Introduction:

Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation is located in the boreal forest of NW Ontario on Highway 599. The total population is 1857, with 1050 living on reserve. This summary presents results of research about band members’ experiences when the reserve was evacuated due to wildfire in 2011.

Thanks To:

- Chief Connie Gray-McKay for her interest and involvement in this research.
- The many members of Mishkeegogamang who shared their experiences.
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for research funding.

The Wildfire Evacuation:

The fire was visible from the reserve for 1-2 weeks before the evacuation. About a week later, smoke started going into the community and people’s homes. The Chief called the evacuation after the wind changed and blew smoke and ash into the community.

The evacuation took place over three days, with school buses used for transportation and the local radio station providing information to band members. On day one, band members including those at high risk from smoke took a bus or drove to Sioux Lookout. On day two, band members were taken to Ignace. On day three, band members were driven to Pickle Lake airport and flown to Geraldton. Some other band members drove to other towns or stayed nearby, and a few did not leave. Band members who were away from the reserve when the evacuation was called were not able to return once the road was barricaded.

In Sioux Lookout, Ignace and Geraldton, community leaders and other band member volunteers helped to looked after evacuees. Accommodation included arenas and hotel rooms, and evacuees were fed at a local Legion, restaurants, or in the arena. Activities were also organized. Band members living in the bush around Pickle Lake when the evacuation was ordered were unable to return home, so food and accommodation was quickly organized by local residents and then Pickle Lake.

Most participants in the three host communities recalled positive experiences including the accommodation, food and activities; and several participants said that the evacuation brought community members closer together. However the evacuation was stressful for community leaders and evacuees who were worried about family members staying in other communities; and their house, pets, and treasured possessions. Some felt homesick. A few individuals in the host communities made racist comments that made some evacuees feel unwelcome. Once evacuees returned home, they found they had lost food in fridges and freezers, and some returned home to a home without power.

After experiencing this fire and evacuation, several participants said they are more concerned about smoke and the possibility of being evacuated again. Others discovered the importance of being prepared.
Recommendations

- The decision to evacuate the community over three days was very helpful. This meant that most evacuees who were on the reserve when the evacuation was called had time to prepare to leave, and were able to take what they needed with them.
- Efforts by the host communities to provide accommodation, food, and activities also contributed to success of the evacuation in the eyes of evacuees. However, further efforts are needed to ensure that evacuees are treated respectfully in host communities so that they feel welcome.
- It is extremely important that First Nations have the resources that they need to respond in an emergency. In this case, there were fortunately extra school buses on the reserve at the time of the evacuation, which were used to transport residents to the three host communities. Although this evacuation went well in many ways, an evacuation plan would have helped community leaders to carry out this evacuation. Importantly evacuation plans should incorporate band members located off the reserve. Awareness raising efforts would also help band members to know what to expect and be prepared in the event of a future wildfire.
- The results of this study also highlight the importance of keeping multi-generational families together during evacuations.
- Governments should compensate First Nation residents for food lost during an emergency. The high cost of food in northern communities and the time to replace meat and berries were a significant impact of this evacuation.
- Governments should consider whether it is possible for First Nations to evacuate to a more suitable location, such as a camp setting instead of a hotel, or within the band’s traditional territory.
- It is important to provide information about the potential need to evacuate as early as possible if there is a wildfire in the area, to enable residents to make plans, and return to the reserve if they are outside the area.

More Information

For more information, see our website https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/awe/

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 First Nations and band members have been affected by wildfire evacuations and identify ways to reduce negative impacts of wildfire evacuations on Indigenous People.

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