Introduction:

In summer 2014 and 2015, we met with Sandy Lake community members to learn about their evacuation experience during the 2011 wildfires. This research summary outlines the results of the study.

Thanks To:

- Chief and Council of Sandy Lake First Nation.
- Research assistant Charles Anshinabie.
- The members of Sandy Lake First Nation who shared their experiences.

The Wildfire Evacuation:

Early in July 2011, the wildfires burning forests surrounding Sandy Lake were not considered a threat. However, the wildfires began to advance on the west side of the community. On July 18, the announcement for a partial evacuation was made and approximately 950 stage one evacuees were evacuated. The following day, July 19, 2011, a full evacuation was ordered due to increasing proximity of wildfire Red Lake #58, which came within 9 kilometers of the community.

The majority of the interview participants received information about the evacuation through the community radio. Community members were evacuated by the Canadian Forces CC-130 Hercules aircraft. Stage one evacuees were sent to Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay; stage two evacuees were scattered to eleven towns throughout Ontario and into Manitoba.

Meals were provided for all evacuees in the hotels and arenas where they were staying. In some places, coupons were provided for a meal pass. In some hosting communities, residents donated clothing and shoes for the evacuees hosted in town. Many evacuees were separated from their family members. A lack of information on family members’ whereabouts and the lack of family support was a stressful experience for many participants. Some participants, particularly Elders, missed traditional foods. A few participants experienced financial problems during the evacuation when they were trying to buy essentials. Some community members volunteered to assist in many activities including cooking traditional foods, laundering, and assisting Elders and medically vulnerable evacuees. Throughout the period of the evacuation, the Chief remained in close communication with the evacuees updating the situation in both Oji Cree and English by using social media (YouTube and Facebook).

Most stage-two evacuees returned home after two weeks while stage-one evacuees remained evacuated for three weeks until essential services were fully restored.
**Recommendations**

- The community needs to have an evacuation plan that is updated every year and communicated back to the residents well before the start of the wildfire season. The evacuation plan should identify a priority list of evacuees (e.g. Elders and medically vulnerable).

- A sufficient amount of resources and personnel should be allocated to the community to support evacuation planning and preparedness.

- All parties involved in emergency response (the affected community, government and non-governmental agencies, hosting communities) need to adhere to standards set out in Ontario’s Mass Evacuation Plan: Far North and service level evacuation standards. This need to be properly communicated among all parties to provide appropriate and feasible support in the context of First Nation evacuees. (https://www.emergencymanagementontario.ca/english/emcommunity/response_resources/plans/mass_evacuation_plan.html)

- The importance of family care for frail Elders must be taken into consideration. Elders and medically vulnerable groups should be allowed to evacuate with care givers plus the dependent children/grandchildren they support.

- In the event of a wildfire that necessitates a full evacuation, efforts should be made to host family groups if not the whole community, together. Efforts should also be made to host band members closer to their home community.

- Hosting communities need to prepare to address the needs of evacuees based on vulnerabilities and cultural needs (e.g. identifying those requiring special accommodation, healthcare needs, and language translation).

- Financial support should be given to evacuees. The financial support enables evacuees to buy essentials such as clothing and meet other essential demands during their stay in the host community.

**More Information**

For more information on the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership: https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/awe/?page=home

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.

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