

# Wildfire evacuation experiences of Meander River (Taché), Dene Tha' First Nation



## Key Lessons Learned

Provisions need to be made to ensure that accurate, real-time, place-specific information is communicated to the First Nation from neighbouring communities and government agencies.

Evacuating to a familiar host community with family support reduced the disruption caused by the evacuation

Follow-up is required after the evacuation to gather feedback from residents and to ensure support is provided to residents who were most negatively affected by the experience



## Introduction:

In summer 2014, we met with community members to learn about their wildfire evacuation experiences during the 2012 Lutose Complex fires

## Thanks To:

- Chief and Council of Dene Tha' First Nation.
- Research assistants Cameron Chalifoux and Tina Yakinneah.
- The members of Dene Tha' First Nation who shared their experiences.

## The Wildfire Evacuation:

One day before the evacuation, most participants were aware that fires were burning near Zama City (100 km NW of Meander River). However, Meander River was not placed on evacuation alert because fire proximity was not yet a risk. On July 10, 2012 strong winds began blowing heavy smoke and ash towards Meander River. Within hours, heavy smoke and ash made breathing and visibility difficult. After witnessing the smoke conditions, the Director of Emergency Management (DEM) for Dene Tha' First Nation began the voluntary evacuation of band members. This was their first evacuation.

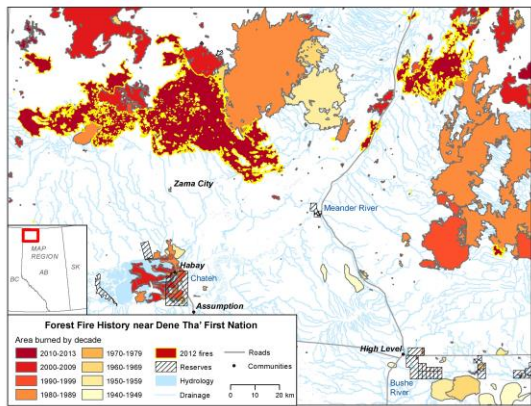
Most residents learned about the evacuation from family and other community members. Some residents had little time to prepare to leave, and others had a few hours to get ready. Residents without transportation took a charter bus organized by the band or received a ride from family or friends. Some residents chose to stay behind until the evacuation became mandatory a few hours later and they were forced to leave.

Host communities included High Level and Bushe River (another Dene Tha' community on a different reserve). Some evacuees stayed with friends and family but most stayed in hotel rooms or in tents set up in Bushe River. Many residents who were evacuated by bus spent the first night sleeping on the floor of the High Level reception centre.

Two residents stayed on the reserve during the evacuation. One was a band employee who looked after infrastructure; the other was the volunteer fire chief. Both patrolled the community in case blowing ash or embers ignited a fire, provide security, and fed animals that were left behind. They also provided updates through the local radio station, text message, and social media.

The DEM mobilized a team of volunteers from Bushe River to help look after evacuees and provide information. Evacuees ate meals at the band complex in Bushe River or at hotels. Some participants kept busy by visiting other evacuees but many spent most of their time their hotel rooms. Part way through the evacuation, the band allowed some evacuees access to their homes in Meander River to pick up personal belongings and check on pets.

All evacuees returned home after 1 week. The band provided each evacuee with \$40 to replace food lost to spoilage and \$40 to replace gas. The band was responsible for the cost of the evacuation, and they applied to the provincial government for reimbursement. At the time of our study, not all costs of the evacuation were reimbursed.



## Recommendations

- When a First Nation has multiple reserves, evacuation plans should be tailored to each community with roles and responsibilities assigned to local residents to assist the Disaster Emergency Manager (DEM). Plans should be updated, practiced, and disseminated to the community regularly.
- Evacuation plans should make provisions to ensure that timely and suitable transportation is available for residents without vehicles and those with mobility constraints.
- When heavy wildfire smoke is present, residents with pre-existing respiratory conditions should be evacuated early with provisions made to ensure exposure to smoke in host communities is minimized.
- Regional stakeholders including local employers, tribal councils, neighbouring municipalities, and government agencies should gather to discuss how they can support one another during evacuations including how to ensure that accurate, real-time, place-specific information is communicated to the First Nation.
- The special status of Elders in the community should be recognized, and these individuals should be prioritized throughout the evacuation.
- Volunteer opportunities should be offered to evacuees during displacement to help pass time, develop a sense of agency & build capacity.
- If possible, nearby host communities including First Nations should be used due to the higher level of cultural familiarity and availability of social support.
- Keeping families together provided tangible and emotional support to evacuees. The type of accommodation used should allow for large families to be together whilst avoiding disturbances and overcrowding.
- During evacuation planning, the financial and staffing implications of cost recovery on a First Nations band must be considered and prepared for.
- Bringing community members together with Chief and Council after an evacuation is an opportunity to provide emotional support and identify lessons learned.

## More Information

For more information on our research with Meander River (Tache):

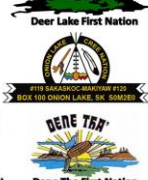
<https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/awe/?page=news>



The First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership brings together researchers, First Nation communities in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta that were evacuated due to recent wildfires, and agencies responsible for conducting or providing support during these evacuations. The goal is to examine how Aboriginal residents and communities have been affected by wildfire evacuations and identify ways to reduce negative impacts of wildfire evacuations on Aboriginal people.

Contacts: Tara McGee ([tmcgee@ualberta.ca](mailto:tmcgee@ualberta.ca)) or Amy Christianson ([Amy.Christianson@canada.ca](mailto:Amy.Christianson@canada.ca))

### PARTNERS



### FUNDING

