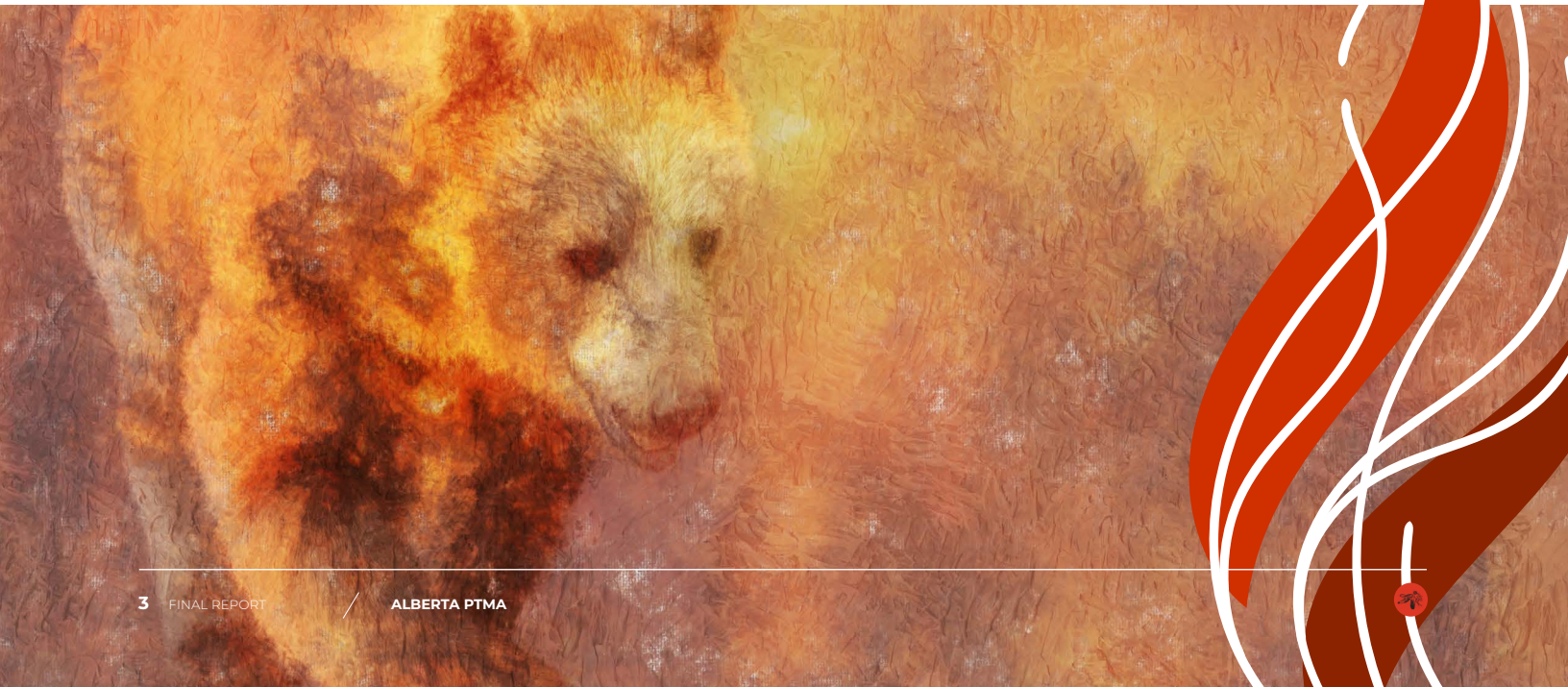
In the face of climate change, Indigenous communities stand on the frontlines, feeling its impacts and protecting Mother Earth, their sacred lands, and, by extension, all of humanity.

May our collective responsibility to protect and preserve Mother Earth be informed by the lessons shared here and beyond. Through understanding, respect, and collaboration, we can strive for a future where our interconnectedness is upheld and revered.





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Introduction

Throughout history and into the present day, Indigenous Peoples in Canada and around the world have been at the forefront of fire mitigation and prevention efforts (Lake & Cardinal Christainson, 2019; McGee & Cardinal Christainson, 2021). Colonial policies and settler practices have criminalized and suppressed Indigenous fire practices, which are traditional land management techniques aimed at rebalancing ecosystems and preventing wildfires. Today, the dominant approach to wildfire management is rooted in a colonial approach that prioritizes fire suppression. This approach often overlooks Indigenous land management techniques and knowledge, resulting in inadequate responses to wildfires that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities (Hoffman et al. 2022; Kristensen & Reid, 2016; Schmidt & Peterson, 2009).

In 2023, an unprecedented wildfire season cast a shadow of smoke over much of Canada and the world (Zurowski, 2023). The intricate dance between global climate change and the surge in catastrophic wildfires in Alberta resulted in 1,092 wildfires scorching a staggering 2.2 million hectares of land—a record-breaking event that reverberated with a multitude of consequences. Although the number of fires aligned with the five-year average, the extent of devastation soared to new heights, witnessing a tenfold surge in the average hectares consumed. The repercussions were acutely felt by 48 Alberta communities, compelling the



evacuation of over 38,000 individuals during an extended period from March 1 to October 31, 2023 (Mertz, 2023).

This research aims to amplify the voices and experiences of Indigenous women and their communities affected by the 2023 Alberta wildfires. By centering the perspectives of community members and fostering safe and

culturally appropriate dialogue led by community, this research seeks to centralize the role of Indigenous women during wildfires and inform policy initiatives, resource allocation strategies, and support system development tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous communities across Alberta. Through interviews with seven Indigenous women and three Indigenous men from East





In future research endeavours, we recommend a direct focus on exploring the experiences and impacts of wildfires specifically among the 2SLGBTQ+ community. By delving into this area, we can gain valuable insights into the unique challenges, vulnerabilities, and needs of this community during wildfire events. This targeted approach will not only provide a more comprehensive understanding of wildfire impacts but also facilitate the development of tailored strategies and support systems to address the diverse needs of the 2SLGBTQ+ community in times of crisis.



Prairie Métis Settlement, Dene Thà First Nation, and Kapawe’no First Nation, the scale and intensity of the wildfires and the challenges they posed, which strained conventional firefighting resources, leaving indelible changes to their lands and communities, was revealed. Understanding the multifaceted impacts of wildfires on Indigenous communities in Alberta is crucial for developing effective mitigation strategies, policies, and support systems. By engaging directly with community members, this project uncovers their unique challenges, resilience strategies, and resource needs.

As some 2023 fires continue to burn today, with little snowfall, and almost no aftercare for communities, these Nations are already planning for another unpredictable wildfire season. Each anticipates that in 2024, wildfires will come earlier, last longer and may extend to communities without any historic experience. Therefore, there is an immediate need for policy changes and resource allocations to ensure Indigenous communities across the province are prepared and equipped to respond safely and protect their lands, communities, and cultures.





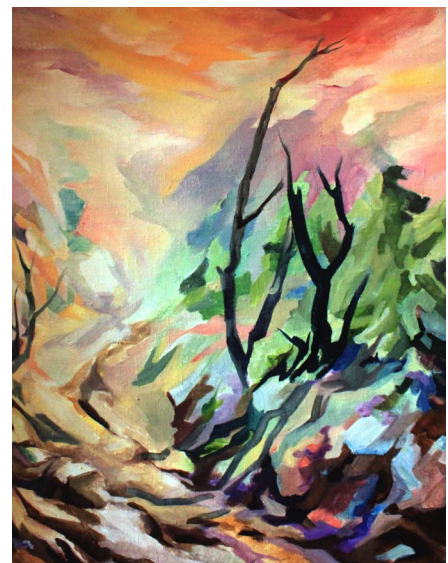
Research Methodology

The research methodology of this project centered on conducting interviews through four engagement sessions with citizens of East Prairie Métis Settlement, Kapawe’no First Nation and Dene Thà First Nation. Leveraging online platforms such as Zoom, interviews were facilitated with the informed consent of participants and recorded to ensure accuracy and thoroughness. Participants were intentionally selected based on their knowledge and experience of the 2023 wildfires in their communities. All names of participants included in this research are pseudonyms. The voices of the three Indigenous women from East Prairie Métis Settlement, two from Dene Thà and two from Kapawe’no First Nation are centralized in this research to honour their

knowledge, experiences, and contributions to protecting their communities.

Three Indigenous men, two from Kapawe’no First Nation and one from Dene Thà also provided invaluable input, enriching the contextual understanding of wildfire impacts and community resilience efforts. Their involvement helped shed light on situational details and available resources, contributing to the analysis of the research findings. To express gratitude for their participation and honour their time and contributions, each participant received a \$50 honorarium, and the Indigenous women received a small gift from the Native Women’s Association of Canada. Each participant was provided with a copy of a draft of this report for review and validation.

Despite the initial focus of this project on Indigenous women and Two Spirit individuals, the absence of Two Spirit participants from the selected communities is evident. Efforts were diligently made to ensure the inclusion of Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people. However, despite outreach and engagement with community members, no suitable candidates were identified to participate in the project in the limited timeframe. We acknowledge and recognize that it remains imperative to strive towards inclusivity and representation in research endeavours, particularly concerning Indigenous Two Spirit people.



East Prairie Métis Settlement

COMMUNITY INTRODUCTION

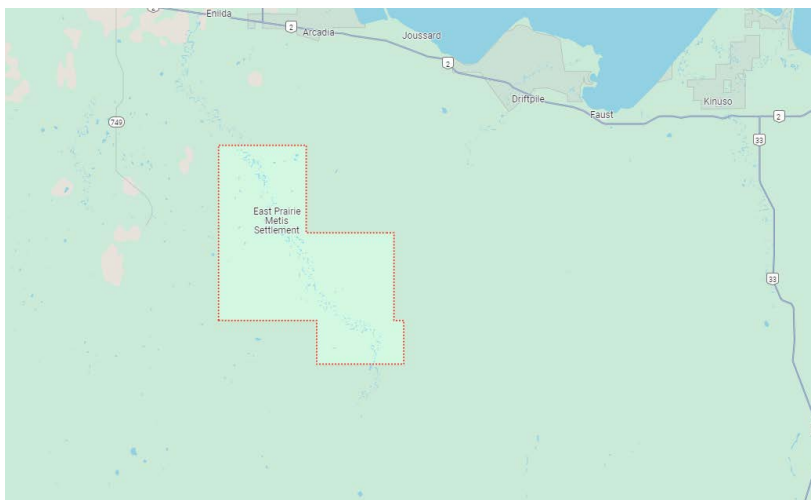
East Prairie Métis Settlement (hereafter East Prairie) is one of eight Métis Settlements across Northern Alberta. Established in 1939, East Prairie is situated in northern Alberta, nestled within Big Lakes County. Positioned approximately 168 km east of Grande Prairie and 40 km south of High Prairie, the settlement is home to a population of under 1,000 people and spans a land area of 33,444 hectares.

Embracing its rich cultural heritage, East Prairie Métis Settlement continues to prioritize traditional harvesting activities, with hunting as an integral part of community life. The Settlement boasts a diverse economy, encompassing industries

such as forestry, oil and gas, transportation, and construction.

East Prairie features essential infrastructure, including a water treatment plant, lift station, lagoon, fire hall, health centre, children’s day care, school, outdoor arena, and reliable natural gas and electrical supply.

A notable presence within the settlement is the wildland firefighters, a team of professionally trained Métis firefighters, contributing to the community’s safety and resilience (Métis Settlement General Council, 2023).





Recent Wildfire Experience

“It’s devastating. That’s my life. We’re going to stay and try to rebuild.”

- CAROL JOHNSTON, EAST PRAIRIE MÉTIS SETTLEMENT (“WILDFIRE DEVASTATES”, 2023).

In May 2023, 87 Alberta wildfires, 24 of which were out of control, led to the displacement of over 16,000 people (“This fire has”, 2023). East Prairie Métis Settlement found themselves amid this escalating emergency as a wildfire spiralled out of control. On May 5, 2023, the imminent threat prompted a one-hour evacuation notice of over 300 residents from the settlement, as the fire rapidly approached from the south. Carmen, a citizen of East Prairie and a nurse, vividly described the swift progression of the fire, underscoring the urgency of the evacuation,

“I was like, ‘It’ll never get here. It has to jump three rivers to get here.’ And it did, instantly, within hours because of how windy it was.”

Following Carmen’s account, Terry, another East Prairie citizen shared her perspective,

“It felt like an apocalypse, it was like a battle zone or a war.”

► **WILDFIRE-SCARRED ALBERTA MÉTIS SETTLEMENT PUSHES FOR SECOND ESCAPE ROUTE**

Ron Bellerose walks through burned trees on what was the site of his home in East Prairie Metis Settlement, Alta., Wednesday, July 5, 2023. Bellerose’s home was destroyed by a wildfire on May 5, 2023.

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jeff McIntosh



Throughout the three-week period of wildfires and evacuations, the resilient citizens of East Prairie had to take it upon themselves, with minimal external assistance, to safeguard their community. Unfortunately, the fires resulted in the loss of 27 homes and a critical bridge.

A revealing CBC interview on May 14 featuring East Prairie Chairman Raymond Supernault and Drayton Valley Mayor Nancy Dodds highlighted the stark contrast in support mechanisms for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Alberta (“This fire has”, 2023). Both leaders were asked about the extent of external assistance they received. Mayor Dodds detailed the substantial aid to her community,

“The support’s been tremendous. We have many people on the ground helping us to fight this fire. We have experts at the table giving us advice on next steps. Alberta Forestry, Provincial Government, Oregon Fire, Fire fighters across Canada”

(“THIS FIRE HAS”, 2023).



▲ **‘THIS FIRE HAS DEVASTATED MY COMMUNITY’: EAST PRAIRIE MÉTIS SETTLEMENT CHAIRMAN.**
(2023, May 14). CBC.





In stark contrast to Mayor Dodds’ account, Chairman Supernault of East Prairie painted a picture of isolation and self-reliance during the critical period. Expressing a poignant sense of neglect, he stated,

“We’ve never seen nobody. No one reached out to East Prairie. I’d love the help if somebody would reach out to me!”

(“THIS FIRE HAS”, 2023).

The absence of external aid forced the community to navigate the challenges alone. Chairman Supernault’s closing statement resonated with a sense of determination and resilience, encapsulating the spirit of the East Prairie community,

“Regardless of who’s there, we’re going to put this fire out.”
 (“THIS FIRE HAS”, 2023)

The glaring disparity in support points to the systemic challenges faced by Indigenous communities, amplifying the urgent need for equitable disaster response policy and response strategies.

Chairman Supernault’s sentiments were echoed by the Indigenous women in the community as they shared their stories. Carmen shed light on the collective resilience through the pivotal roles her husband and sons played in protecting the community. Amid the raging fire, they chose to stand their ground in the battle against the encroaching flames. She explained,

“One son was out there for 36 hours. [Our] commitment to community is strong. I’m pretty proud of my family and my kids.”

Carmen’s son was instrumental in the community’s fight against the fire and saved their home. She vividly described how they watched the fire advance toward their house from their home security camera. Carmen called her son who was stationed at the fire truck. He quickly responded by deploying the fire truck to douse the approaching threat. Carmen, her family, and all East Prairie citizens showcased both individual bravery and a deep commitment to protecting their homes and community.



Those who lost their homes were provided with new modular trailers.



While the flames left scars of destruction in their wake, the wildfire aftermath brought forth a commitment from the Alberta Government. In July 2023, a \$9 million fund injection from the Indigenous Housing Capital Program was allocated to support housing redevelopment in East Prairie (“Alberta government”, 2023). Those who lost their homes were provided with new modular trailers. Among them was Terry. During our interview she shared that she recently transitioned to her new home. She opted for a similar style to her previous home to maintain a sense of familiarity and

continuity in the face of such upheaval. Her story highlights the connection between the physicality of a home and its significance as a locus of family, love, and belonging. Importantly, four families are still waiting for their new homes. Despite this significant commitment from the government, the community’s resilience, and determination to rebuild remain. As East Prairie continues its recovery, addressing housing needs and enhancing critical infrastructure and fire safety are essential to ensure the community’s long-term well-being and safety in the face of future challenges.



The Role of Women



In Indigenous communities, women are a vital force shaping the very essence of familial and communal life. As matriarchs and leaders, Indigenous women stand as pillars of strength, wisdom, and resilience. Amidst the chaos and urgency of the East Prairie wildfire, the heartbeat of the community could be found in the tireless efforts of Indigenous women. They embraced multifaceted roles, from nurturing their families to actively participating in firefighting efforts and extending care to the broader community. This section highlights the indispensable contributions of Indigenous women—whose actions reverberate embodying the spirit of community, kinship, and endurance.

East Prairie has a contractual agreement with Alberta Forestry to maintain four dedicated wildland firefighting crews. There are approximately five or six women actively engaged in firefighting tasks, mirroring the efforts of their male counterparts, including tasks

like pulling hose lines, showcasing the role of women in critical emergency response teams.

While some were on the frontlines of the fire, Carmen explained that for her, one of the hardest parts of the evacuation was staying behind while her husband and children fought the fire in the community,


“We weren’t allowed to go there. I struggled staying behind. I was in the hotel by myself while my family was out there helping.”

To contribute to the ongoing efforts of the firefighters, a group of women including Carmen, took it upon themselves to start making meals at the community hall. They not only fed people in person but also took meals out to the field crews. As donated food was coming to the community, it was cold and it “wasn’t what they were used to or what they would normally eat” (Carmen). Making meals gave Carmen a tangible way to contribute despite the overwhelming feeling of helplessness. She shared that it also fostered a sense of unity within the community because when they shared a meal, they could debrief, laugh, and cry.

◀ **CARROL JOHNSTON PASSES AN INDENTATION** where her home stood before a May wildfire destroyed it in the East Prairie Metis Settlement, Alberta, on Tuesday, July 4, 2023. Johnston, who has been living in a nearby town, is awaiting a modular home so she can return to the land. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Additionally, during the evacuation, some Indigenous women including Marlene were dedicated to feeding the animals that were left behind. She explained,



“I was helping feeding people, getting supplies, feeding animals left behind. I arranged for [the horses] to get hay.”

The efforts of these women reflect a commitment to communal well-being and a deep-seated respect for the interconnectedness with and compassion for all life. The contributions of Indigenous women, alongside the men, are the steadfast anchors of community, embodying the essence of communal care, courage, and unyielding spirit.



Dene Thà First Nation

COMMUNITY INTRODUCTION



Dene Thà First Nation’s main economic activities include a gas station food store, other stores (hardware, crafts, fur purchasing), a laundromat, a post office, a bottle depot, snack and coffee shop, Dene Thà Construction and natural gas distribution. Member-owned businesses provide a taxi service, home building and electrical services, and small engine repair (Dene Thà, 2023).

Dene Thà people place a high value on their way of life. With a rich cultural history, hunting and trapping have always been essential to Dene Thà people. It is said that they “live everywhere” on the land without boundaries.

As part of the North Peace Tribal Council (NPTC), Dene Thà First Nation, a Dene speaking community, has approximately 3,000 citizens (on and off three reserves - Chateh, Busche River, and Meander River). With over 350 dwellings, the Nation has a school that provides kindergarten through grade 12 education to more than 450 students. They provide social supports to their

citizens that includes post-secondary education resources, health and nursing services, social assistance, adult in-home care, the Winbert Didzena Memorial Children’s Centre, alcohol counselling services, a family violence healing team, community health resources, and Child and Family Services provided by the NPTC Child Welfare Agreement.

The Nation has offices in Chateh and Meander, public works buildings in Chateh, Busche and Meander, and the Four Chiefs Complex in Bushe River. Municipal services include water and sewer systems, a fire, water, and sewer truck, respectively.

▼ THE DENE THÀ FIRST NATION LANDS AND ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT (2011)

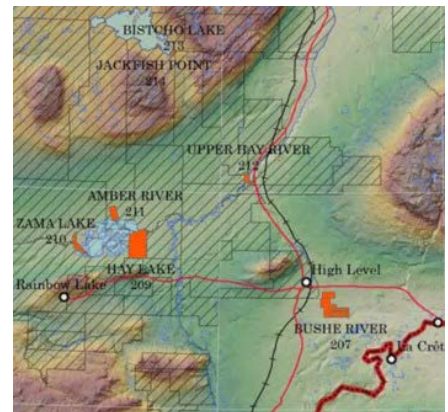


PHOTO ABOVE:

▲ THE DENE THÀ FIRST NATION plans to establish a temporary camp with trailers, kitchen and laundry facilities to accommodate 400 people, possibly for the rest of the summer. (CBC) May 25, 2023





Recent Wildfire Experience

Dene Thà First Nation, home to approximately 1,200 residents on reserve, faced two evacuations during the 2023 wildfire season, with Chateh evacuating twice (Long Lake Fire, May 13-Jun 5 and Bassett Lake Fire Sept 22-29) and Meander River was placed on high alert once (Sousa, 2023). Fortunately, no homes were lost to fires this year, allowing everyone to return home safely. These wildfires marked the fourth and fifth such occurrences since 2018. Dene Thà has extensive expertise in flood and wildfire emergency management in part due to the increasing frequency of such events in their community. Donna, the Deputy Director of Emergency Management (DEM) in Chateh and expert with over 35 years in emergency management, emphasized the uniqueness of each evacuation, stating, “Every evacuation is different. So, you learn where improvements can be made for next time.”

Before Dene Thà had its own fire department, community members took matters into their own hands to combat fires. Donna shared a story from years ago when she and her family would put out grass fires before forestry officials even arrived. Chateh now boasts its own fire department in its second year, with over 10 women firefighters from the Chateh community. This multifaceted emergency response team underscores the community’s emphasis on both preparedness and resilience, contributing significantly to the community’s safety and wellbeing.

The number of wildfires and the

influx of additional evacuees from Northern communities, including Fox Lake Little Red Cree Nation, strained the available resources in High Level, the closest town. Dene Thà purchased vacant land in town to build a temporary camp specifically for disaster response with essential facilities to accommodate about 400 people. However, before the camp could be fully functional, 800 people were evacuated from Chateh in May 2023. Given the widespread fires and the entire province grappling with the crisis at this time, the Nation made efforts to keep community members together in tents and at the Meander River Evacuation Centre.

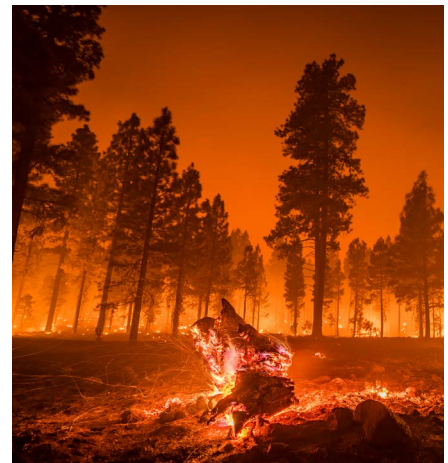
Prior to the May evacuation, Chateh was not on evacuation alert from the province. Alberta Wildfire assured the community that Chateh was safe, but as darkness fell, they lost track of the fire. Adrienne, a Dene Thà citizen and Deputy DEM in Meander River shared,

“But at 9 o’clock at night the fire was moving at 20 metres a minute. Chateh was not even on an alert when they were evacuated. Only after the Nation made the call, then Alberta Wildfire put Chateh on alert.”

When Donna saw the fire approaching the community, she called Dene Thà Chief, the Fire Chief, and the RCMP. The evacuation began immediately, and the entire process took six hours. The community is organized

into five zones, the Emergency Management Team went door-to-door to evacuate citizens and transport them out on a bus. Donna clarified that, due to the imminent threat of the fire, she could not prioritize the evacuation of Elders, those with chronic illnesses, or families with small children first, a departure from the approach taken in previous events.

With no other emergency route, the community had to take the backroad highway out of their community. The departure of oil companies from the region left this road without any service or maintenance. Donna pointed out the potential consequences as a result, stating that, “If it had rained, it would have been bad.”





Rallying Together

MEANDER RIVER EVACUATION CENTRES

Within three hours of the community evacuation notice, Adrienne, the Meander Deputy DEM, and her team, had a full evacuation centre set up for Chateh residents in Meander River (approximately two-hour drive).

Adrienne shared that, “It was my first time in this role, so it was challenging. But I had people to go to, to ask questions.” As Meander prepared for the evacuees’ arrival, a full operations centre was set up by Busche River at the Four Chiefs Complex.

The Meander Nation office and school hosted approximately 71 evacuees for approximately six weeks. Adrienne explained that the set up,

“was a huge effort... [the] community rallied together and dropped off meals [for evacuees].”

She credits Donna’s leadership and forward thinking during the Covid-19 pandemic to purchasing cots and bedding. Since the end of the pandemic, the Nation pivoted

this equipment to disaster planning and response. All equipment is stored in an easily accessible sea can that is accessed when needed.

Following their return home, Donna and her team went door-to-door again to follow up with community members. She shared that, “a lot of them haven’t even unpacked because that fire is still going.” With no snow to date, the community remains in a state of anticipation and concern about future fires or flash flooding in early spring.



The Role of Women

Dene Thà First Nation emergency services benefit from the leadership of the three Indigenous women who act as volunteer Deputy Directors of Emergency Management. With a history of organizing successful community evacuations since 1979, Donna in particular is highly valued by Adrienne and the Director of Emergency Services for her dedication and expertise.

In the face of recurrent wildfires and floods, the Dene Thà Deputy DEMs assume critical roles in coordinating responses within and between their communities. In response to these crises, Indigenous women are pillars of strength in the emergency services

team and community. These women played crucial roles in transportation, security, logistics, and the overall incident command structure, showcasing their education, leadership, and skills in navigating emergency situations. Donna explained more about the relationship and role women play during crises,

“The women in our community play a major role. The women are the ones who take care of their siblings, other family members. And on top of that, I take care of them.”

Donna continually finds herself in leadership roles because of her skills, expertise, and care for her community. As ecological disasters increase from year-to-year, Adrienne explained,

“Even in the community, while the Director is a man, in meetings, everyone will turn to Donna to make decisions or answer questions.”





Throughout her stories of the 2023 evacuations, Donna explained that life continues to go on for their citizens therefore “the services we provide have to continue.” In her effort to take care of her community, she has everything set up and ready to continue through evacuations, so members get their medications filled, attend doctors’ appointments, and nurses, and physicians continue their practice in the community twice a week. Indigenous Services Canada provided mental health support as well as Northern Counselling Services. Even in the case of a death in the community during an evacuation, Donna ensures that ceremony and burials still happen. Despite the indispensable contributions of these women, John, the Director of Emergency

Management shared that overall, there is a prevailing lack of recognition for the capabilities of Indigenous women and Two Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse people within the disaster and emergency management framework.

Beyond the formal and informal responsibilities of women on the DEM team, women in the community hold many other responsibilities for their families. Adrienne explained that in the face of a community crisis,

Everyone in the community experiences



high levels of stress during a wildfire evacuation because, like Adrienne explained, “you don’t know if you’re going to go home, to a home.” However, due to the responsibilities of women during this time, they may feel added stress particularly in regard to caring for their families. Adrienne continued that for women, “It was very stressful, especially for moms who had older kids because some of them started drinking.”



“Women are the ones that it gets put on them to make all the decisions and certain members are left in their care. In the second evacuation at the camp in High Level, I noticed a lot of the young girls from Chateh were put in charge of their elderly family members. Not just the care of their family but also decision making.”



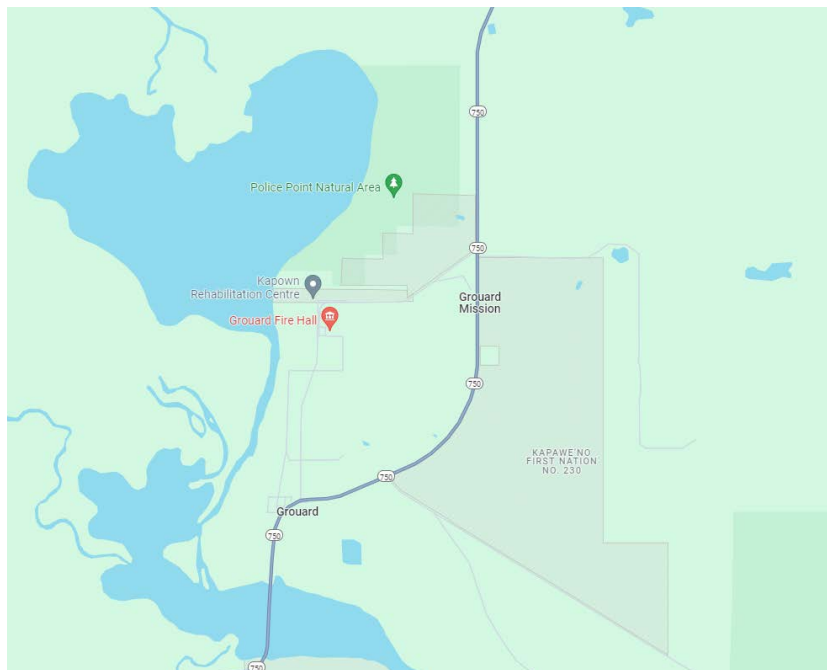
Kapawe’no First Nation

COMMUNITY INTRODUCTION

Kapawe’no First Nation is a Cree community located in Grouard, about 30 km Northeast of High Prairie, Alberta. The Nation’s six reserves include 1,562 hectares of land. Kapawe’no’s governance system is a hereditary system. Former Chief Frank Halcrow became Chief of Kapawe’no First Nation in 1970 and served the Nation for 50 years before passing on January 2, 2020 (Kapawe’no First Nation, 2024). The Nation’s current Chief Sydney Lee Halcrow has been instrumental in his support for his and other communities.

According to 2016 Canada Census, Kapawe’no’s population is 160 people. The Nation is a part of the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council along with Driftpile Cree Nation, Sawridge First Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation, and Swan River First Nation (Government of Canada, 2021).

The Nation owns an oil and gas company which services include oil field leases, heavy equipment, and consulting services. In addition, Kapawe’no offers heavy equipment training for its citizens (Government of Canada, 2021).



▲ GOOGLE MAPS (N.D)





Recent Wildfire Experience



“First Nations people are raised to take care of our families, friends, neighbours. You treat them like your family as best as you could. You always give them something better than for yourself. First Nations people are so welcoming, loving and caring. That’s just how we were raised!”

- ALANNAH, KAPAWE’NO FIRST NATION RESIDENT AND PEAVINE MÉTIS SETTLEMENT CITIZEN

Alannah’s quote above reflects some of the deep-rooted care for embedded in First Nations cultures. She provides insight into why Kapawe’no First Nation opened its community as an evacuation centre during the 2023 wildfires. At the time in early May 2023, the nearby lake was still covered in ice and the situation was dire. East Prairie Métis Settlement was already ablaze. Jean, a Kapawe’no Elder shared that, “Sometimes you couldn’t even see the sun, it was so smoky.” This was the first time Kapawe’no, one of the smallest Nations in Treaty 8, had been placed on a wildfire evacuation alert. While surrounded by fires, they seamlessly transitioned from being on alert to becoming a ‘safe zone.’

In a compassionate response, the Kapawe’no leadership led by Chief and Council, extended a helping hand to their neighbouring communities.

The Nation transformed into a fully operational evacuation centre within days, featuring a 24/7 registration centre, 10 beds dedicated to Elders, 30 additional beds, Covid-19 isolation facilities available for families, and they opened their school to accommodate more evacuees. For seven and a half weeks, Kapawe’no welcomed 133 evacuees, predominantly from Peavine Métis Settlement, Whitefish Lake First Nation, Gift Lake Métis Settlement, and non-Indigenous families. Alannah explained that had Peavine not had Kapawe’no’s support,

“Where would they have went? They wouldn’t have had nowhere to go had we not opened this evacuation centre. They maybe would have had to go to Edmonton or Slave Lake.”

Similar to East Prairie and Dene Thà, Peavine citizens found themselves fighting the fires independently. During our interviews, Kapawe’no staff commended their efforts in safeguarding their community from the threat of wildfires. Kapawe’no’s open-hearted hospitality was inclusive, reflecting a spirit of generosity that embraced anyone in need. In a lighthearted remark, Kapawe’no staff highlighted how Kapawe’no “treated everybody right, and they didn’t want to leave.”

At their own expense, the Nation procured essential supplies like bedding and towels, ensuring the comfort of all evacuees. A dedicated security team was in place to guarantee the safety of both evacuees and Kapawe’no citizens. The daily warm hospitality and quality meals quickly became well-known in the region, attracting interest from others seeking refuge. Despite



the demanding circumstances, Kapawe’no staff, away from their own families, devoted long hours to supporting evacuees, organizing daily activities such as games, art activities, movie nights, horseshoes etc. Special events, including friendly competitions for the ‘best fan’ on Oilers game nights, added a sense of community. Peavine citizens actively took on responsibilities, including cleaning and assisting at

the evacuation centre, contributing to the collaborative effort. Disaster Management staff emphasized the concerted effort to uplift people’s spirits during this challenging period. In addition to their extensive support, Kapawe’no had nurses, doctors, a mental health response team, and translators on-site to meet the diverse needs of evacuees. Alannah concluded by capturing the collective sentiment across communities and the

heightened need for awareness and preparedness as they face the prospect of a challenging spring 2024,

“We don’t have much snow here. My dad [Wildland Firefighter] predicts a dry summer. They already know what’s going to come in the summertime.”





The Role of Women

Kapawe’no’s Disaster Management Team acknowledged the pivotal role women played not only during the evacuation, but also in their daily life and cultural fabric. Most of Kapawe’no staff, predominantly women, balance nurturing and authoritative responsibilities. Alannah described their role as “home fire keepers,” albeit on a larger scale for both their community and evacuees during the evacuation. She explained,

“Women played a strong role. [There was] lots of caring for other people, that was our job. Make them feel as comfortable as possible because they were not at home.”

(ALANNAH).

While gender may influence

specific tasks, Alannah and Jean emphasized that in emergency situations, equality prevails. Each person’s role is valued, and each assumes a unique role, and a cohesive family dynamic can emerge. Jean shared, “It becomes one big family-working together.” The contributions of women during the evacuation and their integral roles in daily life at Kapawe’no stand as a testament to the resilience deeply ingrained in Indigenous communities. In times of crisis, women blend nurturing and leadership roles, exemplifying a communal strength that transcends challenges. It’s crucial to acknowledge the tremendous effort and amount of work that goes into these responses, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of communities facing adversity.



2023 Wildfires Lessons Learned

This section highlights the lessons learned by each Nation through the 2023 wildfires to ensure that their needs are both individually acknowledged and collectively addressed. By examining the insights gained from navigating the challenges posed by the wildfires, we endeavour to honour the diverse perspectives and experiences of Indigenous communities and pave the way for informed policy, strategies, and actions in wildfire management.

The loss of the forest has far-reaching consequences, affecting traditional practices such as hunting and medicine picking, and disrupting the delicate balance of the river system. Additionally, the changed environment has led to increased encounters with wildlife such as bears, deer and moose around homes and posing new challenges for the community.

DENE THÀ



1. IMPACT ON INDIGENOUS CULTURES, MOTHER EARTH AND THE FOUR-LEGGED

EAST PRAIRIE



With 80 per cent of the settlement now reduced to ashes, the aftermath involves the removal of burned trees, altering the landscape, and eradicating the once vibrant Boreal Forest. Forestry officials are not only clearing away the remnants but also capitalizing on the remaining standing trees for economic gain.

Over the last few years, the Nation witnessed significant changes to their lands. Vander Falls, a historically significant water source, has almost run dry—a phenomenon unprecedented in living memory. Insufficient snowfall in December 2023 raises concerns about water scarcity, rendering firefighting efforts challenging when new fires break out. The devastating reach of the 2023 fires has disrupted hunting areas, displacing animals, and scattering them across unfamiliar territories. The dense smoke generated by the wildfires further impeded daily life, making hunting almost impossible due to poor visibility and compromised air quality.





KAPAWE'NO



KAPAWE'NO
FIRST NATION

As the landscape undergoes transformations and traditional medicines succumb to the flames, the wildlife is compelled to venture farther from their natural habitats. The community now sees an increase in orphaned bear cubs and recognizes the need to travel longer distances for moose hunting. In Kapawe'no, the reverberations of climate change manifest in several ways, such as the contamination of lakes and creeks by oilfields, intensified logging near the Nation impacting hunting territories and medicinal grounds, and even seismic activity

linked to fracking in the region. Alannah recounted an unsettling moment during the evacuation hosting when, "We experienced an earthquake...It wasn't real big but we felt it."

A collective call for accountability resounds to resource extraction companies, urging them to take responsibility for their actions, initiate cleanup measures, adopt sustainable practices that safeguard the land and the inherent ties to Treaty Rights. The impacts of resource extraction results in irreversible losses. Kapawe'no citizens emphasized the need for increased involvement in decision-making processes. Chief and Councils are seen as pivotal in this quest to hold companies accountable for their environmental impact, fostering a

balance between development and preservation.

The multifaceted challenges across these Nations highlight the interconnectedness between environmental shifts, Indigenous well-being and cultural preservation, and the urgent need for sustainable resource practices in the province. Wildfires pose a profound danger to the loss of Indigenous cultures as they are deeply intertwined with Mother Earth. Wildfires disrupt traditional activities like harvesting, fishing, hunting, and trapping. Importantly, further separation from the land can have profound mental, emotional, and spiritual effects on communities, while also leading to economic repercussions, particularly in northern populations heavily reliant on these activities



for subsistence and food security (Batdorf and McGee 2023). The recent wildfires highlight not only the immediate safety of entire communities but also the delicate balance of the ecosystem they call home with Indigenous cultures and practices.

2. CALL FOR EVACUATION AND NEED FOR OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE

EAST PRAIRIE

While the origin of the East Prairie fire remains uncertain, citizens asserted that had Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) heeded community warnings, the devastation could have been averted. An Indigenous woman in the community was the first

to contact SRD, but her plea for action was disregarded, resulting in her house being the first to succumb to the flames. Despite the community’s knowledge of the impending threat and their communication with SRD, no preventive measures were taken, including a lack of vigilance in the watch towers. During the evacuation, bureaucratic hurdles within jurisdictions hindered the support of eight municipal fire trucks. Despite their arrival, they were ultimately unable to help and were forced to turn around. The Municipal District told East Prairie to let the fire burn, but the community could not stand by and let it destroy their community.



DENE THÀ



“Our Nation needs our own system to determine when is the best time to evacuate our communities. At the end of the day, Donna she knows her community better than anybody else on the EMT team. She knows what they need and when they need it and how they need it and also her community. She knows the topography. Same with Meander, aside from myself, there are members here that know the community better than anybody. They know what kind of fuel systems are out there and if the South will burn quicker than the North.”

- ADRIANNE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT, MEANDER RIVER.

The absence of adequate forewarning led to reluctance among East Prairie residents to evacuate, signaling a need for enhanced education and awareness in the community. In the urgency of the evacuation, law enforcement intervened forcefully, as Carmen recounted, “kicking down doors and dragging people out.” Additionally, as the community took up the task of fighting the fire themselves, the RCMP came and removed equipment operators who were trying to help. This distressing experience perpetuates historical and contemporary police violence against Indigenous communities, even in times of crisis.



Dene Thà citizens acknowledged that the reliance on forestry to set trigger points is an imperfect system, with instances where it falls short, as evidenced by the rapid approach of the 2023 fire. The Deputy DEMs stressed the need for a self-reliant system, emphasizing, “We need to come up with our own system” rather than depending solely on forestry-provided information, especially when there is a discrepancy in assessing the need for evacuation.

KAPAWE’NO

While hosting evacuees, the government intervened with concerns over the use of the term “evacuation centre” in the facility’s title, prompting a name change during the evacuation. Kapawe’no citizens advocate for a shift in attention away from bureaucratic minutiae and redirect it towards the ultimate goals of land protection and community safety during an emergency. External support should be grounded in trust in the Nation’s inherent capacity to manage crises effectively. The focus should remain on securing resources that empower Indigenous communities to independently address and mitigate the impacts of wildfires. Kapawe’no citizens emphasized the critical necessity for increased support and funding to fortify their own

firefighting capabilities and enhance evacuation facilities for future fires.

Empowering Indigenous communities to autonomously decide when to evacuate is crucial, given their historical and contemporary expertise and the unpredictability of fires and occasional inaccuracies in government predictions. These Nations expect a respectful acknowledgment of their knowledge and expertise in understanding their territories and communities. External and non-governmental agencies should prioritize allowing First Nations and Métis Settlements to lead evacuation planning, leveraging their understanding of member needs and values (McGee and Cardinal Christianson 2021). McGee and Cardinal Christianson (2021) note that Chiefs and Councils often face challenges in evaluating the wildfire threat, given factors like unpredictability, weather conditions, and vegetation. Consequently, they may make evacuation decisions without scientific input or external expertise, raising questions about the support provided by outside agencies, such as sharing real-time information and transparency in decision-making processes (McGee and Cardinal Christianson 2021).

3. FIRESMART & EQUIPMENT

EAST PRAIRIE

In an effort towards emergency preparedness, East Prairie is actively engaged with the FireSmart framework, so they have more tools to effectively prevent and respond to future emergencies. FireSmart is a comprehensive government program aimed at reducing the risk of and providing education to residents and stakeholders about the potential threat of large, uncontrollable wildfires in proximity to communities and critical infrastructure (Government of Alberta, 2024).

PHOTO ABOVE:

▲ **FIRST NATIONS WILDFIRE EVACUATIONS:**
A Guide for Communities and External Agencies Paperback
– July 1 2021



KAPAWE'NO

Elder Jean emphasized the imperative for increased FireSmart initiatives within her Nation, spanning activities from thorough cleaning to establishing fire guards. Like East Prairie, the Nation is currently in the process of implementing the FireSmart program. The community recognizes the urgency of conducting environmental cleanup to remove deadfall and pre-emptively mitigate fire risks. Given the escalating likelihood of wildfires, there is an intensified commitment to safeguarding the surrounding areas in anticipation of the forthcoming seasons. Recognizing the need for immediate action, Kapawe'no has procured four fire trucks and is actively pursuing collaborative partnerships with neighbouring communities to enhance mutual support in preparing for and responding to wildfires in the upcoming seasons.

Ensuring the community's preparedness for future wildfire events involves a crucial focus on acquiring and maintaining appropriate preparation and equipment. The commitment to obtain necessary resources underscores the commitment to enhance the community's resilience and capacity to address challenges posed by



natural disasters. Securing grants for essential equipment is a priority, as it can directly contribute to the communities' ability to protect its residents and resources during wildfires.

4. MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS SUPPORTS

EAST PRAIRIE

The wildfire faced by East Prairie citizens exacted a profound emotional and mental toll both during the evacuation and in the aftermath of their return. Although the community showed remarkable resilience, it became evident that sustaining it

necessitates additional support systems. Marlene, reflecting on the challenges encountered during the evacuation, provided poignant insights into the intricate interplay between resilience and the imperative for bolstering that resilience through comprehensive supports.

“I also seen the toll on men, women, general members of the community. It was scary, it was unknown, it took an emotional toll on everybody.”





In the aftermath of the evacuation, Terry calls attention to the enduring impact on mental and emotional well-being in her account of staying at the hotel throughout the evacuation. The profound challenges and unanticipated emotional strain become apparent as she shared,

“I wasn’t ready to come out here. You had to prepare yourself to come out here. I wasn’t prepared. It was something I never thought I’d see.”

Terry’s experience serves as a poignant reminder of the profound and lasting effects that such traumatic events can have on individuals. Carol shared that her mother’s experience was very different from hers. While Carol felt comfortable and had a sense of safety knowing her mother is safe in her new home, for her mother,

“It doesn’t feel like home, she said it feels like ‘I’m just here.’”

For those who fought the fires, like Carmen’s sons, there are lasting mental and emotional affects from witnessing the fire engulf the community. She explained,

“I know my kid is traumatized. He won’t acknowledge it. He is 24 years old. We needed support during those most crucial days, mental health supports.”

Following the fire aftermath, some mental health supports are available in High Prairie but there are no supports on the settlement.

DENE THÀ

The overall sense of displacement within the community is profound, exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals, particularly Elders, who may struggle to cope. There is a feeling of neglect from the government, heightening the need for self-care within the community. The impact of displacement is especially harsh for those grappling with domestic issues, such as violence against women and children. The mental health implications of these situations are significant.

Within evacuation centres, issues like alcoholism arise, leading to individuals leaving and not returning, posing administrative challenges. Evacuation coordinators, including individuals from Chateh, were tasked with the complex responsibility of managing headcounts, updating daily ledgers, and addressing operational issues.

The profound grief and loss that comes because of a fire is difficult to capture in words. Wildfires may trigger existing, or create new instances of, mental health, family violence and substance use during and after evacuations. It is crucial for ongoing, comprehensive and trauma and culturally informed support systems in these areas to individuals and communities. Culturally appropriate interventions are crucial to address the unique challenges faced by Indigenous communities, acknowledging the interconnectedness of mental well-being with the land, community, and Traditional Knowledge and practices.





5. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

DENE THÀ

Currently, Dene Thà social services staff cover accommodations, transportation, and meals during an evacuation. The Emergency Management Team (EMT) comprises various roles, including Director, Deputy Directors in each community and team leads. It is essential for this team to maintain a relationship with Alberta Emergency Management as they are the first point of contact in emergencies. While Alberta Emergency Management provides templates for disaster responses, the dynamic, history and needs of each community necessitates the development of community specific emergency protocols. Dene Thà is in the process of developing specific, tailored strategies for each of their communities.

According to Donna and Adrienne, a successful wildfire evacuation hinges on good community relationships. Effective planning requires an in-depth understanding of the community members and their needs and interpersonal dynamics. Administrative personnel involved in registration of individuals at evacuation centres need to consider family dynamics, prioritize the needs of Elders, and place them closest to essential facilities like the kitchen and washrooms. This knowledge and understanding proved crucial for Meander staff during the 2023 wildfire to recognize individual triggers, substance withdrawal symptoms and the unique needs of everyone. The evacuation

period became an opportunity for Meander and Chateh residence to foster a sense of community. After returning home and completing the High Level evacuation camp, Dene Thà immediately welcomed evacuees from the Northwest Territories (Smith Landing and Salt River) extending their support to other Indigenous communities facing similar circumstances.

The responsibility often falls on the Nation to provide comprehensive training on evacuation logistics, emergency services, and the unavailability of essential needs such as fuel. Dene Thà uses social media, door-to-door communication, paper information including evacuation details with maps, muster points, and time frames to disseminate information to their citizens. Post evacuation, they conduct debriefing sessions with both the affected community and staff to ensure a collective understanding of the events and gather valuable insights for future improvements.

KAPAWE'NO

Despite facing an evacuation alert with an outdated emergency response manual and without a pre-established plan for setting up an evacuation centre, Kapawe'no demonstrated commendable resilience, resourcefulness, and success. They efficiently responded to the needs of their community and neighbouring areas, showcasing their commitment to safeguarding residents and illustrating the strength of community in times of crisis. Recognizing the areas for improvement, the Nation is now proactively addressing these gaps

by undertaking a comprehensive update of its emergency response manual, further enhancing their preparedness for future challenges.

On-reserve citizens need more education and training for ecological disasters as part of effective emergency preparedness and management. Educating community members on disaster preparedness, evacuation reasons, and the broader implications of climate change is paramount. It plays a vital role to help community members navigate the complexities of fire policies to ensure all are well-informed and adhere to regulations while preserving their cultural practices. There is a need for initiatives that provide comprehensive guidance on fire policies, emphasizing the importance of responsible and safe fire practices. This education should incorporate a nuanced understanding of traditional ceremonies involving fire, ensuring that cultural practices are respected and protected within the framework of regulatory requirements. It is crucial that part of the education and training also includes Indigenous knowledge on climate change, providing community members with information and teachings that allow them to understand the potential long-term impacts and encourages a proactive concern for their well-being.





6. TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

EAST PRAIRIE

Currently East Prairie relies on a single access route, which revealed the community’s vulnerability in this area during the 2023 wildfire evacuation. If the fire had approached from the North, residents would have been trapped in the community (“Alberta government”, 2023).

DENE THÀ

The Nation had difficulty securing bus drivers during their evacuation as drivers found themselves in need of evacuation. While there was an initial scramble to find suitable replacements and licensed drivers, Dene Thà was able to evacuate safely.

There is an urgent need to invest in vital infrastructure such as roads and emergency transportation, fortifying enhanced safety against impending challenges in these communities. One key aspect of comprehensive mitigation efforts

is the establishment of clear and efficient evacuation routes. Strengthening these routes is essential to the safe and timely evacuation of community members during emergencies.

GOVERNMENT PERMITS AND CHANGES TO FIRE FIGHTING QUALIFICATIONS

For both East Prairie and Dene Thà, the evolving landscape of the heightened qualifications for firefighting and government regulations regarding prescribed burns presents significant barriers for these communities to address their own needs.

Both communities noted that changes to firefighting qualification tests, including more rigorous physical tests and training requirements, have resulted in a decline in their community members pursuing this training. The associated costs for obtaining and renewing training qualifications compound these challenges. While Indigenous communities have demonstrated

exceptional historical and contemporary capability in effectively extinguishing fires, the bureaucratic processes and prerequisites for official firefighting roles can hinder their immediate response to local emergencies. Addressing these challenges can foster inclusivity and maximize the valuable firefighting skills historically and presently existing within Indigenous communities.

Permits for prescribed burns, formerly cultural burns led by Indigenous communities, has introduced bureaucratic hurdles that prevent communities from undertaking these burns independently. Instead, these communities wait for external crews to conduct burns and relies on their expertise, rather than their own. Historically and persistently, government fire suppression and control regulations, coupled with stringent permit requirements, deny Indigenous rights over their land (McGee & Cardinal Christainson, 2021).





These regulations often infringe on traditional cultural burn practices that are integral to Indigenous communities. These measures, intended for fire management, inadvertently undermine the deep connection that Indigenous peoples have with their ancestral lands and the cultural significance of burns. Such regulations not only impede traditional land stewardship but also perpetuate a historical pattern of disempowering Indigenous communities and diminishing their autonomy over their territories (McGee & Cardinal Christainson, 2021).

Hoffman et al. (2022) suggests that in response, there is a need to establish a collaborative network comprising Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire practitioners and researchers across each province and territory to pinpoint primary policy obstacles hindering the reintegration of cultural burning. This initiative would address challenges such as jurisdiction, liability, and land governance. The network will enlist boundary spanners proficient in facilitating communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous decision-makers, ensuring Indigenous perspectives

are prioritized in discussions regarding policy barriers, thereby surpassing traditional consultation processes that may perpetuate power imbalances (Hoffman et al. 2022). As Indigenous communities continue to seek enhanced control over their territories, part of this effort, Hoffman et al. (2022) propose to create a National Indigenous Wildfire Stewardship working group, comprised of regional hubs comprising Indigenous fire practitioners and resource managers from various provinces and territories.

► **THE RIGHT TO BURN:** barriers and opportunities for Indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada





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**“It’s +2 right now in Meander.
Everybody sees it. They love it!
But at the same time,
we should be concerned.”**

ADRIANNE, DENE THÀ FIRST NATION.

Research, Report, & Design by:



**Daena Crosby, PhD
Dorothy Schreiber
Dan Martel**

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