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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (1145)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): I call everyone to order. Let's get started. We have a lot of presenters.

Hi, folks back home. Thanks for waiting.

Welcome everybody.

This is the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We're in the midst of a study on fire safety and emergency management in indigenous communities.

Those of us in committee here are on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. It's important for us to recognize Canada's initiative. All of us are moving to understand truth and reconciliation with the people who invited us to this generous and beautiful country.

We have five presenters, so the agenda is very heavy, with a very short time frame.

In terms of quick comments on committee business, I see that MP Anandasangaree is indicating that he would like to present something.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): No, Madam Chair, I think we had initially scheduled 15 minutes for planning. I propose that we vacate that today and go to the witnesses.

The Chair: Is there concurrence?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That still does not give us enough time for the regular procedure. I understand there may be agreement for presentations and one question per party, and that we'll do it for the two panels. We'll take the first panel, and then we'll have one question from each party. Then we'll do the second panel.

Is there agreement? Is everyone good with that?

All right, let's get started.

On our first panel, we have Ryan Day and Ann Louie. Welcome.

Chief Ryan Day (Chief, Bonaparte Indian Band): Thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to ask members to always remember to indicate to whom you want to ask your question.

I open it up to you. Have you decided who's going to go first?

Chief Ann Louie (Chief, Williams Lake Indian Band): I will.

The Chair: Very good.

Go ahead, Chief.

Chief Ann Louie: [*Witness speaks in Shuswap*]

My name is Ann Louie. I'm the chief of the Williams Lake Indian Band. We're part of the Secwepemc organization. I will be presenting the events that occurred for us on July 7 and the following month.

The fire started in our community at approximately 3 p.m. due to a lightning strike. There were issues with trying to get through to report fires. Many community members also had issues with calling in to report the fire, as the Cariboo Fire Centre was apparently overwhelmed during the 148 lightning strikes that day. When staff got through, they would be referred to another agency. During that time, there were automated answering machines which were of no assistance, and 911 was actually glitching out at this time.

Williams Lake Band has an agreement with the 150 Mile House centre, which was also overwhelmed. I sat in my vehicle making calls as well during this time, which I found extremely frustrating. I reached the CRD director chair, who told me then that I was in a better position to make a decision because I could see what was happening.

There should have been a person from the fire centre with expertise sent out to assess the situation, which was not done at any time. As chief of the community, I sat outside my band office with many community members who stayed, watching the aggressive fire coming over the hill within a very short period of time. People were beginning to panic, and I directed them to leave the community for their safety. Some had already left through back roads on the opposite side of the lake from the fire. This was at approximately 6 p.m., three hours after the fire began.

While this was happening, community members began going to Highway 97. They were then turned back by the RCMP who had the road blocked. They came back and told me this, and just then an RCMP officer in a pick-up truck came up to me while I was in the vehicle still trying to make calls. I said to him, "What the hell are you guys doing? You guys now have us blocked in." His response was, "No, I don't think so." I said, "Yes, you do. Our people are going up to the highway and being turned back." He said "I will go check" and left.

He went up to the main highway and within a couple of minutes came back down with his red and blue lights flashing. Then he said, "They can get through now." By this time, the vehicles were lined up to the bridge past the main reserve, which included people from the Onward Ranch. Then they were allowed to leave the community by the highway to get to a registration centre at the Ramada Inn in Williams Lake.

We received assistance from Jeff Eustache of First Nations' Emergency Service Society on Sunday, July 9, and for the week following this. We will be forever grateful to him. He came in and assisted staff in setting up the required documents and contacts for us to deal with the ongoing emergency. We did not get proper assistance from forestry until day three after the fire started, even though the Caribou Fire Centre is less than 10 kilometres from our community, right over the hill, and the fire was only a couple of kilometres from the fire centre.

I went to a meeting at the fire centre, which involved INAC regional director general Catherine Lappe, Grand Chief Ed John, Robert Chamberlin from UBCIC, chiefs, and me, where I stated the above. I also let them know that our community members were fighting the fire with garden hoses and shovels and that we required support. I asked for piss cans and fire hoses for the fire to be fought properly. I also let them know that we had lost a house during the night and that we would have lost a lot more had our community members not returned to the community during the night to fight the fire.

Cantex were contractors working on Highway 97 doing four-laning. They were also instrumental in firefighting and saving our businesses and one house along the highway corridor. Members of the fire centre said, "You do have an agreement with the 150 department. Obviously, they were not able to assist you. We can now assist with structural integrity, which we will set up." One of the other chiefs said to me, "Why did it have to come to you saying you lost a house before you were offered anything?"

•(1150)

Further to the above, we were categorized as an alert rather than an evacuation, which caused us many more issues for getting assistance with food and accommodation for our members. They also listed the fire as "human-caused". I demanded they change this, as it was not accurate.

These two situations alone caused our members to not get assistance until the night before the city of Williams Lake was evacuated, which was one week later. We had three separate meetings at Williams Lake, where the reception centre was, on July 14, trying to get proper assistance for community members who were being turned away.

We were also informed that there were no forms there. It was eventually Dave Dixon from the community policing who told me, "Chief Ann, go back up there. I guarantee you, the forms are there." I sent out the information to members, and we began getting food vouchers that night until about 7:30. Many community members were not able to use their vouchers, as the city of Williams Lake was then evacuated the very next day.

The improper classification of the fire evacuation caused ongoing issues, and the Williams Lake Indian Band's mailing address being under the city of Williams Lake along with the postal codes also caused confusion with the Red Cross assistance, because of the city being evacuated one week later than the Williams Lake Indian Band.

The results of all of the above have caused so many ongoing issues that we recommend strongly that we be engaged at all levels of planning in the future. It brought to light for us that, as first nations, we are totally invisible when these events occur. The municipal, regional district, and provincial levels all have funding to respond. First nations were totally forgotten during this crisis, and it was not until we asserted ourselves that we were included in the ongoing follow-up calls and planning meetings. The province must ensure that we are involved in all planning in the future.

We had to request funding from the RDG to assist us with the ongoing work that resulted due to the wildfires. Fortunately for us, Catherine Lappe, RDG of INAC, responded quickly to this request.

We have stated that we require an emergency fund to be set up for first nations in the amount of \$200 million, to deal with all future emergencies that occur. We are now demanding emergency planning funding, integrations with local governments, fire prevention funding for fuel management, interface projects, and equipment for fire prevention.

We are now faced with huge economic impacts, such as a delay to a major project we were dealing with in building the Coyote Rock development along the highway; reduction in our land value due to visual impacts and reduced recreational value; challenges for business attractions, retention, and tourism; loss of our forestry resource—approximately 350,000 cubic metres on Williams Lake Indian Band and private lands; loss for our forestry company in our territory; and forestry effects on hydrology, drainage, wildlife habitat, and heritage sites.

In terms of social impacts, many have been traumatized by the fire, and elders and others have been displaced. Some members and a lot of non-members have also left their communities. We are now left to deal with educating the community about emergency response, fire prevention, ensuring that assets are properly insured, and assisting those who had insurance in dealing with insurance companies, who in some cases are being unrealistic and demanding receipts for items as far back as 40 years. An individual who was a mechanic was expected to have receipts for tools he had purchased several years ago.

With all of the above, it will be years before we can have a feeling that we are returning to any normal situation within our community.

We have held recent meetings with the ministers in B.C. to discuss some of the issues. As a result, in the last couple of days, for the first time ever, we received an invitation from the provincial firefighting training program to be included in training prior to the fire season. This has been great news for first nations in the Cariboo.

• (1155)

That's the end of my presentation, but I just need to say again that it's been an extremely painful experience for our community.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief. That was well articulated and thought out. We really appreciate your presentation.

Now we have our second presenter, also a chief, Ryan Day from the Bonaparte Indian Band.

Welcome.

Chief Ryan Day: *[Witness speaks in Secwepemctsin]*

My name is Ryan Day. I'm the chief of Bonaparte Indian Band, also part of the Secwepemc Nation. We're located about an hour west of Kamloops, B.C.

I'll speak to a few things that are similar to those that Kukpi7 Ann spoke about, but we have a little bit of different circumstances. I'll also talk a little bit about solutions and moving forward.

On July 7 there was a fire in our neighbouring community of the Ashcroft Indian Band, or just outside of their reserve. I heard about it at around 12:30 in the afternoon. By three o'clock that fire was on our doorstep—and we're about 10 miles away—because it was extremely windy that day. We had no time to prepare, but we had enough people with the wherewithal in our community to evacuate everyone who wasn't going to stay and fight the fire. We got our handful of hoses and just got ready for the flames.

I should note that we didn't have an emergency plan to enact, but we had enough people with experience so that we got organized pretty quickly. Our reservoir can be used to fight fire for about 20 minutes at the most, so we were in an extremely precarious situation with virtually no supplies. These were not young fellows either. These guys with the firefighting experience are in their sixties.

We were able to stop the fire from wiping out our community. There were walls of flames coming down both sides of the highway, but we were able to do some strategic burns at just the right moment and stop the fire from wiping out our community. We lost one home, but it was derelict and hadn't been used for quite a number of years, so we were lucky that was the only real damage that happened there.

We have three populated reserves, and our main reserve we evacuated right away. Then we also evacuated a second reserve just because of the winds and the unpredictable nature of the fire. We were able to bring people home after a couple of weeks but then had to evacuate again because some inexperienced forest firefighters who were doing a back-burn did not understand the winds in the area, and the fire actually came back onto our community from the back-burn, so we had to evacuate again for another couple of weeks.

At any rate, that was kind of the nature of the fire. We just did what we needed to do without a real plan, although you wouldn't know it because we did so well. As Kukpi7 Ann mentioned, we would have been invisible as well had we not asserted ourselves and had some help from First Nations' Emergency Services Society as well through that experience.

As she mentioned, it was very traumatizing for our people, both those who were evacuated and those who stayed back, but at the same time we did an extremely good job of coping with that. I will talk shortly about our ability to cope with compounded trauma.

That is an extremely brief review. To give some context, the fire burned more than half of the territory that my band depends on for our subsistence living. We are caretakers of the Bonaparte River watershed, and well over half of the Bonaparte watershed was razed to the ground, so we're in pretty dire straits moving forward as well.

I'll try to break it down into three parts: prevention, managing the crisis, and post-crisis.

• (1200)

In terms of prevention, many of our reserves, not just my community but others, were surrounded by forest and we need to do the field management that Kukpi7 Ann mentioned. We need to have sustained funding in order to do that, and to ensure that the forests that surround our communities are doing fuel reduction and that there aren't huge hazards there. We can do that work. We have the experienced firefighters. It would be good to have a bit of training and some equipment to do that each year. We do grass fires around our homes every year on our own, but that needs to be expanded into the surrounding forests. That will help a bit. Prevention is really everything.

The other thing with prevention is that the province has mismanaged the forest for many decades. We can create some buffers around our communities directly on reserve, but the problem is that the forest is a mess around our reserves as well. The province needs to be held to account for that, because it creates a liability. It creates a liability for our communities and infrastructure, and it creates a liability for the department.

The province is doing another study. They did the Filmon report back in 2003, and they didn't implement what was needed and what was discussed there. They're going to do another study, but they need to be held to account.

I don't know if the angle that needs to be taken is that they've created a liability for all of our communities and need to be doing their part in terms of mitigating that liability. We can do that together. Because our people are used to doing the fuel management and so on, we can do that for them.

In terms of managing the crisis or managing disasters, as you know, with nearly ever sector, there are jurisdictional issues. We've definitely had big jurisdictional problems on our reserves and in our neighbouring communities. Disasters like this, fires and floods, are landscape-level disasters, and they're regional.

To illustrate what we need at a regional level, I'll give the example of a war chief. In wartime, the peace chief steps aside and is no longer responsible for what goes on. The war chief is activated in times of war because he's an expert. The same thing should go for emergencies. For our communities, for neighbouring communities, when a state of emergency is called, there's a whole subset of people who are then activated in order to deal with that crisis. They are experts who are trained and who maintain relationships with one another so that when an emergency happens there's no wasted time, no inefficient communication. They're ready to go so that lives are not lost and so that less damage occurs.

That was an issue we had. We had to deal with the regional district—a bunch of mayors who know nothing about the land, who know nothing about emergencies. In the same way, I'm not an expert in emergencies, yet I was required to do a bunch that I shouldn't have been doing. It was really helpful that I had the emergency services person to help me out, but what we really need in the community is an emergency chief, and a regional plan that gets activated when a state of emergency is called, where everybody's on the same playing field and is used to working with one another.

What we found was that because we have so much knowledge of the land, the winds, and the hills, when it came to a fire, we were the most valuable asset out there in terms of knowledge. When it came to an emergency, there was a respect between the firefighters we had and the ones from the province and elsewhere. In my mind, that's one thing that needs to happen. We need to have that annual funding, not just to have a plan but to keep that plan updated and to practise doing drills for floods, and so on and so forth. That is critical.

In terms of evacuations, we had a lot of problems with racism. When people are evacuated, the volunteer pool is typically the pool of the town, or whatever. Unfortunately, racism is a problem that's not going to be solved overnight, so we need our own people, our own teams to deal with our evacuees. We need them to perhaps come from outside the region in order to help out.

• (1205)

I see I need to begin wrapping up.

The Chair: Yes, please.

Chief Ryan Day: I will just talk about post-crisis. We know global warming is a fact and these things are going to continue to happen. We already have a traumatized population and we are just compounding that trauma. Hopefully, we will be able to deal with it thoroughly by the time flood season starts, but it's going to happen again. We have to be able to deal with the mental health stuff and the resilience, because that's the thing that was created by the Government of Canada. The poverty, the land dispossession, the residential schools have created a vulnerability in our communities and that's what we need to work on in order to be resilient. We need to be able to manage our lands and prevent these issues from happening, and we're the best ones to do it.

Thank you.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go into a series of questions. It's going to be one from every party. We'll start with MP Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Chief Day and Chief Louie. It's very appreciated, your taking the time today and explaining your first-hand experience with this summer's really challenging events. I can only imagine what difficulties you've been through as a community.

I wanted to pick up on Chief Day's comment around the need for different types of leadership. You made the analogy of the war chief, the need to have distinct leadership at the time of a fire catastrophe. If you're here suggesting that there needs to be a regional approach and there needs to be a very specific indigenous community approach to dealing with these circumstances, does it not indicate that there ought to be further emergency preparedness planning within your community and within the entire region, both indigenous and non-indigenous communities, and if it does, what does that kind of planning look like between indigenous and non-indigenous communities?

The Chair: You're directing the questions.

Chief Ryan Day: We live about five kilometres away from the next municipality of Cache Creek. What I was trying to get at is that it shouldn't matter whether it's in town or it's on reserve. When it comes to an emergency and we're in that proximity, we should be completely on the same page. It shouldn't be my dealing with the mayor of Cache Creek. There should be two people who are trained in emergency management who are in contact throughout the year and have coordinated drills or whatever it is ongoing each year. It's not dependent upon election cycles or whatever else because you just don't have time in an emergency to be dealing with those types of things. They just need to be ready to go.

It's one thing to build a plan, but you have to be exercising that and updating that every year, without fail. That's been the history of, I guess, the funding issues. You get funding to make a plan and then that's it. Implementation has always been the struggle.

Mr. William Amos: Okay, so it's ongoing exercises, integrating towns and reserve communities.

Chief Louie, could you comment on that? We've heard it loud and clear that funding is necessary. Beyond the funding issue, what kinds of mechanisms to integrate indigenous and the non-indigenous communities are required in order to have a more effective regional approach to natural disasters like fire and flood?

Chief Ann Louie: For me, it would be full inclusion by the other jurisdictions that are involved: Cariboo Regional District, the City of Williams Lake. Williams Lake Band does have an emergency evacuation plan which obviously we determined was not up fully where it should have been, but we are developing a community safety plan. However, since the fire, Williams Lake Band is now looking and negotiating with 150 Mile House Fire Department to put a second fire hall within our area. We also have plans to do a community forum with the city and CRD and Williams Lake Indian Band to continue the planning work.

However, that must occur across the entire province and not in individual communities, because what we determined during this crisis was that the different levels in the provincial government—forestry, firefighting—were all from different pockets, so different people were doing different things. One of the largest things that came out for us was that we were never consulted when they were bringing in the firefighters from out of province. When those firefighters hit the ground out here, they did not know the landscape. But we have people in our communities who are trained firefighters, who could have easily taken the lead and shown them how to eliminate the stuff that Chief Day spoke about, which was the back-burning that went so wrong.

• (1215)

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

I'd like to ask each of you to answer in turn. I don't know how much time I have left, probably about two minutes.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. William Amos: Perhaps you could answer in about a minute each.

What kind of fire education programs or services do you offer on reserve? What information is provided to your community to be more aware of the dangers of fires in community? This is less about forest fire circumstances and a bit more about the average, everyday fire concern.

Chief Ryan Day: Little, that's the quickest answer there is. We really haven't done much. We do our regular fire alarm stuff, and that's about the extent of it.

Chief Ann Louie: Williams Lake Band has a fire truck, fire hall, and we're integrated with the 150 Mile House Fire Department, so some of our community members have been trained to work with the fire department. We make presentations at our community meetings, but as I said earlier, there's a lot more work to be done.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you to you both. It's very appreciated.

The Chair: Questioning now goes to MP Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair

Thank you to Chief Ann Louie for being here.

Folks, I don't know how many of you know that my hometown is the chiefs. My mom lives literally about 700 metres down from the chief's community, and chief's very humble. When she talked about sitting in her car and making phone calls, she really was. She talked about the 150 Mile House volunteer department. You have to depend on a department that's not fully ramped-up.

Chief, I have a couple of questions for you, and I really appreciate you and your strength over the course of the summer. Your comments were bang-on with both chiefs.

Chief, on July 31, Prime Minister Trudeau visited our region. How much time were you afforded to speak with him and voice your concerns?

Chief Ann Louie: When Prime Minister Trudeau came to Williams Lake, none of our chiefs from the northern Secwepemc were given any time at all. He got off the plane, shook our hands, made a couple of comments, and that was the extent of his visit with us.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That is disappointing, and I know you were fairly frustrated since it is the traditional territory of our Williams Lake Indian Band.

Chief, we had a lot of conversations over the course of it. Did you have anybody in the CRD EOC working alongside our Cariboo Regional District and our regional firefighters?

Chief Ann Louie: Eventually, after we asserted ourselves, we had planning meetings throughout, but for the first few days we did not have anybody other than Jeff Eustache, who came on from first nations. We moved our office to Williams Lake because we have a building in Williams Lake. That's where we did our work, but we ourselves ended up setting up a daily phone call for our community members and staff, along with EOC.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Were there some inequities in who was receiving funding with respect to first nations in and around our areas and who weren't receiving funding to begin with?

Chief Ann Louie: We never received any funding and we never got any planning dollars or anything to develop emergency evacuations for crises such as this.

The funding we got from the federal government I requested directly from Catherine Lappe. That's how we got that, but it was much later in the event.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That was probably mid-August. Is that correct?

Chief Ann Louie: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay. Did other groups receive funding earlier in the process?

Chief Ann Louie: That was where I found out about information with funding being allocated to the Tsilhqot'in people. Chief Joe Alphonse approached me and mentioned that he had received a large sum of money, so I pursued it immediately and relayed that message to other chiefs in our area.

• (1220)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Why do you think that happened?

Chief Ann Louie: I don't know. You mentioned earlier about the Prime Minister coming to the area. The Williams Lake Band and the surrounding areas have always been left out.

I addressed that specifically to Minister Wilson-Raybould, that I was annoyed that the Prime Minister landed in our territory and took a flight directly to the west to see the other nations, but didn't give us the time of day. That seems to be a regular occurrence.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I think you know that at least it wasn't due in part from your MP working hard to try to get him to meet with you.

Chief Ann Louie: That's right and I appreciate your efforts in that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I think both of you mentioned during this, that when we are doing a mass evacuation—and for those who aren't from British Columbia and who might not understand the scope of this, we had first nations communities and non-first nations communities, the largest mass evacuation in British Columbia history. The social and cultural component in the evacuation centres is something I think the Red Cross was not equipped to really handle. Is that correct?

Chief Ryan Day: In their defence, the Red Cross really just came in at the request of EMBC to do what they did in Alberta last year. That's basically what happened, so I mean they did the best they could, but....

Mr. Todd Doherty: In Ottawa, I think the other part that sometimes we forget is that many of our first nation communities are in rural communities. You work alongside our ranchers and our farmers. I think you both said it. You had the local knowledge, but we had firefighters from out of country and out of province taking precedence over our local contractors and firefighters.

Do you both agree with that?

Chief Ann Louie: Yes.

Chief Ryan Day: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: How hard was it for you to fight to have your local firefighters be part of the program?

Chief Ann Louie: For us, initially, it took the meeting that occurred at the Cariboo fire centre, with the people that I named earlier, and making demands and asserting ourselves. Fortunately for us, one of our council members, Willie Sellars, was a former firefighter with the Cariboo fire centre, so they recognized him and finally set up a "pac team" within the Williams Lake Band and then he eventually went to work for the Cariboo fire centre.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Chief, how much property would we have lost, in terms of residential as well as community, if our local first nations, ranchers, and farmers didn't band together to really fight this fire?

Chief Ann Louie: I can't speak for all other communities, but I know for us, our community would have probably been wiped out entirely had it not been for the firefighters who went back in during the night, as well as the people who worked on the highway. It was their equipment that saved our businesses and the community members saved the houses.

My home is probably 500 yards from where that other house burned and the fire came right up. That's a new subdivision and it stopped right at the pavement and that was due to the members stopping it.

Mr. Todd Doherty: This will be the last comment, I have.

The Chair: Be very quick, please.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Chief, due to the confusion that you alluded to, we had community members, including my mom, who were evacuated through flames. Is that correct?

Chief Ann Louie: Yes. They were very extreme flames.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

The Chair: These are very challenging stories, as is the life that you went through.

The questioning now wraps up with MP Stetski.

Mr. Wayne Stetski (Kootenay—Columbia, NDP): Thank you.

I'm from southeastern British Columbia, which is the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa and the Shuswap. Of course, we also had a fire this summer in the Ktunaxa area, at ?aqam, just outside of Cranbrook.

This leads to two questions. When I was mayor of Cranbrook, we had an agreement with the ?aqam band to fight structural fires in some of their larger structures on their land.

Of course, every regional district does have an emergency response plan in place. Starting with you, Chief Louie, and then you, Chief Day, is there an openness or willingness you're finding now that you've gone through that, for both your local city fire departments to participate more actively on reserve land and/or for you to be fully integrated into the regional district emergency plan?

• (1225)

Chief Ann Louie: Williams Lake Band has not had any communication with the Williams Lake Fire Department. However, we have been dealing with the 150 Mile House volunteer fire department and the Cariboo Regional District to expand our firefighting capacity.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: It certainly is possible for cities to do that, having been part of that agreement in Cranbrook.

What about an openness to be part of that larger regional district emergency response? Is there a door there that is open now that wasn't there before?

Chief Ann Louie: For us, yes.

I just want to go back to the comment about the city. We've had experiences of racism because of the mayor in the past. That's an issue that has evolved over time, because we have let him know that we won't put up with it any longer. Business is getting better, but we've always had a better relationship with the CRD.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: It's disappointing to hear that.

Chief Day.

Chief Ryan Day: Unfortunately, I don't have much of a different story there. The local community, as I say, is five kilometres away. It's only a thousand people, and it has a volunteer fire department as well. There's a willingness there, but there's a capacity issue on both sides.

In terms of the emergency plan with the regional district, yes, there is an openness, and we'll probably head in that direction, but there's a real issue with the regional districts as far as governance is concerned, as I alluded to in my statement. There needs to be a mechanism outside of politicians, with actual experts in the area on an operational level to deal with that.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Is there an opportunity for you as chiefs going through the kind of experiences you did last summer—again, Joe Pierre from Ktunaxa would be part of that—to get together and talk about how to have a better future for first nations in terms of fire? We all know it's likely to continue.

I'll start with you, Chief Day.

Chief Ryan Day: Certainly. Emergency Management BC has been good about wanting to do debriefs and some organizing. As I mentioned, though, it's important for us as chiefs to get together. We have to solve the jurisdictional barrier problem. When it comes to emergencies, there has to be a landscape-level solution. We are the experts on the landscape. That needs to be recognized and enforced so that we're leading the charge on that.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Chief Louie.

Chief Ann Louie: I agree with Kukpi7 Day's comments. I personally made a presentation to the B.C. cabinet and all the chiefs regarding the fire situation this summer. EMBC has been quite active. I just met with them again a couple of weeks ago. It has been a difficult process, but it's slowly evolving.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Let me finish by commending your band members. I watched the news with a great deal of interest. It was very clear that if it weren't for the effort of your band members, it would have been much more catastrophic.

Chief Ryan Day: Indeed. Thank you.

Chief Ann Louie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for taking the time to present to us. We will use your testimony, and your briefs if you submit them, as evidence for us to prepare a report, which we will be submitting to Parliament.

Meegwetch. Thank you very much.

We'll take a short break before we reconvene.

MP Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Chair, I'm going to propose that we continue and that we invite the witnesses for the next panel, but while they come up here, if I may, there has been some discussion on whether we could agree to extend our meeting today for about 20 minutes. That would allow for one round of 10-minute presentations, plus seven minutes each in one full round, with the provision that if people have to leave, then we won't be doing any votes after one o'clock.

The Chair: We had some informal discussion, but there is a glitch. The clerk has just reminded me that, as he had indicated previously, another group will be entering this room at one o'clock, so we must exit.

I would now encourage the second panel to come forward.

Gary.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Chair, then I suggest we limit the presentations to seven minutes, followed by a five-minute round.

• (1230)

The Chair: Five minutes each?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Yes.

The Chair: The suggestion from the Liberal side is seven minutes for...

You're saying not really; eight minutes?

Cathy.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): I know that in the past, Madam Chair, one o'clock has not tended to be a busy time, so there might be an opportunity to find another room for the group that's coming in. I would ask that we try that first.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Chair, through you to the clerk—

The Chair: Sorry, where are we now?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Out of respect to the witnesses who are here who have come from afar, I do wonder if it's possible to book another room for the next meeting, for the people who are coming at one o'clock.

The Chair: The clerk is going to try to pursue that option. We'll report back.

As we look at presentations right now, do we have concurrence that we're going to encourage the presenters to cut their presentations down to seven or eight minutes? What is the feeling of the members, please? That will give us an opportunity to allow for questioning at five-minute rounds.

Does that seem agreeable? All right.

I see that we have the first panel. At least the first presenters, perhaps, are ready to go.

How about the Lac La Ronge group? Would you like to start? I see that you're prepared. Are you ready, or would you like to....

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson (Chief, Lac La Ronge Indian Band): No, it's good.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead then.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: Good afternoon.

[Witness speaks in Cree]

It's a real honour to be here this morning. I recognize that we're on Algonquin territory.

Madam Chair, honourable committee members, I am thankful for the opportunity to be here this morning to talk about the impacts of the wildfires in northern Saskatchewan.

[Witness speaks in Cree]

My name is Tammy Cook-Searson. I am an elected member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. I have served my community for 20 years as a band councillor, and as chief for the last five terms. I am a fluent Cree speaker. I was raised on the family trapline, and along with my wider community, we continue to rely on our physical and mental and social well-being. We hunt elk, moose, deer. We fish, we trap, and we harvest plants for medicines and food.

Lac La Ronge Indian Band is the largest first nation in Saskatchewan. We are the 10th-largest band in Canada out of 633 first nations. Our population as of last week was 10,911. That's how many band members we have. We are part of Treaty 6. Our treaty was signed on February 11, 1889. We're situated in north central Saskatchewan on the edge of the Precambrian Shield. Usually, our traditional territories are based on how the traplines were separated in the 1930s. Lac La Ronge Indian Band is comprised of six separate communities and 19 reserve lands that cover over 107,000 acres of reserve lands.

Two years ago, during the summer of 2015, our communities experienced an unprecedented number of wildfires that resulted in the largest evacuation effort in Saskatchewan's history. It made national and international news. The fire season began like any other year during the month of May. However, by the first week of June, there were 25 new fires caused by hot weather, dry conditions, and lightning resulted in a fire situation that we had never experienced before.

Given the intensity of the fire and smoke, we began calling states of emergency beginning on June 6. Our first communities impacted were Sikichew Lake and Clam Lake Bridge, and there a family lost their home as a result of the wildfires. From June 6 until July 4, all of our communities were impacted, including the surrounding communities of La Ronge, the town of La Ronge, and the village of Air Ronge. We were evacuating people in different stages, whether it was because of smoke or fire. Nobody returned home until July 22. It was a long drawn-out evacuation, and it was the largest disaster we had ever experienced in our living memory.

I've been asked here to speak as a witness to this event, and I would like to present the concerns that were related to the provincial emergency response and its effect on health and safety of our members. However, before I continue, I want to first acknowledge the efforts of our partners and supporters.

It was truly humbling how everyone came together during our time of need. There were all of the front-line workers and staff, including the firefighters, first responders, RCMP, Saskatchewan wildfire management, Saskatchewan emergency management, Red Cross, emergency social services, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Health Canada, Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority and Mamawetan Churchill River Health Region, Prince Albert Grand Council and first nations, as well as other teams of volunteers, and many other supporters and stakeholders.

It was an incredibly trying and difficult time for the evacuees, yet our community members, who are known for their resilience, managed to make the most of the situation with the support of many. For this, I am thankful. At the present time, the Northern Inter-tribal Health Authority is finalizing a report that captures first-hand accounts and experiences from key stakeholders. That includes

interviews from many of our elected officials, elders, community health resources, and community evacuees, as well as the federal and provincial government agencies' management and responses.

● (1235)

Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority represents Meadow Lake Tribal Council, Prince Albert Grand Council, Lac La Ronge Indian Band, and Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. As part of the Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority, one of the recommendations is there needs to be formalized processes and policies as to how a state of emergency is declared and what is expected and anticipated.

For example, with regard to funding policies, unlike urban or rural municipalities that leverage land tax revenues to support emergency management policies and response activities, we rely on INAC funding through federal funding programs and services. In most cases, our communities don't have the reserve capacity to cover interim expenses related to emergency planning and response, and we are unclear as to how, and how quickly, financial assistance can be accessed from the federal government.

In 2015 we spent over \$800,000. We were eventually reimbursed, but it took almost one year and many meetings. When the provincial response was mobilized, it became clear that their capability and capacity were quickly overwhelmed because there were 13,000 evacuees.

We had established emergency response plans and our community leaders were well versed on their roles and responsibilities during this time of crisis, yet they were interacting with provincial responders and there was a lack of defined process and no clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, which made it disorganized and sometimes chaotic. This meant we needed to take action in advance of receiving a clear response from the province. We found that once evacuees began leaving the communities, there were no established processes to track where they were or how to maintain communication with them.

One of the other main concerns was over the lack of defined roles and responsibilities in the area of communications and the coordination of provincial activities. We believe that we could have provided valuable support in these areas. In fact, there were many instances where first nations wanted to support one another in need. Several first nation communities and organizations established support services for evacuees in community centres, gyms, halls, and other facilities to provide food, shelter, clothing, and safe harbour for evacuees where the provincial response had not reached them or was not able to provide for them.

That's why, as a result of the overload of the situation on the Red Cross, we failed to understand why the offer for help, for accommodation, from other first nations was denied. There were no applicable governance policies that described what the requirements were for a community to be approved as a host community. What needs to be done for that change?

During this time the Prince Albert Grand Council filled in the gaps as a critical resource for the province. It established information, services, and a resource centre to feed and support evacuees as well as volunteers. Shelter and food were also provided to 80 wildfire management crew members after their camp was destroyed. This represents one of many examples of first nations' capabilities and capacities.

We also know there is a wealth of certified, skilled, and local first nations expertise, such as first responders, firefighters, nurses, food handlers, and equipment operators who can enhance provincial emergency response capacity.

It was greatly appreciated that the government brought the Canadian Forces to La Ronge during 2015; however, we had many experienced local firefighters who were evacuated and weren't allowed...by the province because they needed to be recertified. At one point the province said that they would be trained and hired, but they ended up waiting day after day, week after week, at the shelters, anxious and frustrated that they weren't called in.

• (1240)

We commend the efforts of the Red Cross and the emergency social services, yet there is room for improvement, change, and collaboration. Different processes might have been considered when understanding that elders felt the evacuation process reminded them that they were taken away to the Indian residential schools and how it triggered traumatic memories from when they were forced onto buses, separated from families, waited in long lines, took instruction from strange authorities, and bunked in congregate shelters.

At the same time, we are thankful for the leadership of Alex Campbell, the regional director general for the first nations and Inuit health branch. He helped us move our elders—

The Chair: Could you please wrap up.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: I realize you're in a rush, but this is really important. You're the standing committee, and we rely on you to listen to us and to not rush us, with all due respect.

The Chair: We're just asking you to share. We have three groups to present, and we will not give them the same amount of time.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: I understand. It's just that we've travelled a long way to be here to share with the committee.

The Chair: I know. It's very difficult. You can also submit your brief to us.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: I'll just finish my presentation.

The Chair: All right.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

We want to thank Alex Campbell, the regional director general for the first nations and Inuit health branch. He helped us move our

elders, bigger families, and those with compromised health conditions from the congregate shelters into a better environment.

As I already mentioned, our recommendations on how we can approve these concerns are outlined in the report that is currently being finalized.

As Chief Peter Beatty already has articulated to this committee, one of our top recommendations is that the Province of Saskatchewan work with first nations and other provincial organizations to clarify provincial roles and responsibilities for emergency response activities. We'd like these to be set out in a formal agreement with INAC and first nations and to serve to enhance local first nations' emergency response plans where interaction with the province is required.

The Chair: Please summarize.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: We are also asking for a tripartite agreement on a coordinated strategy for quality training that will develop the best firefighters and managers. About 10 to 20 years ago, our firefighters from northern Saskatchewan used to be hired all over the country and the United States—

The Chair: Please—

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: —and this is something we want to do again.

Before I close—

The Chair: We need to move the presentation now. I'm terribly sorry. You can submit your brief. We will read it, and it will be part of the public record. We now must move on. I'm so sorry. I've given you an extra three minutes.

We do need to go on. The second group is waiting to present.

Who wishes to take the next spot?

Please go ahead.

• (1245)

Chief Ronald E. Ignace (Chief, Skeetchestn Indian Band):
[*Witness speaks in Secwepemctsin*]

Thank you for honouring me to do a presentation here.

I am Chief Ron Ignace, from the Skeetchestn community, which is part of the Shuswap Nation. My fellow Shuswap chiefs were up on the screen there.

I also want to recognize the owners of this land here that I am on and thank them for giving us the opportunity to talk together.

One of the questions I saw you asking was, what went well during the fire? For us, nothing. My fellow chiefs up there, I believe I heard them say they were invisible. So were we.

I found out by accident, 10 days down the road, that the local authorities had asked the RCMP to go and give a fire emergency notice around all the non-native communities surrounding our reserve, but we were left out of the loop.

I happened to go down to our gas station. There were six RCMP in the store. They were sitting there and I said, "What have we done wrong here?" They said, "Oh no, we are going out and giving notices of fire alerts." I said, "When did that happen?" They said, "Oh, it's been a few days now." I immediately turned and went up to our band office. I notified them that there was an alert going on around there, and we decided that... We were angry because we weren't notified. We weren't brought into the loop. We were invisible, just as the other Shuswap communities were invisible.

We are still invisible today. John Horgan has called in two west coast native people to advise him on the fire in the interior. I have nothing against our west coast people. They are my brothers and sisters. Nonetheless, they weren't anywhere near the fire. We were best able to advise them.

So we took matters into our own hands. We were fortunate that the fire started over in Ashcroft reserve and went to Cache Creek, in that direction, before it came to us, and we had time to prepare.

We took every opportunity. To begin, we set up our own incident commander pre-op program and got organized. We organized all the various departments of our community. Our finance department kept track of all the finances, all the expenditures, and the hours of work that people were doing—community workers, carpenters, truck drivers—to begin amassing all the vehicles and machinery that we needed, the Cats. We even loaded up four-by-four trucks so we could do guerrilla warfare, mobilize and fight the fire with the trucks.

When the sparks were coming down on our non-native communities up the valley, we drove our trucks up there. We put out the fires like that. We engaged all the communities around us, whether they were native or non-native, to come to our meetings. We talked about the fire, planning how we could fight the fire together. We were fortunate.

Once we found out that there was this imminent danger forthcoming, we began—I'll put it in a nice way—reaching out to the RCMP. We began reaching out to the Red Cross, to FNESS, and to the incident commander. There was a big firefighting camp situated in Cache Creek, with 300 firefighters. I went there and introduced myself to the incident commander. I began talking to him and explaining what was happening to us here. We developed relationships. We had our own emergency operation centre established, which we moved out of the danger of the fire, but we maintained our incident commander.

I and 32 other people stayed behind in the community, once we decided to evacuate the community.

• (1250)

I, along with our social workers, our personnel, went to the evacuation centre in Kamloops. I met with all the people in there, introduced them, and told them that our people were coming so they would be aware of them. I told them that we had elders, that we wanted to keep our people together and not scattered all over, and

that if there were hotel rooms required for the elders, we would much appreciate that. We developed a great rapport.

The problem was not with those people. We developed a great rapport and a great working relationship once we built two-way bridges. The problem was with the federal and provincial governments. They had signed a MOU, an emergency operation agreement between the federal and provincial governments and the First Nations Leadership Council of B.C.

The First Nations Leadership Council of B.C. is our provincial organization. They're not statutory decision-makers. We are. We make decisions about ourselves. They're just a lobby group for us. But here they were expected to make decisions about things that they knew nothing about. We didn't exist as a result of that. They existed in an ethereal world, so to speak.

I went reaching out, and I found out that the Cache Creek fire camp needed a place to move to. They were looking for a place because the school was starting up in September. I told them to come to my community, my reserve lands, on the highway. We have 5,000 acres of highway frontage land; that's flat land. I invited them over. They came and set up camp on our reserve. I figured, "Wow, we have a good fire insurance here."

When they came, I, my councillors, and our tribal chair went down there, and we had a welcoming ceremony for them, an honouring ceremony. We did smudging. We did an honour song for them, a welcome song for them. As we finished smudging, I turned around and there was a whole line of firefighters wanting to be smudged as well. We told them about the history of the land, the importance of the land, and the significance of the land.

When I first got there, there were 300 firefighters, individually, looking to fight a fire they knew nothing about. After we finished, I tell you, the atmosphere was transformative. There were 300 firefighters that were fighting like a firefighting team that had a vision and a mission to accomplish. They invited us in. They said, "Come in and work with us." We did.

One of our guys was with the natural resources department, and we would send him out to the mountains every day to track with GPS exactly where the fire was. They had infrared mapping that gave them an approximation of where the fires were. We would tell them exactly where to put the firebreaks. We built firebreaks all around our reserve. It's about an eight kilometre stretch of reserve boundary. We put in a firebreak of about 12 kilometres, plus others that we put in. We brought in Cats and dozers. We had to straighten and make roads wider so that the larger equipment could get through.

It was amazing. The incident commander came to check out what we were doing. He couldn't believe how organized we were and what equipment and machinery we had. They brought in the people who put fire sprinklers on your house. They came in, and within one day they had all the fire sprinklers on every house, on all our buildings. It was through that type of opening up of relations that we were able to accomplish that.

Mega fires are now a new normal. This fire that we had here is just the beginning. The mother of all fires has yet to come—I tell you that. Climate change adds fuel to wildfire flames. As was told, up there our traditional food sources have already been severely impacted. There are few Secwepemc alternatives to our traditional foods. I'm telling the provincial forestry department that they have to stop managing their fire for fibre. They have to begin managing it for water, and we are going to start using our traditional knowledge of how to manage the forest with fire.

• (1255)

I'm going out to look for Smokey the bear and put his hide up on a wall, because he has it all wrong.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you, Chief.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: We're now looking at setting up a cultural resources and management centre so that we can train our people in the use of fire as well as in the use of revegetation using our traditional plants. I gave the chair two books on that.

The Chair: Yes.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: I've been using fire, and I've been able to bring back two keystone species that were dormant for 100 years through the use of fire, which is a regenerator.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief.

The book that we received looks comprehensive, detailed, and is available for committee members. It's a gift to the Parliament of Canada. We want to thank you for that. It will be available for MPs and analysts going forward. We appreciate that very much.

For the final presenters, everyone, I believe, has been informed that we can stay here until 1:20. Is that the agreement? We have a few minutes left. We'll have enough time to hear from you and a very short round of questions after that.

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, please go ahead.

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler (Grand Chief, Nishnawbe Aski Nation): *Meegwetch.*

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you to talk about these very important issues.

I want to start off by acknowledging that we are on unceded territory of the Algonquin people. I thank the leadership and the members of that nation for welcoming us into their territory.

My name is Alvin Fiddler. I'm the grand chief for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. The Nishnawbe Aski Nation represents 49 first nations in northeastern and northwestern Ontario, on Treaty No. 9 and part of Treaty No. 5 land.

Loss of lives to house fires is something that has hit us hard during the course of our history. I want to mention one community very quickly, which is Mishkeegogamang. Since 1980 they've recorded over 30 lives lost to house fires, and we hear about other tragic incidents that have occurred in our territory over the course of NAN's existence.

One of the things that really shook us up was what happened in Pigangkum in March 2016 in one house fire. In that one tragic event, nine lives were lost. The youngest victim in that house fire was named Amber Strang. Amber was just five months old. Three generations of one family were lost in that one tragic event.

About a month and a half later, our chiefs from NAN gathered in Timmins and they passed a motion directing the NAN executive to launch a campaign named in Amber's memory, Amber's Fire Safety Campaign. They were very direct with us in terms of what they wanted to see. They wanted to see some immediate things happen in the communities to protect our families from house fires.

One of the things they told us to do was to install a smoke detector and a carbon monoxide detector in every home in the NAN territory. They said to go to every home to ensure—because many of our homes are still heated by wood stoves—that the wood stoves are clean, that they're working properly, that the chimneys are clean, and that there's proper shielding around the walls where the wood stoves are located.

They also identified some long-term issues that they wanted us to work on. These included things like proper infrastructure to ensure that our communities have fire hydrants and that they have access to water in the event of a fire. They wanted us to look at building garages to have fire trucks, and to have trained personnel, volunteers on the ground, who could do this work.

I'm here today with Mike McKay. Mike is our infrastructure director at the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Also with me is one of our partners, Chief John Hay from the Thunder Bay Fire Department.

We recognized when we began this work that we needed partners. We cannot do this by ourselves. We need municipalities, and I'm thankful for John's leadership and help. We need the federal government. We need Ontario to make this a sustainable and comprehensive campaign. It has to be a permanent campaign. It cannot be just a one-year, two-year, or three-year campaign. It has to be permanent, because the threats are there every day in our communities because of the way our houses are built, because of the way they're heated, and because of the general living conditions in our communities.

The risks are high and we see that in the stats. There are 10 times more lives lost in our communities than in the rest of the country. So the threats are real. The issues that we submitted to you are real.

•(1300)

I wanted to give a few moments for both Mike and John to speak to some of the specifics we are asking you to consider as members of the standing committee. We need your support to make this a sustainable campaign. It has to be a comprehensive one. We need buy-in from all parties. We need support from everyone to ensure this works for our communities. We have a detailed plan. I'm not sure if any other region in the country has that, but we're organized; we're ready. We have the capacity. We will need some help to continue to build our capacity in our communities, but we are ready to roll this out, because it's very important to us.

It's very difficult to go to one of our communities and go to a funeral. I remember when I was in Pikangikum for that. There were nine caskets in the church. The smallest one was Amber's. It's at those moments that you have to say to yourself that something needs to change. We cannot lose any more lives.

The fundamental issue that I find in our communities is the lack of standards, the lack of any type of code for our communities to meet. I was at a meeting just this morning with Minister Ralph Goodale on policing. Again, it's lack of standards. Everything is program-based. These programs are endangering the lives of our communities, and in some cases, killing our community members.

I want to give a few moments to Mike and John.

Mr. Michael McKay (Director, Housing and Infrastructure, Nishnawbe Aski Nation): Thank you, Grand Chief.

Thank you to the committee for this opportunity today.

I'll just speak a little bit on the Amber's Fire Safety Campaign. We have four pillars in the campaign: education, training, partnerships, and capacity building. With the education piece, we've been working with our partners, for example Fire Chief John Hay, to deliver these fire prevention activities in our first nations. We have 31 remote communities, so it's a little bit harder for our communities and our schools to access that basic education.

One of the things our fire professionals or fire chiefs found is that the schools have never conducted fire drills. That's one thing I couldn't shake off when I heard it. It's unimaginable that our communities are unable to conduct this basic practice. I'm grateful, as Grand Chief Fiddler said, to have these partnerships developed, and they've been great to work with on this. The fire drills lead back to the accountability mechanisms that are not offered in our first

nations but are offered in municipalities and urban centres. That's just one story I wanted to share with the committee today.

I'll let John speak now.

•(1305)

Mr. John Hay (Fire Chief, Thunder Bay Fire Rescue, Nishnawbe Aski Nation): Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and committee members.

I'm privileged to be able to offer some comments at this venue, but I'm equally proud to be part of the Amber campaign. I had the opportunity to go to Pikangikum with Chief Fiddler many months after the event. The pall that stills exists in the community, the cloud that's surrounding the people there, is palpable. That trip still resonates with me now. That reinforced my desire to be part of the Amber campaign, to offer up any suggestions I can to them, to support them on a technical basis. I've had 35 years in the fire service —municipal fire service, some wild land interface activities. I think I bring some experience to them as well as some suggestions.

Firefighting capacity in first nations communities is not going to be what Ottawa enjoys or what Thunder Bay enjoys. We have to take that into account when we build resilience into the community for fire safety protection. I think sprinklers in residential is one way to do that. It's not to save the building. It's to extend the escape time for family members and people who are in the building by up to 10 minutes. That will save lives.

The folks from B.C. who were presenting earlier are not far away from a community that decided to put sprinklers in all their new residential buildings and some existing ones. They have not had a fire death in a sprinklered building since that happened 20-some years ago.

I think it's an opportunity. It's something that should be considered along with enhancing the firefighting capacity, matching up with the needs and the circumstances in the community.

I'm pleased to be before you again, and I look forward any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time is so short. I'm sorry for having to limit the amount of time.

We do have to go into questioning. I see that we're not going to have enough time for five minutes each. We're going to have to cut it to four minutes to make it fair.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Chair, can we extend the time of the committee?

The Chair: I have a deadline at twenty after, so no.

Mr. Mike Bossio: That's unfortunate. It doesn't leave a lot of time, Chair.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Yes, but we have a vice-chair here as well, so I don't know if—

The Chair: Five minutes? Okay.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: If necessary, we can have Cathy go first if she wants to do the first round of questioning.

The Chair: Cathy, do you want to go first?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Sure, Madam Chair, and then perhaps if you have a commitment....

First of all, thank you to all the witnesses. Each one of you had so much to tell us. I too feel it was unfortunate that the bells got in the way of what is our normal time frame.

I think there are two places I want to go to.

First of all, I do have to acknowledge Chief Ignace from my area. One of the reasons I'm so glad he could come and join us is his story about how he introduced some of the cultural pieces. The people were from Mexico, I think, and from all over. I thought it was something that we needed to learn from.

Also, I've worked in the emergency social service centres, and what I realized was that you can quickly train someone to work in those centres. The fact is that we didn't take people from the communities that were being evacuated and say to them, "Listen, you know your people and you know your elders, and it's a two-hour training program, so can we get you trained up so that you can do that work in the emergency support centre?"

Chief Ignace, could you talk a bit about that element?

Then, if I have time, I have a last question for everyone. There has been a lot of talk about the creation of a national indigenous fire marshal's office. I want to hear just quickly from everyone if you support that idea or not.

• (1310)

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: I'm sorry. Can you quickly rephrase your question just to be clear?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The last part is about the creation of the national indigenous fire marshal's office. A lot of communities have come before us to talk about that as something that should help. More specifically, I think, could you talk about the ability to have a more sensitive reception centre and the ability to share the culture with the people who are fighting the fires?

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: Yes, and thank you for that, but I want to say first that when the federal and provincial governments came out and immediately, while the smoke was still billowing in the air, gave \$20 million to the cattlemen's association—and we have yet to get any money—we took this to mean that cattle are more important than us Indians. I have to say that.

I wanted to say earlier that we have a proposal I'm putting forward. We're developing a proposal for an indigenous-led environmental and stewardship emergency response education centre that will be open both to our people and to non-native people.

In league with that, we're working with Brinkman & Associates to co-develop a restoration approach that engages a strategy of walking on the two legs of western science and indigenous knowledge for the reforestation and revegetation of non-timber forest products, based on the management of forests for water and not for fibre. Those will include using fire as a traditional management practice and other traditional practices that we've developed down through the ages.

The book I gave you talks about our 10,000-year history. I wrote about our 10,000-year history, going back to the ice age, as to how we lived on our land and managed it. I hope that helps.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Have you heard about the proposal that's been put forward around the national indigenous fire marshal's office? Do you support it or not? I need a quick yes or no, given the time.

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: Yes, we support it. It's in our submission. What we want to insist on, though, is that we be involved in defining the function of that office. We need to be involved in the creation of that office.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Very good.

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: We also support it, the first nations fire marshal's office which is being rolled out right now. We do support the idea.

The Chair: All right, I have on the list that questioning now goes to MP Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: The fire marshal is exactly what I want to talk about.

You mentioned the four pillars that you're establishing in your own community. Improving fire safety involves greater fire safety education. It also involves access to emergency equipment, updated building codes, expanded training, community infrastructure, etc.

How can your community be supported better in the future with access to the resources you need? Do they see the fire marshal's office playing a pivotal role in helping to define the processes and the requirements and the capacity for fire safety?

I would invite Chief Fiddler or John, or whoever wants to take that on. That would be great. Thank you.

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: Obviously the fire marshal's office would be a part of that strategy. If you read our document that we submitted to the committee earlier today, it spells out some of the things we want to do immediately. At the same time, there are some long-term issues that we need to address together.

That's why we're here today. It's to ask you for your support in rolling this out.

Mr. John Hay: I believe that a fire marshal for indigenous communities would be helpful for first nation communities. Really, I'd be a little jealous. There is no fire commissioner or fire marshal for Canada. That's been brought up a number of times in other venues.

Yes, if it's there and it's coordinated, and the structure is approved by the people receiving the benefits of it, I think it would go a long way towards building that resilience in all the communities, not just the Ontario ones. Right now, I'm with the Amber campaign, and that's Ontario.

• (1315)

Mr. Mike Bossio: Mike, did you want to add to that?

Mr. Michael McKay: Yes, I agree that it would be beneficial.

The other thing that pertains to that is the establishment of funding that is needs-based instead of one that's formula-based. That's one thing we've flagged in this process. The formula hasn't changed in I don't know how many years. The training that's part of their operation and maintenance funding is still at \$20 a head. That's something that also could be reviewed, as well as establishing a sustainable fire department at the community level.

Mr. Mike Bossio: As far as the fire marshal's office being able to establish standards is concerned, whether it's fire safety standards, building code standards, sprinklers, as John said, do you see that playing a valuable role within your own community? We realize each community has its own unique challenges, but how about as far as helping communities to establish those standards?

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: There should at least be a base that we all agree on in terms of what those standards should look like or what they can look like.

Right now, at least in our territory, there's an utter lack of any type of standard. For example, Mike talked about our schools, and right now they don't even do fire drills. To me it's shocking that in this day and age we would allow that to happen.

It's basic things that I think we want to begin to address.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Does the school even have a sprinkler system?

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: We don't know that, because there are no standards.

I spoke with the minister this morning on NAPS, our police service. Again, there are no standards in our detachment. Everything is program based, and that's what we need to change.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Are there building code standards right now? Is there a building code inspector?

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: No.

Mr. Mike Bossio: So it's establishing the standards, and then also establishing the training regimen as well, to ensure that you have trained indigenous individuals who can oversee and enforce those standards.

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: That's right.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Yes, and it's—

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Okay.

Is there anything you would like to add regarding what establishing a fire marshal could do for your own community moving forward?

Mr. Michael McKay: One thing we did recommend was to explore the development of a trilateral process to provide equitable fire protection and prevention services in our communities. There are a lot of things we need to look at, like I was talking about with that funding.

One of our main goals of the campaign was to provide smoke detectors. With our partners, INAC, they were able to provide the purchase and delivery of smoke protectors, but they didn't provide phase two of it, which was the installation piece.

Mr. Mike Bossio: The implementation.

Mr. Michael McKay: Yes, and inventory of that. We were told that our communities, our fire departments, should be able to do that. My question was, what fire departments?

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): Thank you.

The last five minutes will go to the NDP's Sheila Malcolmson.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I was elected in British Columbia. Some of the headlines in this summer's fires that were especially shocking from far away—it must have been really hard in the communities—were about the RCMP threat that, if the chiefs didn't agree to evacuate their communities themselves, the RCMP would apprehend the children. That was obviously a bad trigger from a really bad time in Canada. That was mentioned by Chief Joe Alphonse from the Tsilhqot'in First Nation, west of Williams Lake.

Is that something that travelled through leadership in other parts of the country?

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: I confronted that. We brought in the RCMP to help us give the evacuation order. When they tried to confront our people in that way, I told them to back off, to leave them alone, that we'd take care of the people, that we'd look after them, and we did. Those who decided to stay back, we allowed them to stay, regardless of age, and things went well and smoothly.

• (1320)

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: You were able to look after your families all on your own.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: Yes, we even watered the gardens, and fed budgies and pets in the homes.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: That's good work. Thanks for keeping everybody safe.

Are there any comments from the others?

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: I'll just comment on that. In La Ronge in 2015, we had the RCMP help us. We did forced evacuations. Somebody did challenge us on a forced evacuation, because a lot of people were forced to evacuate. We were told there was no choice, but there were some people who didn't leave and didn't want to leave. After the fires and everything was all settled, we were challenged, and I guess we have no authority to tell people to leave. If people want to stay when there's a threat to the community, it's their choice. As long as they've been warned and told that there's a threat to the community, or there's fire, there's smoke, or there's a general evacuation, then it's their choice to leave or not, as long as they're warned of the dangers.

What we found is that it's really important to have people stay back in the communities, too, to have a team of people looking after the community, looking after the infrastructure, and looking after the pets that might be left.

Also, the firefighters, they can stay back, too, instead of being evacuated. When they're called, they don't have to be sent back from Saskatoon, or Prince Albert, or Regina, or Cold Lake, or wherever they'd been evacuated to.

That's what we found out. We can't force people to evacuate. We did try to have some forms, and we did work with the RCMP and the Canadian rangers. Then we also had our own security we hired just to warn people that they were being evacuated, but then it was almost like a forced evacuation. Now we realize that we can't force people. If they don't want to go, they don't have to go.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: The people who chose to stay, were they threatened with the apprehension of their children?

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson: No, not to my knowledge.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Is there anybody else with experience along those lines?

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler: Our communities are policed by our own police service, the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service. There are protocols with our police service in terms of what their role is or should be in the event of an evacuation, so those are clear with our leadership, with our police service, and other emergency personnel.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Great.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: I'd just like to say, what we'd like to see—our Shuswap communities, our collective communities—is resourcing so we could establish our own emergency preparedness plan and program where we could assist each other. We want to be able to keep our firefighters back in our territories. Our Shuswap firefighters were being sent up north, and they were phoning back home that they were lost. They should have been kept home to fight the fire in the territory they're familiar with.

We had the Kamloops community. I am grateful to them for taking in our community members and non-native people into their powwow arbour and housing them there. The non-native people quit depending on the information from the government and began relying on our information that we were giving out.

I have to give kudos. Once the Red Cross, the firefighters, and the police knew what we were up against, they were behind us 100%.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): You have 20 seconds left.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thank you for keeping everybody safe. That was a crazy fire in your territory. We were all watching from afar. We are all hoping it never happens to us. Thanks for showing us what can be done.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: We got some really wild photos.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): That ends this meeting.

Thank you to all the witnesses. This is our last meeting on both the wildfires and basically firefighting in communities. Hopefully this will result in some important recommendations for government to follow through on.

Chief Ronald E. Ignace: [*Witness speaks in Secwepemctsin*]

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to tell you what suffering we went through. We have a larger story. Maybe one day we can tell it.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): Thank you.

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