



Wildfire Evacuation Experiences of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459

Main Messages

The purpose of this research was to understand how members of Whitefish Lake First Nation, Alberta were positively and negatively affected when they were evacuated during the summer of 2011 due to wildfire.

Evacuation Planning and Preparedness

- 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.
- Provisions for evacuation transportation should be incorporated into emergency plans and communicated to community members.

During an Evacuation

- Social support provided during the evacuation can positively impact evacuees. Family members should be kept together and opportunities should be provided to meet with other community members to provide each other with social support during evacuations.
- Financial assistance provided during an evacuation should assist evacuees to buy clothing and food during the evacuation and cover the costs of food and other losses once evacuees return home. The distribution of funding should ensure that it is spent on goods that are needed and should aim to minimize negative impacts on evacuees.
- Local leadership is important for evacuees. Chief and Council 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. The presence of at least one Councillor in each host community is valued by community members.

Post-Evacuation Recovery and Evaluation

- Bringing community members together with Chief and Council after an evacuation is an opportunity 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.
- 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.