

# **Rebuilding Resilient Indigenous Communities in the RMWB: Executive Summary**



**Timothy David Clark  
October 2018**

**“We were on our own.”**

**“This wound is still very, very raw. We’re not healed.”**

**“That's what's bothering me right now: it's just like, I give up. I'm scared again. I've got no drive anymore. I didn't give up but I'm at that point where I don't care anymore.”**

**“It was totally devastating. I just remember going by the house, the old homestead. And I cried, because it was gone. We were brought up there, raised there, the whole family. And the things that you lose, from parent's stuff and that, it’s all gone. It don't matter if you lose all your furniture. That can be replaced. But this stuff will never be replaced.”**

**“If you ever fly over this fire, or for those of us that have that opportunity, you can see it, just like a dragon’s breath. When that dragon comes back again he's still got lots to burn, and if we're not ready we're gonna go this time. We got lucky last time. That’s what we did: we got lucky.”**

**“Coming back to see the disaster, my hometown, we drove around and everything was ashes. I don't know, it's hard to explain how you felt in your mind, your heart, your soul. Everything was gone. But the whole thing is, I had some trees. I had some greenery along the creek. And that's what upheld me. It brought something to me that said, ‘Okay, we'll come back from the ashes.’ I said, ‘I'm coming back, and I am moving back. I'm going to rebuild, and this is my home. This is where I want to spend the rest of my days.’”**

**“The Indigenous wildfire story, I think is one of perseverance...during some of the toughest times in this province's history, in this country's history, the Indigenous community stepped up and held up this province, it held up this country, whether it be for an hour, whether it be for a day. We, as a people, showed this country that we're not just a minority. We are a part of this country. We were a light in that darkness, and I want the rest of Alberta and Canada to know it.”**

**“The Indigenous people, they know their people the best...Our strength is in our unity, when we come together as Indigenous peoples, as First Nation peoples, as Métis peoples, we have the power to effect real substantive change that impacts the day to day lives of our community members. The municipal, provincial, and federal governments would do well to allow us to flourish in our own way; we know how to take care of ourselves.”**



## LIMITATIONS AND TERMS OF USE

This report presents the findings of the *Rebuilding Resilient Indigenous Communities in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo* project. The project is a partnership between the Athabasca Tribal Council, the Athabasca River Métis, and the Nistawoyou Association Friendship Centre. The Canadian Red Cross Society provided generous financial support.

The findings and recommendations contained in this report are based upon detailed primary and secondary research carried out over a period of two years, including the following: (1) ten focus groups held with Indigenous communities and peoples in the region, covering all major geographic sub-regions; (2) forty interviews with Indigenous community members, staff, and leadership, as well as officials from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and the Alberta Emergency Management Agency; (3) a comprehensive survey of the Indigenous population in the region; and (4) a review of the publicly available secondary information on natural disaster and Indigenous peoples at the provincial, national, and global levels, and on the Indigenous peoples and history of northeastern Alberta.

This report, its findings, and its recommendations do not necessarily represent or reflect the views and perspectives of the Indigenous governments, organizations, and peoples of the region. Nothing in this report should be construed so as to define, limit, or otherwise constrain the Treaty, Constitutional, or legislative rights and interests of the Indigenous peoples of the region.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**LIMITATIONS AND TERMS OF USE..... I**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....II**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS .....III**

**REPORT HIGHLIGHTS.....1**

**WHY STUDY INDIGENOUS IMPACTS?.....3**

**A GROUND BREAKING PROJECT .....7**

**A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN.....9**

**A ‘SECONDARY DISASTER’ .....12**

**INTERCONNECTIONS AND IMPACTS.....19**

**RISK AND RESILIENCE .....22**

**FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS .....25**

    RECONCILIATION, RECOGNITION, AND RIGHTS .....25

    JURISDICTION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS .....27

    REGIONAL COOPERATION.....28

    COMMUNITY-BASED PREPAREDNESS .....30

    RESPONSE, RE-ENTRY, AND RECOVERY .....32

    MITIGATION .....34

**DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND RECONCILIATION .....36**



## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- This ground-breaking project is a first of its kind in Canada: an Indigenous-controlled assessment of the impacts of a major natural disaster that brings together First Nations and Métis governments, communities, and organizations from across an entire region;
- Disaster events cannot be understood in a vacuum; context matters. Political and socio-economic legacies from residential schools, municipal amalgamation and the infringement and negation of Treaty and Aboriginal rights to the cumulative effects of decades of oil sands development have left many Indigenous communities and peoples highly and disproportionately vulnerable to natural disasters;
- A lack of federal leadership has resulted in a disjointed Indigenous disaster management system that is excessively centralized in terms of municipal and provincial planning and decision-making; excessively localized in terms of First Nation disaster management, which is handled at the level of the reserve; and excessively narrow in terms of the exclusion of Métis from federal and provincial programs, despite the 2016 *Daniels* decision;
- Within this institutional environment, Indigenous authorities operate in a parallel and disconnected fashion and struggle with capacity constraints (overworked Band Managers often moonlight as Directors of Emergency Management) and inconsistent and fragmented support from provincial and federal authorities who are often too far away and lack the resources, inter-cultural capacity, and knowledge of local institutions and histories to provide adequate support for Indigenous disaster and emergency management;



- The wildfire revealed the depth of this institutional disconnect, which manifested in low levels of preparedness, weak coordination and cooperation, major communications breakdowns, and critical capacity deficits across all responsible authorities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in all phases of disaster management;
- Institutional design flaws were exacerbated by distinctive cultural values, assumptions, and perceptions of risk, combined with a lack of cultural self-awareness on the part of municipal and provincial disaster management officials. Together these factors fuelled an atmosphere of tension and mistrust that contributed to a negative-feedback loop that drove communication breakdowns, undermined opportunities for effective cooperation, and limited the possibilities for learning and improvement;
- As a result of historical, geographical, socio-economic, and cultural factors, overall impacts of the wildfire to Indigenous peoples were disproportionate in scale and regional in character. Indigenous peoples suffered enormous direct impacts and generally had fewer resources with which to cope and recover. These direct impacts in turn reverberated across the region via migration to overburdened rural communities, interruptions in access to goods and services, and disrupted cultural connections to places settled, occupied, and used by ancestors for generations, among other indirect effects;
- Despite these significant and adverse impacts, First Nations governments were too often excluded from response, re-entry, and recovery operations, and the Métis were excluded almost entirely. As a result, vulnerable populations were unnecessarily exposed to high-risk environments and many Indigenous peoples struggled to access adequate and culturally-appropriate services and supports in all phases of the disaster cycle;
- High levels of hazard risk and vulnerability, institutional disjointedness, and cultural barriers remain. These are, however, signs for optimism: while the wildfire exposed numerous





sources of vulnerability, it likewise highlighted key sources of resilience and optimism, including the remarkable response of many Indigenous communities to thousands of evacuees, the key role of Indigenous organizations and cultural practices in the processes of recovery and healing, and signs of greater cooperation between First Nation and Métis communities and between Indigenous governments and the municipality;

- This report recommends a broad range of measures to improve disaster management for Indigenous peoples, including greater federal leadership, guidance, and funding, enhanced Indigenous control over disaster management, and improved regional and inter-organizational planning and cooperation. To succeed, however, disaster management must be situated within a wider context of reconciliation and a shift towards relations based upon mutual respect, inter-cultural understanding, and government-to-government relations.

## WHY STUDY INDIGENOUS IMPACTS?

Over the past two years, the response of many non-Indigenous persons to this study has been ‘why *just* study impacts to Indigenous peoples?’ Why not study the impacts to all the residents of Fort McMurray and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB)? After all, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples were evacuated, lost their homes, lacked insurance, struggled to rebuild, suffered psychological trauma, and witnessed the unravelling of family and community bonds and supports. This line of thought was perceptible within disaster management organizations as well, where the idea of an Indigenous-specific study and Indigenous-specific disaster management programs sits somewhat uncomfortably with the general ethos and mandate of many disaster professionals: that all people be treated the same.



This question matters because it speaks to the broader challenges of inter-cultural communication and collaboration. What the question ‘why *just* study impacts to Indigenous peoples’ reflects is the fact that dominant cultural groups rarely recognize that their values, assumptions, perceptions, and priorities are often particular to their cultural group. Rather, they tend to treat the values and assumptions of their cultural group as ‘natural’, and are surprised when others perceive policies, events, or actions in an altogether different manner. It is worth remembering that treating people the ‘same’ does not necessarily mean treating them equally or fairly. When there are significant differences in resources, values, assumptions, and priorities between groups, treating everyone the ‘same’ can result in dysfunctional program design, poor decision-making, communications breakdowns, and unequal and inequitable outcomes.

**“There seemed to be an inability for them [RMWB officials] to comprehend that Indigenous people had unique needs and they would say, ‘Everyone’s house burned down,’ or, ‘Everyone had to evacuate’...It was just really shocking that they tried to see it like everyone’s the same. And I get it. We’re all fellow citizens. We’re all in it together, absolutely...but for the policy makers to refuse to see that there’s a real problem here, it exposed a lot of weaknesses and exposed a lot of I would say the wrong colonial ways of doing things, and it exposed racism. A lot of racism came to the front.”**

For instance, when the decision was made not to include Indigenous leaders in the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC), it was likely done on the assumption that this was the best way to maintain the Incident Command System (ICS) and provide the quickest and most effective response. What those who made the decision failed to consider adequately, however, was that their decision would be interpreted as disrespectful and exclusionary by many Indigenous peoples, as a continuation of decades and centuries of colonial disregard. Similarly, when the RMWB decided to use public schools as the physical locations for re-entry services, it likely did not occur to officials that some Indigenous peoples – and particularly Elders and residential school survivors – might not be comfortable in such an environment and this would affect whether they used the re-entry and recovery services provided by the municipality.



Or take the example of Waterways, which was settled by Indigenous peoples, was the most-heavily Indigenous neighbourhood in Fort McMurray, and was almost totally destroyed. For municipal and provincial planners and risk-mitigation experts, Waterways is a high-risk development zones because of flood risks and slope stability. Risk from this perspective is understood exclusively in terms of probabilities and financial cost. For many Indigenous residents of Waterways, however, risk is viewed from a different cultural lens in which connectedness to ancestors, to the land, and to the people of Waterways predominates in the calculation of ‘acceptable risk’. As one long-time resident who lost his ancestral home, which was the last trapper’s cabin in Waterways, put it:

I've been here from the date of birth. This was a meeting place pretty much, where we'd get together and talk. We used to dry meat out here and stuff. Back in my mother's days, they used to tan moose hides right here. Lots of traditional stuff went on here. I've always said: this property here is heaven because I consider it sacred, which my parents did also.<sup>1</sup>

For many Indigenous peoples who were born and raised in Waterways and whose ancestors had occupied the area before them, the risk of losing those connections is the greatest risk of all. In the literature on natural disasters, this is referred to as the Cultural Theory of Risk, which seeks to explain how risk is perceived through and in relation to particular worldviews and ways of life, the result of which is that risks are identified, prioritized, and responded to in ways that vary greatly across different cultural groups.

The inability to recognize the ways in which culture and history shape not only our perceptions of events but also the ways in which those events impact individuals, families, and communities represents one of the greatest obstacles to effective disaster management for Indigenous peoples in the RMWB and likely in many other parts of the country. This inability was evident in the reports on the wildfire commissioned by the RMWB and the Government of Alberta, where the questions asked and the answers provided reflected almost exclusively the values, assumptions,

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<sup>1</sup> Key Person Interview – Harvey Sykes, Board Member, McMurray Métis Local 1935, interviewed on 28 February 2018 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.



and priorities of the municipal and provincial governments. Because the official reports did not situate the 2016 Horse River wildfire within the history and historical legacies of the region and the province, they reproduced the painful colonial legacies of neglect and condescension and risked reinforcing or deepening the inequalities of risk and vulnerability.

What this study will highlight is that Indigenous disaster preparedness and resilience do not and cannot take place in a cultural and historical vacuum. Research suggests one of the chief benefits of disasters is the potential to expose and highlight sources of vulnerability that were relatively hidden prior to the disaster event. Unfortunately, it is clear from the official reports that Indigenous voices, perspectives, and concerns have not been heard.

This lack of knowledge of the impacts to Indigenous peoples should set off alarm bells. We know that wildfires and other natural disasters feed into and intensify existing socio-economic, political, and cultural inequalities and affect the most vulnerable more severely. This is true at all stages of the disaster cycle, from levels of preparedness and the initial direct and indirect impacts to the response, recovery, and mitigation stages. We also know that while Indigenous peoples are more vulnerable to natural disasters than are non-Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK) can play a critical role in disaster mitigation and preparedness planning and the building of resilience against future disaster events. We know that Indigenous peoples affected by natural disasters suffer a double indignity: their lives most affected, their voices least heard. The question for the RMWB, Alberta, and Canada, then, is how were they expecting to collaborate with and improve disaster preparedness, response, and recovery for the Indigenous communities in the region without first hearing the wildfire stories, experiences, perspectives, and priorities of the region's Indigenous peoples?

**“I can honestly tell you nobody understood, nobody. And I still struggle with that. There's days when I was hoping that with some of our advocacy, that our people would change things, but it really hasn't...nobody still understands how this has affected our Indigenous community...I just feel so sad that nobody gets us and nobody wants to understand what happened to us and why.”**



## A GROUND BREAKING PROJECT

The 2016 Horse River wildfire was one of the largest and costliest natural disasters in Canadian history, with more than 88,000 residents evacuated, more than 2,400 structures damaged or destroyed, an estimated financial cost of approximately CAD\$10 billion, and nearly 600,000 hectares of scorched earth. In the aftermath of the disaster, governments funneled resources to academic studies and the provincial and municipal governments commissioned studies of disaster response and recovery. It is telling, then, that in the rush to study the disaster that neither the federal, nor the provincial, nor the municipal



Photo: Mel Grandjambe

government deemed it necessary to provide resources to Indigenous peoples to produce their own report or reports on the wildfire, despite the fact that Indigenous peoples had occupied and used the region since well before Europeans arrived and were among the most heavily impacted.

This study emerged from fears over the all-too-predictable marginalization of Indigenous voices and concerns. In the months following the wildfire, representatives from the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC), the Athabasca River Métis (ARM), and the Nistawoyou Association Friendship Centre (NAFC) met to discuss their concerns that the absence of information on impacts to Indigenous peoples would result in recovery, mitigation, and preparedness planning that would



further marginalize Indigenous peoples and leave them even more vulnerable to future wildfires and disaster events. The three partner organizations put together a proposal for the present study and took it to the Red Cross, which had hitherto worked to fill in many of the service and support gaps faced by Indigenous peoples during the response, re-entry, and recovery phases. The Red Cross agreed to fund the study.

This ground-breaking project is a first of its kind in Canada: an Indigenous-controlled assessment of the impacts of a major natural disaster that brings together First Nations and Métis governments, communities, and organizations from across an entire region. For decades and centuries, governments in Canada have divided Indigenous peoples and pit First Nations and Métis against each other over access to resources and services. Against these currents, this project brings together 11 Indigenous communities/organizations and three regional Indigenous partner organizations to tell the wildfire stories of the region's Indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup> This report is based upon two years of detailed research, including 10 focus groups, 40 interviews, a regional survey of more than 600 Indigenous people, and a review of more than 200 secondary sources on Indigenous research methodologies, the Indigenous history of northeastern Alberta, Indigenous vulnerability and resilience to natural disasters, and disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The 36 recommendations detailed in the final section cover a range of themes, including reconciliation and rights; jurisdiction, responsibility, and regional cooperation; community-based preparedness; response, re-entry, and recovery; and mitigation.

**“I hope that if another disaster happens, that we won't be left out. That's my greatest hope, that this information...it's going to be able to show the rest of Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo what we did and what we were capable of and the things we accomplished, even with very little or no support. Those are going to come up shining and it's going to show how collaborative we were, how much got done when our Indigenous organizations work together collaboratively; it's pretty phenomenal.”**

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<sup>2</sup> The 11 Indigenous communities/organizations were Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Fort Chipewyan Métis Local 125, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McKay Métis Community, McMurray Métis, Fort McMurray First Nation 468, Willow Lake Métis Local 780, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, the Janvier Dene Wood Buffalo Community Association, and the Conklin Resource and Development Advisory Committee.



To return, then, to the question posed in the previous section: why is a study of the effects of the 2016 Horse River wildfire on Indigenous peoples necessary? A study of the effects of the wildfire on Indigenous peoples is necessary because Indigenous perspectives, voices, and stories were largely absent from official reports; because Indigenous governments and peoples opened their lives, their homes, and their communities to evacuees, only to be shut out of the response and recovery efforts; because Indigenous peoples are more vulnerable to disaster events and have fewer resources and supports to cope and recover; because disaster resilience requires reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; because reconciliation requires truth; and because truth requires that all voices and all perspectives be heard.

## **A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN**

Wildfires are commonly referred to as ‘natural’ disasters, but we must be careful not to naturalize or treat as inevitable the effects of disaster events. The literature on disasters clearly demonstrates how the size, extent, and distribution of effects are in many ways socially constructed. Our research similarly found that the underlying historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the RMWB and in the Province of Alberta powerfully shaped the effects of the 2016 Horse River wildfire. To understand the origins, impacts, and lessons of the Horse River wildfire, then, one must first understand the Indigenous origins and history of the region. Put simply: context matters.

This study identifies four key contextual dynamics that shaped the preparedness, response, and recovery phases, and how Indigenous peoples were impacted in each phase of the disaster cycle. The first (1) was the legacy and persistence of racist and discriminatory policies towards



Indigenous peoples. Over the past century, a wide range of federal, provincial, and municipal policies have negatively impacted the Indigenous peoples of the region, from broken Treaty promises, residential schools, and the Sixties Scoop to weak and uneven consultation policies, the non-recognition of Métis rights and governments, and the unfulfilled commitments of regional amalgamation. The cumulative effects of state policy heightened Indigenous vulnerability and fuelled inter-governmental relations characterized by mistrust and poor communication. As one Indigenous leader eloquently stated, when asked about the relationship with the RMWB: “We didn't have that relationship; we'd developed an estranged relationship.”<sup>3</sup>

The second (2) contextual dynamic was the large-scale exploitation of oil sands resources from the 1960s. While the oil sands have provided important sources of revenue, employment, and business opportunities for some Indigenous communities, efforts to integrate Indigenous peoples as full partners in the petro-economy have generally come up short, at the same time as oil sands operations and disturbances have undermined the traditional way of life and culture of Indigenous peoples throughout the region, from Fort Chipewyan in the north to Conklin and Janvier in the south.



Photo: Peter Fortna

The third (3) contextual dynamic was jurisdictional fragmentation and poor institutional relations. Disaster management in the region is parcelled out among various levels of government. The result is a system characterized by a lack federal leadership, weak coordination between governments and agencies, and inadequate support for Indigenous communities to take

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<sup>3</sup> Key Person Interview – Bill Loutitt, Chief Executive Officer, McMurray Métis Local 1935, interviewed on 12 December 2017 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.





responsibility for disaster management. Nearly all interview participants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, underlined the centrality of relationships to disaster management. And yet, when the wildfire struck there was confusion over roles and responsibilities and weak relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments, agencies, and actors.

Jurisdictional and design flaws fed into the fourth (4) contextual dynamic: the cultural disconnect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments and peoples. Many RMWB and AEMA officials were not properly equipped to deal with the cultural divide that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in terms of perceptions of risk, interpretations of events, and preferences for service and program delivery. This cultural divide and the lack of cultural self-awareness on the part of disaster management officials drove communication breakdowns and fuelled tension and mistrust among the parties, undermined the effectiveness of response and recovery plans, and limited the opportunities for learning and improvement.

The cumulative effects of this historical, institutional, and cultural context were an Indigenous population highly vulnerable to wildfires and other disaster events and a disaster management regime ill-equipped to cope with the myriad challenges. Indigenous peoples had far fewer resources with which to prepare, respond, and recover from the disaster event: they were more than 90 percent more likely to be unemployed with median incomes that were two-thirds the regional average. Similarly, Indigenous peoples were far more likely to live in homes that required “major repairs”, were far less likely to have insurance, and were far too likely to be homeless or at-risk for homelessness. This cumulative vulnerability was compounded by a disjointed and dysfunctional disaster management system and a deep-seated mistrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments in the region. When the disaster hit, communication collapsed and many Indigenous governments and peoples, among the most overburdened and vulnerable in the region, were left to fend for themselves. Far from a ‘natural disaster’, for the Indigenous peoples of the region this was a ‘disaster waiting to happen’.



## A ‘SECONDARY DISASTER’

While most attention is paid to the direct impacts of a disaster event, these primary impacts can trigger secondary or indirect effects that can be very significant. This is particularly true for vulnerable populations. For Indigenous peoples, the response, re-entry, and recovery phases were so badly mishandled by the RMWB – and to a lesser extent the Province – that they merit the label ‘secondary disaster’. A host of factors complicated the proper functioning of evacuation and response efforts, including the lack of preparedness, the centralization of disaster planning, jurisdictional and coordination problems, communication failures, and the lack of appropriate evacuation centres, the effects of which persisted for months after the initial disaster.

While it is almost impossible to be fully prepared for a disaster of the scale and scope of the Horse River wildfires, levels of local preparedness were unacceptable. The RMWB had not updated its Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) since 2010 and mitigation programs, such as Fire Smart, were sporadic and insufficient. As one Anzac resident observed: “It's not that this stuff [mitigation] never happens, but the fire breaks, they never maintained them. You've got three feet of tall dry grass and bunch of small trees that have grown in; that's not a firebreak anymore.”<sup>4</sup> The disaster preparedness of Indigenous communities was similarly inadequate: of the First Nations and Métis Locals with which we spoke, none had up-to-date emergency response plans prior to the wildfire, and none of the plans that did exist were used.

While the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) provides support to help First Nations (but not Métis) prepare a plan, the results are mixed and these resources are less

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<sup>4</sup> Willow Lake Métis Local 780 Focus Group, held on 22 August 2017 in Anzac, Alberta.



effective at supporting maintenance: “AEMA comes in, right, and they come in and they do their little training, like I said, for three days. That was all great, but it's just general overview of stuff. There's no real plan or anything. So then you go to this training, and then you don't use it.”<sup>5</sup> Nor do the services provided by the AEMA support coordination between the three main kinds of government in the region: First Nations, Métis, and the RMWB. In an environment of highly fragmented and contentious jurisdiction like the RMWB, however, communications and coordination between the local authorities is paramount.

The RMWB’s MEMP was overly centralized and focussed on Fort McMurray. As one Indigenous leader observed: “When I realized the plan that RMWB had and how they went about it, and stuff like that, I quickly realized that they have no plan for the surrounding areas.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, there was little to no consideration of and planning for the rural hamlets or coordination with First Nations. The tendency towards centralized disaster planning was reinforced within Indigenous communities by the AEMA support system, which focuses on working with the Director of Emergency Management (DEM) and leadership to get a plan done, rather than on building plans that involve community members as more active participants. The literature on disaster management, however, is clear: disaster management and emergency response plans that are more integrated into the operations of Indigenous governments and involve community members are more likely to be maintained and function effectively.

There was a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities and a general lack of coordination between governments, which contributed to tension between levels of government, several poor decisions, and unacceptable communication breakdowns. The lack of jurisdictional clarity and roles resulted in Indigenous governments being excluded from the REOC, which was a persistent source of frustration for Indigenous communities. The lack of clear roles and lines of authority between governments similarly led to provincial overreach in their relations with First Nations

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<sup>5</sup> Key Person Interview – Cindy Miller, Band Manager, Fort McMurray First Nation 468, interviewed on 19 September 2017 on the Fort McMurray First Nation 468 Reserve.

<sup>6</sup> Key Person Interview – Allan Adam, Chief, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, interviewed on 27 February 2018 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.



during evacuation. In particular, uncertainty regarding evacuation authority under a Provincial State of Emergency (PSEO) led to tension and conflict with Fort McMurray First Nation, which was told not to evacuate without authorization by the AEMA, despite the fact that legal authority to evacuate rests with the Band council.<sup>7</sup>

Poor preparation, centralized planning, and jurisdictional uncertainties likewise contributed to major breakdowns of communication between the RMWB, the AEMA, and Indigenous governments. On the one hand, the RMWB evacuated their Indigenous and Rural Relations (IRR) staff and there was virtually no communication from the REOC to Indigenous governments for the first week of the disaster. In fact, Fort McMurray First Nation did not become aware of a command centre until after the evacuation: “Right off, I knew there was poor communication, right? There was no communication with the outside world. I know they had a command post in McMurray, but I found that out after. I thought everybody was gone or whatever. That was a problem.”<sup>8</sup> While communications with First Nations gradually improved, the Métis remained largely out of the loop. As the former General Manager of McMurray Métis commented: “I’ll tell you, officially from the organizational point of view, I got my updates much like the general public...With the RMWB, there was no communication.”<sup>9</sup>

**“We were left out. We made several requests to be included in those communications. We were left out. We actually listened in on a phone one day, and the person that had their phone there [from the AEMA], that let us listen to the meeting, got scolded...There was a jurisdiction thing where oh, now you’re supposed to talk to this person because you’re First Nation. They just decided we weren’t to be included.”**

<sup>7</sup> Key Person Interview – Brad Callihoo, Chief Executive Officer, Fort McMurray First Nation 468, interviewed on 19 September at the Fort McMurray First Nation 468 Reserve.

<sup>8</sup> Key Person Interview – Brad Callihoo, Chief Executive Officer, Fort McMurray First Nation 468, interviewed on 19 September at the Fort McMurray First Nation 468 Reserve.

<sup>9</sup> Key Person Interview – Dan Stuckless, Manager, Industry Relations, Mikisew Cree First Nation, interviewed on 30 October 2017 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.



The lack of safe and culturally appropriate evacuation sites contributed to family and community separation, the exposure of vulnerable populations to high-risk environments, and a lack of support services for evacuees. The evacuation debacle of Janvier is particularly instructive.

**“At the Bold Center, I got a phone call from an Elder at 11 o'clock at night, and she was crying. And she says ‘you know what?’ She says, ‘they woke us up and they said that we were all going to have to leave the Bold Center. We have to go home.’ She said ‘They're putting us all on the buses now.’ So everybody has to go. So long as you're from Janvier, you have to go...to send people back into this environment where...you couldn't even see five feet in front of you at times because of the smoke. And they sent our people back.”**

Much of the Janvier community was initially evacuated to the Bold Centre in Lac La Biche. During the evening, there was an incident at the centre in connection with a small number of youth. In response, Bold Centre officials removed all community members, including Elders who were woken up and displaced again after having been evacuated earlier that same day. Some residents were sent to another facility, but some ended up going back to Janvier and into the pathway of the approaching wildfire.

This lack of a safe and culturally appropriate evacuation centres also undermined the provision of services and support to rural Indigenous peoples. In focus groups and interviews, Indigenous government staff and community members repeatedly emphasized the challenges in coordinating support for members and identified centralized, safe, and culturally appropriate evacuation sites as key to the provision of emergency response support, particularly to Indigenous Elders and rural residents who may lack the resources to access services on their

own. For Indigenous governments, scattered populations made it difficult to provide support to members; for members, the absence of a safe and recognizable environment made them less likely to seek the support they needed. As one staff member of McMurray Métis Local 1935 explained: “If I had a problem, I knew how to advocate for myself. If I needed to get a hold of someone I could. I had a bank account that I could deposit the money in, all that kind of stuff, whereas a lot of the Métis people were left behind.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Key Person Interview – Jay Telegdi, former Government Relations Office at McMurray Métis, 29 September 2017, Fort McMurray, Alberta.



The poor coordination and communication with Indigenous governments and communities that characterized the response and evacuation continued into the re-entry and recovery phases. Much as during the response and evacuation phases, Indigenous governments and communities were largely excluded from re-entry and recovery planning and lacked adequate reception areas and support. Moreover, Indigenous communities expressed concern that their skills and resources were not properly utilized in the recovery and expressed frustration with the reimbursement process for disaster expenses.

In stark contrast to the Slave Lake wildfire, where recovery was planned and managed via a ‘Tri-Council’ governance structure that included the Sawridge First Nation, Indigenous governments in the region had little to no direct input into re-entry and recovery planning. The RMWB failed to create an Indigenous re-entry point for Fort McMurray’s more than 5,000 Indigenous residents. Instead the government used schools as the primary re-entry centres, to which one former municipal employee observed: “Schools hold a very uncomfortable history for Indigenous people



Photo: Peter Fortna

in general, and I can't imagine asking an Indigenous person to have to go get their Red Cross money at a school if they haven't stepped in a school since they were in residential schools.”<sup>11</sup> It was only at the insistence and initiative of the NAFC, McMurray Métis, and the Red Cross that an Indigenous re-entry centre was established at the Friendship Centre.

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<sup>11</sup> Key Person Interview – Elena Gould, Manager, Department of Indigenous and Rural Relations, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 15 February 2018, Fort McMurray, Alberta.



The marginalization of Indigenous voices continued into the recovery phase. The recovery committee set-up up by the RMWB consisted of one council member from the Rural Service Area, two councillors from Ward 1, and six members from the public at-large appointed by the council, with no official representation for any of the Indigenous governments of the region. It was not until March of 2017 that formal Indigenous representation was established with the hiring of one First Nation and one Métis wildfire coordinators to sit on the Recovery Task Force, but by that time, as the Manager of the RMWB’s Indigenous and Rural Relations remarked, “It was almost too late.”<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the RMWB’s recovery plan made scant mention of Indigenous peoples and identified Indigenous governments merely as ‘stakeholders’.

Because of their exclusion from the re-entry and recovery planning process, many Indigenous peoples struggled to access adequate and culturally appropriate support services. 70% of survey respondents expressed a preference for disaster support services provided by Indigenous organizations and persons, and Indigenous representatives suggested the lack of Indigenous support services was an obstacle to the provision of support. As Fort McMurray First Nation staff explained: “If you just put information out there and it said, ‘here's a pamphlet’...people are not likely to take it upon themselves to call to some vague, unknown individual or group and say, ‘I need help.’ They'd rather just stay within the Nation here, right? We have more success that way.”<sup>13</sup> Staff from Fort McKay First Nation concurred: “We had two or three people...from mental health that came in. We figured out that, nice people, but again there wasn’t a comfort level for them to open up about their emotions...we’ve seen that so many times.”<sup>14</sup>

These cultural barriers extended to non-governmental organizations like the Red Cross. As one woman explained, “It was a huge thing, I felt like, for me, to go to Red Cross. I felt like—I don't

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<sup>12</sup> Key Person Interview – Elena Gould, Manager, Department of Indigenous and Rural Relations, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, interviewed on 15 February 2018 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.

<sup>13</sup> Key Person Interview – Brad Callihoo, Chief Executive Officer, Fort McMurray First Nation 468, interviewed on 19 September at the Fort McMurray First Nation 468 Reserve.

<sup>14</sup> Key Person Interview – Simon Adams, Director of Community Services, Fort McKay First Nation, interviewed on 27 September 2017 on the Fort McKay First Nation Reserve.



know if everybody felt like that. It felt like you weren't supposed to be there.”<sup>15</sup> The need for more frontline Indigenous support workers at the RMWB, Alberta Health, and the Red Cross was a consistent theme: “It would have helped if we had had more Aboriginal workers...They didn't have the Aboriginal workers there in the right proportion for that population.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there were several issues with the Disaster Recovery Program (DRP) administered by the AEMA and paid by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). The DRP is managed by a First Nation Advisor working out of the AEMA, who works with First Nations to submit requests for reimbursement for losses and expenditures incurred as a result of the disaster. The first problem relates to the gap between the expectations of the AEMA and the training and capacity of many First Nations to meet those requirements, which can result in long delays and frustration and mistrust on both sides. Where there is a disagreement between the AEMA and a First Nation over what is covered and how much, moreover, ISC can intervene to approve submissions that the AEMA rejected, which introduces the second problem: what are the criteria used by ISC to adjudicate conflicts between First Nations and the AEMA? In the absence of clear guidelines, the process runs the risk of arbitrary and inequitable treatment across First Nations, and could in turn fuel misinformation about the program and drive further tension between First Nations who feel they are being treated differently or unfairly by the AEMA.

The final key deficiency of the DRP is that the Métis are excluded from the program, which is discriminatory and inconsistent with the spirit of the *Daniels* ruling. The Willow Lake Métis Local, for instance, estimated it spent more than \$100,000 to support its members during the wildfire and McMurray Métis ran down its reserves to the point where they could not get a bank loan. The high and up-front cost of disaster response and the lack of resources and support, particularly for the Métis, introduces a potentially perverse incentive structure in which Indigenous governments have to choose between paying emergency response costs out of pocket

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<sup>15</sup> Janvier Dene Wood Buffalo Community Association Focus Group held on 12 July 2017 in Chard, Alberta.

<sup>16</sup> Key Person Interview – Bill Loutitt, Chief Executive Officer, McMurray Métis Local 1935, interviewed on 12 December 2017 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.





and undermining their organizational capacity or withholding support from members during the crisis to protect their financial solvency down the road.

## INTERCONNECTIONS AND IMPACTS

For Indigenous peoples, the wildfires were a *regional* disaster. Because of the historical movement of people and goods across the region, its Indigenous communities are both highly diverse and highly interconnected. The disaster and its effects, therefore, were not confined to specific impact categories or to the geographic locale of Fort McMurray. The devastation of Fort McMurray and its environs reverberated across the region via impacts to family members, migration from Fort McMurray to overburdened rural areas, interruptions of goods and services, and disturbed connections to places settled and occupied by ancestors for generations. Unfortunately, disaster management in the region is highly centralized at the municipal level,

highly localized at the First Nations level, and excludes the Métis, which resulted in key breakdowns, oversights, and gaps throughout all stages of the disaster cycle.

- **25% of Indigenous survey respondents in Fort McMurray lost their home in the wildfires;**
- **Of those who lost their home, 36% had no insurance and 25% were over 60 years old;**
- **32% of survey respondents reported a net loss of income from the period prior to the wildfire to the end of 2017.**

Survey results provided evidence of the disproportionate direct impacts suffered by Indigenous peoples, many of whom lost a home and many lacked insurance and other means to recover. The wildfires similarly hit an already battered Indigenous economy hard. Despite the injections of money from governments and insurance companies and the stabilization of oil prices and the oil and



gas industry, survey results found that the wildfires had a negative net effect on the socio-economic status and income of Indigenous peoples. The secondary and socio-cultural effects were similarly severe.

After an initial burst of solidarity and coming together, numerous Indigenous families and communities have witnessed the erosion of social bonds, a phenomenon known in the disaster literature as the supersession of “therapeutic communities” by “corrosive communities”. After the initial burst of unity and mutual support in the face of the immediate crisis and devastation, the bonds of community and solidarity began to weaken: “It’s like we don’t support each other as much anymore. For me, it’s just the unity is not as strong.”<sup>17</sup> The erosion of family and community bonds and support in turn exacerbated mental health challenges. Self-reported levels of stress from our survey remain about 30% above pre-wildfire levels, with considerably higher numbers reported by those who were evacuated, whether from Fort McMurray or the rural hamlets and reserves.

- **60% of evacuees were separated from family members; 30% of those for more than 1 month;**
- **15% of families and nearly 20% of community members reported more distant relationships nearly two years after the wildfire;**
- **Self-reported stress levels were 70% above pre-wildfire levels in evacuated rural communities and 300% above for Fort McMurray residents.**

Another impact area often overlooked is governance. And yet, impacts to governance institutions and capacity represent important short-term and long-term effects of natural disasters on disaster resilience and management, particularly for Indigenous governments that often face substantial resource and capacity constraints. As an immediate effect of the wildfire, the offices of the Athabasca Tribal Council were severely damaged and the office of McMurray Métis was destroyed. McMurray Métis and Fort McMurray First Nation also lost data as a result of inadequate backup systems. For the McMurray Métis in particular, the loss of their offices and

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<sup>17</sup> McMurray Métis Focus Group held on 22 June 2017 in Fort McMurray, Alberta.



data significantly impaired their ability to communicate with and support their members. Several staff members commented that community members were more hesitant to visit the Local while they were temporarily housed in the former Shell Canada offices and it was much more challenging to connect with members, even after many had returned to Fort McMurray.

Governance capacity was further undermined by impacts to staff members. On the one hand, staff members faced a considerable increases in their responsibilities, because the wildfires did not stop the normal operations of Indigenous governments. Disaster management for Indigenous staff, then, was in addition to their regular responsibilities, as were other informal duties that

emerged. On the other hand, the lack of Indigenous support workers within the RMWB and the Government of Alberta meant that Indigenous peoples often turned to Indigenous government staff and community members for emotional and other forms of support.

And on top of these extraordinary responsibilities and burdens, many Indigenous staff members were themselves directly impacted by the wildfires. At the Friendship Centre, for instance, four Board members and three staff members lost their homes, while 8 of the 32 Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation staff members lost their homes, three of whom had no

**“We just could never get an Indigenous social worker, and I think that was the hardest part of all the people were coming in on a daily basis, especially in the first two months and they wanted somebody to talk to because they were scared or because things were happening in their home, violence erupting...So what happens, my staff and I and then my husband were kind of becoming makeshift counsellors for these people, just so that they could leave the center not all stressed out.”**

insurance.<sup>18</sup> This burden on staff began to produce resignations and staff shortages. Within a little over a year from the wildfire, the leadership of the three partner organizations for this project, the ATC, the ARM, and the NAFC, had turned over. Among staff on the front lines of community support, there was a palpable sense of burnout. To paraphrase a discussion in one of the focus groups, when everyone is hurting, who will help the helpers?

<sup>18</sup> Key Person Interview – Teresa Nahwegahbow, former Executive Director of the Nistawoyou Association Friendship Centre, interviewed on 30 October 2017 by telephone; Key Person Interview – Allan Adam, Chief, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, interviewed on 27 February 2018 in Fort McMurray, Alberta



## RISK AND RESILIENCE

The risks related to future wildfires and natural disasters continue to be high in many parts of the region, and particularly in rural areas. Fort McKay and Fort Chipewyan remain at high-extreme risk at the community and landscape wildfire levels, while Conklin and Anzac are at high risk. Levels of vulnerability in terms of socio-economic indicators and the interconnectedness of potential effects remain disproportionately high for Indigenous peoples in the region. Finally, disaster management in the region continues to suffer from jurisdictional disjointedness and uncertainty and has yet to integrate Indigenous governments and communities as full partners. There remains a clear lack of federal leadership, both in terms of guidance and resources for disaster management for First Nations and the continued exclusion of the Métis. Provincial programs for Indigenous peoples, while well intentioned, provide inadequate supports given the resource constraints at the level of Indigenous governments, among other barriers.

There are, however, reasons for hope and optimism. Although the wildfire revealed vulnerabilities in Indigenous communities, it likewise revealed key sources of strength and resilience. The response of Indigenous peoples from across the region, who opened their homes and communities and shared their resources with thousands of strangers, in many cases while under



Photo: Charles Nokohoo



threat of evacuation themselves, is a testament to the generosity and the resilience of the Indigenous peoples, cultures, and communities of the region.

Despite the lack of preparedness and resources, including support resources, and the fact that they were under the threat of evacuation themselves, rural Indigenous communities across the region opened their lives, their homes, and their communities to the tens of thousands of evacuees. Fort Chipewyan sent boats up the Athabasca River to help support and evacuate Fort McKay; Fort McKay received thousands of evacuees in the first days of the disaster, before they were eventually evacuated themselves; Fort McMurray First Nation opened up Indian Beach and with Willow Lake Métis provided water, food, and gas before they too were evacuated; Chipewyan Prairie First Nation opened camps and homes and worked long days cooking food and providing support for evacuees; and the Conklin Métis served food and lined the streets with jerry-cans to put gas in the vehicles of evacuees.

**“You know, the Indigenous people have always been like that. They've always helped. You come to somebody's house and they'll feed you. And it's just a given...The community came together, seems to me like it was a lot stronger than they ever have been. Everybody was doing things together, helping each other and guiding each other. There was a lot of people in some pretty tight spots there. But on the other end of it too, the people of Canada, basically, I've never seen so many people come together and help. We were in different cities, and there were signs up, it was just overwhelming how much people helped, and not only in the Métis community, but all of Canada, really.”**

First Nations and Métis alike took in strangers, opened facilities, shared food and water, and distributed gasoline and other key provisions to those fleeing the disaster for days on end, and under the constant threat of evacuation as the wildfires spread north and to the southeast. At the time, many people interviewed saw the contributions of Indigenous peoples as not only an expression of Indigenous culture and values, but as part of the wider coming together of Canadians from across the country to support victims of the greatest natural disaster in our nation's history. That Indigenous communities were then largely shut out of re-entry and recovery planning, however, served to reinforce the perceptions of many Indigenous peoples that



the RMWB, the Government of Alberta, and the Government of Canada view their Indigenous residents and neighbours as ‘second-class citizens’ rather than as full and equal partners.

Traditional cultural values and practices were additional sources of resilience and recovery for many Indigenous peoples, from political participation and community gatherings to traditional land use and ceremonies. Not surprisingly, 70% of survey respondents declared a preference for disaster management services provided directly Indigenous governments, organizations, and peoples. And despite the lack of external communications and support, and for many Métis Locals the lack of financial and other resources, Indigenous governments and staff did a remarkable job of receiving evacuees, evacuating their communities, and supporting members.



Photo: Peter Fortna

Finally, the wildfire fed into an emerging movement towards reconciliation between First Nations and Métis communities within the region. After decades and centuries of being played against each other by governments and industry, First Nation and Métis governments are beginning to work together on a range of

activities, from the Rural Coalition to advocate for improved rural services to proposals for joint First Nation and Métis ownership of the proposed Transmountain pipeline. The continued collaboration between First Nation and Métis governments will be crucial to the development and success of disaster management moving forward.



## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has identified a range of contextual factors that contributed to the high levels of risk and vulnerability of Indigenous communities and peoples prior to the 2016 Horse River wildfire, as well as numerous deficiencies related to the preparedness, response, and recovery phases of the disaster. Consistent with the vision that disaster management and emergency response must take into account these contextual factors, be rooted in local knowledge and capacity, and support the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, this report makes 36 recommendations for the Government of Canada and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), the Government of Alberta and the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA), the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB), and the First Nations and Métis governments of the region.

### RECONCILIATION, RECOGNITION, AND RIGHTS

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- **RECOMMENDATION 1:** Disaster management and emergency response in the RMWB must be conducted within a wider framework of reconciliation with the Indigenous governments and peoples in the region;
- **RECOMMENDATION 2:** The Government of Canada, the Government of Alberta, and the RMWB should formally adopt and fully implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) as the broad legal framework for reconciliation;



- **RECOMMENDATION 3:** The RMWB should establish a Reconciliation Advisory Committee with representatives from the municipality, First Nations, and the Métis to develop and implement a Framework Agreement for Reconciliation, based upon the principles of UNDRIP and the historical experience of the Indigenous peoples of the region;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 4:** Disaster management and emergency response in the region should be designed and implemented on the basis of government-to-government relations between the RMWB, the Government of Alberta, and the Government of Canada, on the one hand, and First Nation and Métis governments, on the other;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 5:** Disaster management and emergency response programs should be designed with the clear objectives of strengthening Indigenous governance capacity, developing the human and other resources of Indigenous communities, and equalizing the standard of living between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 6:** The Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta should continue to work with the Métis Nation of Alberta, its Regions, its Locals, and its citizens to implement a framework agreement to advance Métis self-determination in the Province of Alberta, recognize Métis governments and governance structures as Indigenous governments that represent the citizens of the Métis Nation of Alberta, and provide funding to support the operations of Métis governments and the provision of services to Métis citizens in Alberta;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 7:** The Government of Alberta should continue to work with the Métis in Alberta to recognize the constitutionally protected Aboriginal





rights of the Métis and design and implement a consultation policy for non-Settlement Métis to ensure those rights are protected;

## **JURISDICTION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS**

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- **RECOMMENDATION 8:** Consistent with the *Daniels* decision, ISC should recognize the federal responsibility for disaster management involving Métis communities and amend its agreement with the AEMA to include Métis governments and citizens in all programs and services offered for the purposes of disaster management and emergency response;
- **RECOMMENDATION 9:** ISC should work with the Government of Alberta and First Nations/Métis at the provincial level to draft and sign a partnership and framework agreement that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all partners in disaster management for Indigenous peoples in the province;
- **RECOMMENDATION 10:** ISC should amend its agreement with the AEMA to include disaster mitigation programs and funding; this would unify disaster management services for Indigenous peoples in Alberta, from preparedness and response to recovery and mitigation, in one organization, which would facilitate a more integrated approach to Indigenous disaster management in the province;
- **RECOMMENDATION 11:** ISC should work with Indigenous organizations in Canada to develop a national policy for disaster recovery funding for Indigenous governments and communities. Because of the inadequate condition of infrastructure in most rural Indigenous communities in Canada, this national standard should make explicit the objective of disaster recovery funding to



*improve* the infrastructure and resilience of Indigenous communities, not simply return them to their pre-disaster state, which is the present standard utilized by the AEMA across the province;

- **RECOMMENDATION 12:** There must be better coordination between the AEMA and RMWB officials responsible for supporting Indigenous peoples. To that end, the AEMA and the RMWB should sign a Memorandum of Understanding that lays out their respective roles and responsibilities regarding Indigenous peoples and commits each side to improving relationships and lines of communication. AEMA First Nations fields officers, for instance, should make a point of visiting RES and IRR officials from the RMWB when they visit Indigenous communities in the region to share information and coordinate;
- **RECOMMENDATION 13:** All governments in the region, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, must prioritize disaster management in their communities and commit to greater coordination and cooperation between governments in the areas of disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation;

## REGIONAL COOPERATION

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- **RECOMMENDATION 14:** The RMWB, First Nations, and Métis governments in the region should negotiate and implement a Disaster Management Framework Agreement that defines institutions, roles, responsibilities, and relationships for disaster management in the region on a government-to-government basis. The Framework Agreement would lay the foundations for the design and implementation of the regional disaster management plan based upon local autonomy, mutual respect, and mutual aid; that framework agreement should



address all phases of disaster management from preparedness and response to recovery and mitigation;

- **RECOMMENDATION 15:** As part of the regional framework agreement, the RMWB should convene a Disaster Management and Emergency Response Advisory Group consisting of representatives from the municipality, Indigenous governments, and industry. The Advisory Group would be responsible for making recommendations for the design and coordination of disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation plans and initiatives;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 16:** As a longer-term goal, ISC should work with the AEMA and Indigenous governments in the province to establish and fund an Indigenous Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (IDEMA). The Agency would be funded by ISC but should be coordinated with and potentially housed by the AEMA. The Agency would assume control of all ISC-funded disaster and emergency response programs and could be governed by a Board of Directors consisting of representatives from First Nations and Métis governments in each major region of the province;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 17:** ISC, AEMA/IDEMA, and the RMWB should work with Indigenous governments in the region to hire and train First Nation and Métis Directors of Emergency Management (DEM) at the regional level. The positions would be funded by ISC but could operate under the control of First Nation and Métis governments/organizations. These positions could be located at the RMWB to facilitate coordination with the municipality. The DEMs would be responsible for working with Indigenous governments to ensure emergency response plans are in place and regularly updated, liaise between Indigenous governments, the RMWB, and the AEMA/IDEMA to maximize intergovernmental coordination of disaster management planning, and represent



Indigenous communities in Emergency Operations Centres (EOC) in disaster events. Where desirable and practical, this initiative could be replicated in all major regions of the province;

- **RECOMMENDATION 18:** The AEMA/IDEMA should consider a pilot program to hire and train an Indigenous All-Hazards Incident Management Team, similar to the existing provincial team, funded by ISC. The All-Hazards Management Team would be deployed to provide immediate support to Indigenous communities during disaster events. Ideally the team would have representatives in each region of the province to facilitate strong relationships and trust with local Indigenous governments and communities;

## COMMUNITY-BASED PREPAREDNESS

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- **RECOMMENDATION 19:** All First Nations and Métis governments in the region should have a Director of Emergency Management (DEM) and an Assistant Director of Emergency Management (ADEM). Insofar as possible, the DEM should be a person who lives in the community and knows the community and its members well. Indigenous governments should seek to minimize turnover in the DEM position and use to ADEM to ensure institutional memory and continuity where DEMs do leave their positions;
- **RECOMMENDATION 20:** All First Nations and Métis communities in the region should design their own community-based disaster management and emergency response plans to (1) determine key hazards; (2) identify the major sources of vulnerability within the community; and (3) design preparedness, response, and mitigation plans based on community priorities and local



knowledge. Community-level plans should be integrated into the regular operations of Indigenous governments to the greatest extent possible, should be updated and reviewed by the community and its members on an annual basis, and should utilize and build upon the skills and knowledge of community members. Where desirable, community-based plans could be done on a sub-regional level;

- **RECOMMENDATION 21:** Based on the gaps identified in interviews, community-based disaster management plans should consider the following:
  - Regular updating of members, residences, and contact information;
  - A centralized communications plan, social media presence, and plan to contact and support Elders and other vulnerable individuals;
  - Backup for all key data, including governance and historical documents, and identification of cultural artefacts to be evacuated;
  - Design and use of a database to track impacts to members and needs in the event of a disaster event and evacuation;
  - Preparations to receive evacuees and provide support where a disaster event takes places in another part of the region;
  - Identification of a centralized, safe, and culturally appropriate evacuation site for the community to maintain families and community members together and provide support more efficiently and under the control and supervision of Indigenous governments;
  - Staffing roles and responsibilities for emergency response, including the roles and responsibilities of DEMs and leadership;
  - Staffing requirements and the potential need to hire additional staff to support existing staff and provide relief;



- A dedicated individual to work on tracking expenditures and making submissions for disaster recovery funding; this person should be trained by AEMA staff;
- An employee assistance program for staff who are themselves victims of a disaster event;
- Consideration of the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), including a single point of contact for NGOs within the community to coordinate external NGO support services.

## RESPONSE, RE-ENTRY, AND RECOVERY

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- **RECOMMENDATION 22:** The RMWB's MEMP should include direct representation for First Nations and Métis in the REOC. Representation should be negotiated with Indigenous governments and should reflect the spirit of government-to-government relationships;
- **RECOMMENDATION 23:** Municipal and Provincial EOCs should provide First Nations and Métis leadership with daily/regular leadership briefings/updates, as they would other high-level government officials;
- **RECOMMENDATION 24:** ISC and AEMA/IDEMA should work with First Nations and Métis governments to identify and establish a network of Indigenous evacuation centres on or at First Nations reserves, Métis Settlements, and and/or Indigenous organizations that could provide centralized, safe, and culturally-appropriate evacuation sites for evacuated Indigenous communities, where Indigenous governments can coordinate and provide support to members;



- **RECOMMENDATION 25:** The RMWB should work with Indigenous governments to design a Re-Entry and Recovery Plan that includes Indigenous governments and communities as full partners. The recovery plan should contemplate a Tri-Partite Recovery Committee consisting of representatives from the RMWB, First Nations, and Métis, similar to the Slave Lake model;
- **RECOMMENDATION 26:** As part of the re-entry and recovery planning, the RMWB should work with Indigenous governments to identify and set-up Indigenous re-entry and recovery centres for the urban Indigenous population, for example at the Friendship Centre, as well as for rural areas. These centres should provide safe and culturally appropriate re-entry and recovery spaces where Indigenous peoples can get information and access support services;
- **RECOMMENDATION 27:** One of the most common concerns expressed by Indigenous peoples was the lack of Indigenous workers at the RMWB and in other governmental and non-governmental agencies, including the Red Cross. Response, re-entry, and recovery efforts would be facilitated considerably by the existence of more Indigenous employees within the RMWB, who are able to interface and work directly with Indigenous peoples. The RMWB should review its hiring policies and work with Indigenous governments to increase the number of Indigenous employees in the municipality;
- **RECOMMENDATION 28:** Alberta Health Services (AHS) should similarly emphasize the hiring of more Indigenous counsellors and support workers. AHS could consider the establishment of an Indigenous Disaster Response and Recovery team comprised of Indigenous counsellors and support workers that can be deployed to areas where disasters have affected Indigenous communities;



- **RECOMMENDATION 29:** The RMWB and AHS should require that all staff undergo Cultural Safety Training to address the need for increased Indigenous cultural safety by bringing to light biases and the legacies of colonialism that affect service accessibility and health outcomes for Indigenous peoples;

## MITIGATION

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- **RECOMMENDATION 30:** Given the increasing frequency of disaster events and the disproportionate risk of and vulnerability to natural disasters in Indigenous communities, ISC should prioritize preparedness and mitigation initiatives for Indigenous communities and peoples and significantly increase funding for such activities from current levels;
- **RECOMMENDATION 31:** The RMWB should establish a Disaster Mitigation Advisory Sub-Committee as part of the Disaster Management and Emergency Response Advisory Group. The sub-committee should have representatives from the RMWB, First Nations, and Métis governments and would work to identify mitigation needs across the region, coordinate initiatives, and support applications made to the AEMA/ISC by First Nations and Métis for mitigation projects;
- **RECOMMENDATION 32:** The Disaster Mitigation Advisory Sub-Committee should work to identify deficits related to regional and community-level egress routes and develop and coordinate funding proposals for rural hamlets and First Nation reserves as part of a regional emergency evacuation plan. Eventually each rural community and reserve should have at least two egress routes in case of an emergency or natural disaster;





- **RECOMMENDATION 33:** The Disaster Mitigation Advisory Sub-Committee should develop a plan to increase levels of home and tenant insurance for Indigenous peoples, particularly in the rural hamlets. Such a plan could consider an educational campaign, regional coordination with insurance companies, and subsidies, among other initiatives;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 34:** The RMWB should work with First Nation and Métis governments to form a FireSmart Regional Advisory Committee, similar to the one set-up by the Town and Municipal District of Slave Lake and the Sawridge First Nation. The Advisory Committee would coordinate FireSmart activities and ensure maximum benefit accrues locally;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 35:** The Disaster Mitigation Advisory Sub-Committee should seek to maximize the input of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK) holders in the design and implementation of mitigation and monitoring initiatives;
  
- **RECOMMENDATION 36:** The RMWB, First Nations, and Métis governments should work together to establish an Indigenous Summer Firefighting Crew that could be deployed during wildfire season. A similar program was set-up in Slave Lake after the 2011 wildfires. This program could build upon the existing Indigenous firefighting knowledge and provide training and employment for Indigenous youth in the summers.



## DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND RECONCILIATION

More than a year removed from the 2016 Horse River wildfire, we still know comparatively little about how the wildfire impacted the Indigenous peoples of the region. The reports produced by and for the RMWB and the Government of Alberta failed to assess the specific impacts to Indigenous peoples, beyond several in-text boxes. Even more seriously, none of the reports attempted to grapple with the complex legacies of relations between Indigenous communities, the RMWB, the Government of Alberta, and the Government of Canada. Absent such a context, however, one cannot answer the most important questions facing emergency response and disaster management planning in Indigenous communities. This report represents an attempt to fill these gaps and express Indigenous voices, perspectives, and priorities.

To this end, the report has made 36 recommendations to the Governments of Canada and Alberta, the RMWB, and the Indigenous governments of the region to strengthen disaster management and emergency response for the Indigenous peoples of the region. These recommendations make clear that to be effective, disaster management must be one part of a wider process of truth telling and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and of the development of equitable and respectful relationships between the governments and peoples in the RMWB, the Province of Alberta, and across the entire country. Wildfires and other disaster events are likely to increase in both frequency and intensity in the foreseeable future and Indigenous peoples occupy and use much of the highest risk areas. Unless there is a dramatic transformation in our approach to intergovernmental relations, intercultural communication, and disaster management, however, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of the RMWB, the Province of Alberta, and the country will continue to talk past each other, condemned to repeat the errors of the past.