Introduction:
In summer and fall 2014, we met with community members to learn about their wildfire evacuation experiences during the 2011 Utikuma Complex fires.

Thanks To:
• Chief and Council of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459.
• Research assistants Sheila Laboucan and Sharon Sahlin.
• The members of Whitefish Lake First Nation who shared their experiences.

The Wildfire Evacuation:
Two days before the evacuation, residents were aware fire was near the community and saw or smelled smoke, or saw ash falling. The next day a second fire started. There were strong winds, and more smoke and ash falling. After receiving advice from the provincial government, Whitefish Lake First Nation began the evacuation of band members.

Most residents learned about the evacuation from family and other community members. Some people had little time to prepare to leave, and others had a few hours to get ready. Residents without transportation took a school bus organized by the band or received a ride from family or friends. Some people who had a vehicle did not have money for gas; the band responded by providing gas free of charge at the local gas station.

Host communities included High Prairie, Valleyview, McLennan, Grande Prairie, Edmonton, and Peace River. Some evacuees stayed with friends and family in other communities. In cases where extended families ended up in different places, organizers made efforts to bring families together.

An estimated 20 band members stayed on the reserve during the evacuation. Some were band employees who looked after infrastructure; others were band members who refused to leave. The band members who stayed behind patrolled the community to check on the fire, provide security, and feed animals that were left behind.

Some band council members took a leadership role to look after evacuees and provide information. Evacuees also asked family and other band members for information. Evacuees ate meals in an arena or at hotels. Some participants kept busy by volunteering or visiting band members, but others stayed in their hotel room. Part way through the evacuation, the Government of Alberta provided funds for evacuees: $1250 for each adult and $500 for children.

Most evacuees returned home after 2 weeks. Evacuees with health conditions or those with babies remained evacuated for another week until essential services were re-established. Loss of electricity during the fire meant that food was spoiled and appliances had to be thrown out when evacuees returned home. 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 of the costs of the evacuation were reimbursed.
Recommendations

- Different regulations for driving and vehicle registration and insurance on a reserve compared to the province must be taken into consideration when planning, calling, or carrying out an evacuation. Other transportation issues must also be taken into account, such as arranging transportation for large families, those who do not have access to a vehicle and those who may be in remote areas of the reserve undertaking traditional activities.
- In planning for evacuations, those who stay behind in the community need to be identified and used as sources of information for evacuees.
- Language barriers must be taken into consideration during evacuation planning, with efforts made to have translators available to assist. Band members must also help to identify and assist other evacuees who may have a language barrier.
- The types of accommodation that are usually provided in the event of an evacuation (gyms, recreation centres, hotel rooms) should be reconsidered for First Nation evacuees. When planning or responding to evacuations, the uniqueness of the size of First Nations families and the importance of keeping families together must be taken into consideration.
- The presence of at least one councilor in each host community is valued by community members.
- Financial aid must be provided to First Nation evacuees, but in a suitable way to ensure the money is spent on evacuation related expenses.
- Additional health resources may need to be leveraged during the evacuation of a First Nations community to deal with health issues that may be exacerbated during a wildfire evacuation.
- During evacuation planning, the financial and staffing implications of cost recovery on a First Nations band must be taken into account 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 Whitefish:
https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/aqe/?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) or Amy Christianson (Amy.Christianson@canada.ca)