



Wildfire Evacuation Experiences of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459

Executive Summary

Approach:

This study aimed to understand the wildfire evacuation experiences of residents of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459. The objectives were to: (1) Identify characteristics of the wildfire evacuation that influenced how residents were positively and negatively affected by the evacuation; (2) identify characteristics of individuals, their social context, and the First Nation community affected how residents were positively and negatively affected by the wildfire evacuation; and (3) identify ways to reduce the negative impacts of wildfire evacuations on First Nations people. Qualitative research was completed during the spring and summer 2014. We completed 31 semi-structured interviews with 45 residents of Whitefish Lake First Nation. The research process involved meetings with Chief and Council, community advisors, and other key contacts. Two community research assistants were trained and helped to recruit interview participants and conduct interviews, provided advice to the research team, and acted as interpreters during interviews where required.

Findings:

The Utikuma Complex Fires in May 2011 caused the evacuation of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459, a community with approximately 1186 residents. The evacuation lasted 2 weeks for most residents and 3 weeks for residents with health issues. Most residents evacuated to nearby towns of High Prairie, Valleyview, Grande Prairie, and Peace River, though some evacuees stayed with friends and family in other communities, and approximately 20 residents stayed behind in the community. The findings from the interviews revealed a broad range of experiences before, during and after the wildfire evacuation which are summarized in Table 1 (page 3).

Factors that affected Experiences :

Limited warning time and uncertainty: The limited time to prepare for evacuation meant that some participants left with few personal items including clothing, which meant that evacuees relied on donations and money provided by the band or the government to buy food and clothing during and after the evacuation. The limited warning time and uncertainty about where to go when told to evacuate also increased stress as residents rushed to evacuate.

Being with Family: All participants said that being near their family made it easier to cope with the evacuation. Councillors and volunteers from Whitefish Lake recognized this, including the importance of the extended family, and tried to move families around so that extended families could be together.

Slave Lake: Residents from nearby Slave Lake evacuated the same day as the evacuation of Whitefish Lake First Nation, which made it difficult for Whitefish Lake residents to find accommodation. There was little media coverage about the fire that threatened Whitefish Lake and its impact on the community, which meant that Whitefish Lake evacuees were unable to obtain information about their home and community through the media and instead relied on information from community leaders and those who had remained behind in the community.

Financial Assistance: Funding provided to evacuees enabled them to buy clothing and food during the evacuation. This funding also enabled community members to buy food for taking back to their home once the evacuation was over, which helped to replace some of the food that was lost during the fire. However the way that this money was provided caused some negative impacts when some evacuees used this money to buy alcohol. Participants reported that liquor stores and bars in the host communities contributed to the problems by extending their hours. The money was also used sometimes to purchase goods unrelated to the evacuation.

Loss of Electricity: The loss of power to the community resulted in lost food for community members. Many participants described having to throw out fridges and freezers full of meat, which included wild and store bought meat. Most participants said that this was a major setback, particularly the loss of wild meat that would take a lot of effort and energy to replace.

Financial Impacts: The evacuation and associated impacts to the community's infrastructure caused considerable financial problems for an already financially distressed community. The process to get reimbursed was confusing and it was difficult to claim for all of the expenses incurred during the evacuation.

Conclusion & Recommendations:

By exploring and documenting how the evacuation took place we were able to identify the factors outlined above and how they came together to positively and negatively affect the evacuation experiences of participants and the community. At Whitefish Lake First Nation, factors that positively affected evacuees' experiences included that the band provided bus transport and gas to enable community members to evacuate; neighbouring Sucker Creek First Nation providing traditional food for evacuees; and information provided to evacuees by community leaders and those who stayed behind. Activities organized for children in the host communities, and provincial government funding to enable evacuees to replace food lost during the evacuation were also helpful. Factors that negatively influenced evacuees' experiences including a lack of preparedness – in particular evacuees' lack of understanding about where to go when they were told to leave; insufficient social support during and after the evacuation; challenges of staying in hotels for parents with young children; some money from the province being spent on alcohol; and financial challenges for the band.

Based on our findings we offer the following recommendations to community organizers and government and other agencies in anticipation that they may be useful in reducing distress and increasing the positive outcomes of future evacuations. In regards to evacuation planning and preparation, government agencies should provide additional financial and other resources to First Nations communities for emergency management in order to ensure the development and implementation of emergency plans specifically tailored to their communities. During evacuations efforts should be made to ensure adequate social support is provided such as keeping extended families together. The presence of local leadership by Chief and Council is appreciated by evacuees. They are a trusted resource for providing information about how and where to evacuate, the status of the fire, how long the evacuation would last, and instructions on returning to the community. Also during an evacuation, financial assistance provided to evacuees should be distributed to ensure that it is spent on goods that are needed and should aim to minimize negative impacts on evacuees. Post-evacuation, community members should be brought together with Chief and Council to provide emotional support and to identify lessons for community leadership. This could help to identify those community members who need ongoing emotional support and would also be an opportunity to identify how community leadership can make changes to reduce negative impacts of future wildfires. Finally, evacuations are a considerable administrative and financial burden. All

costs incurred by First Nations during evacuations need to be reimbursed, and government agencies must take into account the unique structures of Aboriginal communities and families.

Table 1: Summary of events & experiences associated with Whitefish Lake evacuation

Timing / Theme	Events and Experiences
Before the Evacuation (Day 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were aware fire was near their community and saw or smelled smoke, or ash falling. Participants were not overly concerned since seeing/smelling smoke during the summer is a regular occurrence.
Before the Evacuation (Day 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A second fire started nearby with high winds, more smoke, and ash falling in the community. • A local Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) staff member contacted a Councillor, suggested that the community be evacuated.
Getting Ready to Evacuate (Day 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The evacuation notice was given by family and other community members. Residents had between a few minutes to a few hours to leave. • Transportation from the community was problematic. Residents learned via word of mouth that the band would provide gas free of charge; others residents received rides from family or took a school bus organized by the band. • Residents drove to High Prairie where many people secured a hotel room. • The hotels in High Prairie filled with evacuees from other communities forcing some to continue to neighbouring communities to find accommodation.
Being outside the community during evacuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some members were in other communities and wanted to return home to family. • They were told to remain where they were. This troubled these participants because they didn't have enough clothes or money to buy gas, food or a hotel room for an extended stay away.
Staying in Host Communities (Day 2-15 or 22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of the Band Council took a leadership role to look after evacuees and provide information about the community. • Efforts were made by organizers to move evacuees so that extended families could be together in the same hotels and host communities. • Evacuees ate their meals in an arena or in hotels and missed food that they would normally eat. Nearby Sucker Creek First Nation offered traditional foods for evacuees. • Evacuees obtained information from sources including text messaging family and other band members. • Some participants tried to keep busy by volunteering or visiting band members, but others stayed in hotel room as they were too upset to leave. • The evacuation was a stressful experience. Participants were concerned about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Whether their home would survive the fire and how this would affect their future. ○ The two to three week evacuation was a long time to be away, particularly for those who never or rarely leave the reserve. ○ Impact of the evacuation on community Elders – although seemed to manage well. • The Government of Alberta provided funds - each adult evacuee given \$1250, each child \$500.
Staying in Whitefish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An estimated 20 members of the band stayed on reserve during the evacuation. • Some were band employees who were required to look after infrastructure; others were band members who refused to leave. All were men who patrolled the community to check on the fire, to provide security, and to feed pets that were left behind.
Returning Home (Day 15 or 22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most evacuees returned home after 2 weeks. They were informed in a variety of ways. • Evacuees with health conditions or those with babies remained evacuated until essential services were re-established in Whitefish Lake. • The loss of electricity during the fire resulted in food and appliance losses.
Lasting Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some participants are still dealing with the emotional toll of the evacuation 3 years later. • Children are concerned about being evacuated again. Seeing smoke in the sky triggers people's concerns. • The band was responsible for cost of the evacuation, and then they applied to the provincial government for reimbursement which resulted in partial coverage of costs.