



JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

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PAGC Releases Interim Report on the Wildfire Task Force

Treaty 6 Territory - The Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) has released “Fighting Forest Fires in Northern Saskatchewan,” the interim report of the PAGC Wildfire Task Force.

The Task Force was launched in January 2018, as mandated by the PAGC Legislative Fall Assembly Chiefs’ Resolution to provide an independent review of Saskatchewan’s current wildfire management strategies.

It marked the first step by PAGC to help reform the current system before the beginning of a new fire season. It is chaired by PAGC Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte and comprised of First Nation Elders, leaders and technicians from across northern Saskatchewan, as well as representation from the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN).

According to the report, there were 353 wildfires last year and the areas of burnt land have had an impact on the Treaty rights of northern First Nations to hunt, trap, fish, and gather foods.

“Since we are among the first to face the direct consequences of the wildfires, it was necessary for us to identify and address areas for improvement,” said Grand Chief Hardlotte. “I’m pleased that throughout this process, we have made much progress by working closely together to address and implement the needed changes.”

"It is important to develop joint solutions and strategies for northern food security reasons," said PAGC Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie. "The increasing rate of wildfires destroys Caribou feeding grounds, which impact the ability of our hunters to access their main food for survival especially in Athabasca communities where food prices are extremely high."

PAGC Vice Chief Christopher Jobb added, "It is clear that our First Nations in the North are feeling the impacts of climate change more than ever before, and it's important that we are involved in the solutions at all levels."

The Task Force identified the following areas for action and recommendations:

- To increase the configuration of fire crews from 5 to 10;
- To reintroduce the remote camp model that will allow for more "boots on the ground" to more strategically suppress the fires;
- To develop training to enlist more Type 3 (emergency) crew leaders;
- To improve the training program for First Nations and northern communities contract Type 2 crews;
- To hire more Type 3 firefighters;
- To review the State of Emergency procedures, which have recently been addressed through a new agreement between PAGC and the Canadian Red Cross; and,
- To involve First Nations in the discussion on the impacts of climate change.

The Government of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Environment has already introduced changes for the coming wildfire season, including increasing the emergency firefighter crew size from five to eight, training more crew leaders to increase capacity to deploy firefighters, and enhanced funding for fuel mitigation projects near communities.

The discussions also clarified that the use of the 20-km community response zone, often misrepresented as the "Let It Burn" policy, was already discontinued following the review of the 2015 wildfire season.

"The ministry has a long-standing, positive working relationship with the Prince Albert Grand Council, with partnerships in training and community protection projects," Environment Minister Dustin Duncan said. "We look forward to building on those

successes together, including fuel management projects and contract fire crews that help protect communities, create employment and help build local capacity.”

“We are pleased with the collaborative process and proactive measures that have come from the inclusion of our First Nations Elders, knowledge keepers and grassroots people in these very important meetings with the Ministry,” said FSIN Vice Chief Heather Bear. “The report that PAGC has prepared harnesses their traditional knowledge in order to help mitigate fires in the North, while protecting communities and preserving the wildlife and forests, as well as the sacred medicines within them.”

The Task Force will continue to work closely with the Ministry of Environment throughout the summer. The interim report can be viewed on PAGC’s website at <https://www.pagc.sk.ca/health/programs-and-services/emergency-preparedness/>.

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