



FIGHTING FOREST FIRES IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

TASK FORCE INTERIM REPORT



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Prince Albert Grand Council

Prince Albert Grand Council Wildfire Task Force Interim Report 2018

In January 2018, Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) initiated a Wildfire Task Force with a clear terms of reference to review and provide recommendations to Saskatchewan Environment – Wildfire Management Branch. The Wildfire Task Force originated through a resolution passed at the PAGC annual assembly. The Task Force includes a technical group that plays an advisory role in relation to current strategies to manage wildfires in the province. A work plan was developed. Regular meetings are held. Funding is provided by the federal and provincial governments.

The Prince Albert Grand Council is committed to improving conservation efforts and the management and suppression of wildfires in the north. There is no doubt that climate change has contributed to the intensity of wildfires in northern Saskatchewan in recent years which is a major concern for First Nations living in the region. It is predicted that the situation will get worse in the future. Hundreds of square kilometers of land and bush have been burned. Warmer temperatures make the fuels drier. Less precipitation dries up the soil. Increased lightening activity and strikes on trees in higher latitudes are common in the summer months. The winds are stronger. The flames are more intense. Firefighting impacts water supply. According to the Saskatchewan Research Council (2017), the province has the highest rate of wildfires.¹ Average over 1990-2015:

- Number of fires: 598 (min 302, max 1,266)
- Area burned: 530,201 ha (min 3,885 ha, max 1,734,806 ha)

According to Mike Flannigan, a professor of wildland fire at the University of Alberta. “The amount of fire activity in Canada, which currently is about 2 1/2 million hectares -- about half the size of Nova Scotia -- has doubled since the 1970s.”(Bill Graveland, The Canadian Press Published Sunday, October 22, 2017 7:12AM EDT). Currently there are usually 7,000 forest fires a year in Canada. There are 3 ingredients to forest fires: fuel, ignitions, and weather. An average of \$800 million dollars is spent by fire management agencies in Canada a year on direct firefighting costs. Forest fire management in the country is considered the best in the world.

Wildfires affect both First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples. The forest fire policy and management in the province must be reviewed for better strategies that involve Prince Albert Grand Council communities. In 2017, there were 353 wildfires in the province as of December 31, 2018 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment). Every year, evacuations result in depletion of human resources in urban centers to the south such Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina. There are strains on health-care systems and hotels. There are highway closures. There is a decrease in air quality. Commercial and private properties have been destroyed. Insurance claims skyrocket.

¹ Johnston, M. (2017). Natural hazards: Wildfires. Saskatchewan Research Council: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Trap lines, crown lands, and cabins are destroyed, including animals, animal habitats, and traditional medicines.

In a survey conducted by the Keewatin Development Corporation in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy during the 2015 massive evacuations in La Ronge, many of the businesses reported the wildfires impacted their viability.² There was loss of earnings, some got behind in their work, others lost customers. Some said they had to cancel plans to expand, there were delays in grand openings, and others made comments they would have to close down.

The Task Force recommends that a total damage inventory is needed on First Nations lands that maps out all burn areas for compensation purposes that will require political will and commitment. Indigenous peoples in northern Saskatchewan are among the first to face the direct consequences of forest fires. They have a close relationship with the land and the resources they depend on for their existence. Climate change exacerbates wildfires and the difficulties already faced by vulnerable First Nation communities, including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment.

First Nations peoples in the northern region have a right to hunt, fish, trap, and gather not only for food to support the local economy, but also as the basis for their cultural and social identity. Many hectares of their traditional territories have burnt destroying animal habitats and animal species. Woodland caribou food sources are depleted. Even one tree that is burned is a significant loss. Some of the climate change concerns facing First Nations peoples include availability of traditional food sources, medicines, perceived reduction in weather predictions and the safety of traveling in changing ice and weather conditions. These concerns pose serious challenges to human health and food security.

There is a good working relationship between Saskatchewan Environment and PAGC First Nations. Wildfire Management met with the Task Force on April 13th, 2018 to provide information on the changes made based on a review that was done in the fall of 2015. Mutual dialogue is critical for joint solutions to fighting fires in northern Saskatchewan. Northern Indigenous peoples have historic experience with the suppression of wildfires and must be given opportunities to provide input on strategies as well as to document traditional knowledge perspectives. Furthermore, it is recommended that input be provided formally through the development of a First Nations wildfire advisory council.

At the present time, it is important to review the process of hiring emergency fire personnel. During the height of northern forest fires in 2015, many First Nations members wanted to go firefighting but were not hired. It makes logistic sense to higher local people where fires are burning close to their communities both for economic reasons, goodwill, and cost saving

² Canadian Business. (2015). Northern Saskatchewan wildfires had huge impact on area businesses. Canadian Press. (September 1st).

measures. Some northern Elders question why southerners are even allowed to come north to fight our fires when it is our forests and we are protectors and stewards of the land.

In the fall of 2015, there was a provincial review of the 2015 wildfire season, including the strategies that were used. The review included the perspectives of First Nation leaders. As a result of the review, the ministry stopped using zones to guide its responses. Other changes were made. Eight additional fire crews were introduced (4 Type 1 and 4 Type 2s).

The current trilateral agreement between PAGC, INAC, and Saskatchewan Environment needs to focus on the sustained action and emergency firefighting personnel. Although the firefighting crew configuration has been changed for 2018, the goal is to ensure the small increase in numbers is monitored to ensure it is adequate. The remote camp model that was once in place has been reconsidered based on the recommendation of northern First Nations. First Nations are aware there are Occupational Health and Safety Rules that reinforce the centralized camp model. The initial phase that includes the amount of time it takes for observation and assessment must be reviewed. Furthermore, there is need to consider reclamation efforts of burned boreal forest and soil. There have been too many cuts to fighting fires in the north. Mining companies, outfitters, loggers, forestry users, and sports fishermen should pay into a forest protection fund to offset the budget that government allocates to fires.

Climate change must be incorporated in the decision making in suppressing fires. Climate change poses threats and dangers to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the province. It also poses a threat to and the survival of First Nations communities, even though they contribute little to greenhouse emissions. First Nation peoples are vital to, and active in, the many ecosystems on their lands and territories, and may therefore help enhance the resilience of these ecosystems. It is important that traditional land users be provided opportunities to share, interpret, and react to the impacts of climate change and fighting forest fires in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes.

First Nations are striving to cope with climate change through various means. Some are focusing on economic opportunities for example through green energy projects. There is a demand for renewable energy using wind and solar power that could make First Nations lands an important resource, replacing fossil fuel-derived energy and limiting greenhouse gas emissions. There are opportunities to use wind as a resource and its development could help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as alleviate problems created through the use of hydropower. There may also be opportunities for carbon sequestration.

Enhancing and supporting the adaptive capacity of First Nations peoples will be successful if this is integrated with other strategies such as Fire Smart, fuel management, education, training, building codes, disaster preparation, evacuation plans, land-use planning, environmental conservation and national plans for sustainable development. Adaptation and mitigation requires financial resources and the transfer of technological capacity that most First Nation communities do not possess. While short-term adaptation activities are underway, resource and capacity constraints are limiting the implementation of long-term strategies.

WILD FIRE TASK FORCE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Fire Crew Configuration

The fire crew configuration of a 5-man crew has been increased to 8 inclusive of a cook and cook/camp helper. This increase needs to be monitored whether this is adequate. The recommendation from northern First Nations is a 10-man crew. The more personnel on the ground fighting fire the more likelihood of putting out fires and decreasing damage to the land. However, coordination and safety is paramount.

Remote Camp Model

Central camp model was introduced by the province. Occupational Health and Safety rules exist that reinforce this model. The remote camp model must be reconsidered. This is recommended by northern First Nations. The logistics need to be examined. Flying out crews, setting up camps, bringing in food, supplies, and rotating manpower in 7 day shifts appears more economical than several helicopters and air tankers flying in one day. It has been proven over the years that 'boots on the ground' are the tried and true way of ensuring mopped up fire don't start up again. Firefighters work hard for an 8/10 - hour day and accomplish a great deal more than a water bomber dropping foam and retardant as they cannot get every square inch of the fires as men on the ground can do.

Type 3 Fire Crews

Type 3 fire crews are emergency personnel hired through an emergency firefighter wage account. They have to take a basic firefighting training course for 6 days with fitness training. They are organized in the communities. They are activated based on the fire hazard index. They go into a forest fire situation after the fire has been suppressed. They are supervised by experienced personnel. There is no guarantee they will be hired during a forest fire. There is a need for Type 3 Crew Leaders in the communities.

Wildfire Management will continue to train Type 3 firefighters locally early in the season and recertify trained Type 3 firefighters to allow for identification of these workers for hiring. This would also prevent them from being evacuated if their services were needed.

Due to a shortage of local trained Type 3 Crew bosses, Wildfire Management will target additional training for 2018 and operational changes will be made to allow for an 8-person Type 3 Crew (1 Crew boss and 7 firefighters). A cook and a cook helper may be added if required.

The province is in line with the increase recommended by the PAGC Task Force on Wildfires. However, the overall goal by PAGC is to increase it to a 10-man crew.

Type 2 Fire Crews

Type 2 program needs to be improved. Type 2 Fire Crews are contract suppression personnel. They are sustained action fire crews. They are part of the tri-lateral agreement between PAGC, INAC, and Saskatchewan Environment. They are trained according to provincial standard. The basic course is 6 days. There is a minimum fitness test standard. These crews can work in other jurisdictions in the province.

There is a recommendation for type 2 crews be trained to meet the national standards test so they can work across Canada. Also certification to remain in effect for 10 years as advancements in firefighting techniques do not develop that fast. There are some new methods, however people do not forget how to do certain things. First Nations recommend that training be done in off season either late October before winter or late winter before snow melt. There is also a need to update filing and registration so that information is easily acquired and passed from office to office. A database needs to be updated annually in all communities.

In 2018, maintain 58 type 2 sustained action First Nation contract crews. There are 22 'northern work crews' supported by the province (non-First Nations).

Climate Change Factor

It is clear Climate Change is a big factor in the intensity of northern forest fires. First Nations are at the forefront of climate change impacts. They need to be involved in solutions. There will be more forest fires in the future and so there is a need to ensure proper management and suppression strategies. It is projected up to a 6-degree Celsius increase in global mean temperatures by 2100. This means there will be an increase in extreme weather conditions, heat waves, droughts, floods, wind storms, and ice storms. There will be longer fire seasons resulting in larger fires and more intense fires.

State of Emergency Procedures

The province provides information to the communities on the state of the fire situation. The communities are responsible to declare a state of emergency. Communities work with the Red Cross in the management of evacuations. In 2018, an agreement was signed between Red Cross and PAGC to work more closely together on state of emergency procedures.