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The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. This is the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are beginning our study on wildfires in first nations communities.

In the first panel from 11 o'clock to 12 o'clock, we have the Assembly of First Nations and Saskatchewan First Nation Emergency Management, represented by Richard Kent who I see here. Because you're prompt, you get to go first.

You get 10 minutes to present, then we'll hear from the other presenter, if they're here, and then we do a series of questions.

The first thing we do, especially now that we're in a process of truth and reconciliation, is to recognize that we're on unceded Algonquin territory. It reminds us that we're in the process of a land claims study to look at the most important relationship, and the first relationship, the contracts that we made with the first peoples of this nation.

Richard, welcome. I'm so glad that you travelled from Saskatchewan, I'm assuming.

Mr. Richard Kent (Commissioner, Emergency and Protective Services, Saskatchewan First Nation Emergency Management): Thank you, Chair and honourable members of the committee. I thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to speak to the very important issue of fire safety and emergency management in our first nations communities. I am accompanied by Peter A. Beatty, chief of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, Saskatchewan.

Before beginning, I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on unceded traditional Algonquin territory.

I will begin by briefly describing how I have organized my office and its operations to support my mandate of providing emergency preparedness and fire safety training to all of Saskatchewan's first nations people and communities.

My office conducts a range of activities in support of Saskatchewan's first nations communities. I have organized it into two divisions.

First is fire and safety. We provide community training in all aspects of structural and wildland/urban interface firefighting. We provide advanced training in other areas such as auto extrication, water and ice rescue training, confined space, and a multitude of other training, depending on the community's needs. We provide fire prevention programs with the communities as well. We perform fire investigations and fire inspections for Head Start and day care buildings.

Next is emergency preparedness and response. We provide all aspects of emergency preparedness training to all of Saskatchewan's first nations communities. We also respond to emergencies in communities, when called upon to do so by the elected officials. We will set up and help to run a community or regional operation centre when it's requested by an elected official. We provide support and guidance to communities affected by emergencies, as well as act in a liaison capacity between the communities and other municipal, provincial, or federal agencies involved in the emergency.

In terms of human resources, my office has a total of eight positions, one of which is currently vacant at this time. I have four staffers for fire and safety training, and four staffers for emergency preparedness training and response.

I'll now address our challenges. I am going to read from an article by Professor James Waldram, of the University of Saskatchewan, who did a study on the Wollaston Lake fire and evacuation. He said, "...the irony is clear: the disaster of which many residents spoke pertains not to the threat of wildfire, but to the efforts to protect them from it."

As emergencies continue to become more and more prevalent across Canada within our first nations communities, we need to ensure that all of our fist nations communities across Canada have the proper training and people in place to ensure the least amount of disruption to these communities. To do this we must ensure that sufficient support structures are put in place to manage these emergencies properly.

We must also ensure that we understand the effects that chronic disruptions to community life can have on these communities long after repatriation. In my opinion, a support staff of four for over 100 communities in Saskatchewan does not meet the requirements to ensure safe community readiness in either fire safety or emergency preparedness.

The other challenge is that the funding that is received for the staffing level of eight is on a year-to-year basis and is obviously not very conducive for qualified staff hiring or retention.

In my role as vice-president of the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada, AFAC, we have been leading a project to design and build a national fire marshal's office in collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations leadership and staff, regional first nations partners, and key allies.

● (1110)

Our tribal council stands firmly in support of the creation of this office as long as its development is guided by first nations. We feel it is very important that the office is designed by us, for us. This office could ensure that proper standards and codes are being met and followed, which in turn would help to ensure adequate standards for our first nations communities and their levels of preparedness in the emergencies field in the following ways: remove regional disparity; develop national standards for emergency services within first nations; provide needed fire prevention focus; support regional and community incident response; build a base of first nations emergency services expertise; gather incident data to be used to redefine what needs to be changed, enhanced, or supplemented in first nations emergency services; and help to ensure adequate funding to existing compliant emergency services offered by first nations institutions.

In conclusion, again, thank you to the committee for inviting me to discuss fire safety and emergency management and for the opportunity to ensure that you, as our elected officials, have your questions answered from the boots-on-the-ground emergency officials.

This concludes my opening statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have for me.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Chief Beatty, please go ahead.

Chief Peter Beatty (Chief, Peter Ballantyne First Nation, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Madam Chair and honourable committee members, for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the impacts of the wildfires on our northern communities.

The Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, PBCN, is a large multi-community band located in Saskatchewan and has a population of 10,655 members, seven distinct northern communities, and one community located just outside of Prince Albert. The seven northern PBCN communities are spread throughout a vast traditional territory of approximately 51,000 square kilometres.

During the first week of August, 2017, several fires were started due to lightning strikes in the vicinity of a number of PBCN communities. Although the fires began as small and manageable, as they grew daily they came to significantly impact three of the PBCN communities. Poor air quality and direct fire threat led to the evacuation of approximately 2,800 PBCN band members. These evacuated members were displaced for approximately 34 days.

During Wildfire Management's actioning of the fires and the efforts to evacuate, shelter, and repatriate community members, there were several significant issues that surfaced that I would like to bring to your attention at this time. These issues fall under the areas of communication, actioning of fires, and funding.

In the area of communication, clarity is needed in the definition and terminology used by Wildfire Management when describing operations. Differing definitions used throughout the event were confusing and at times misleading. Provincial teleconferences regarding strategy and event management were closed to the PBCN leadership and the emergency operations centre, resulting in a question of transparency of operational communications.

In the area of actioning of fires, the timeliness of actioning fires with manpower and equipment is a major concern. The impacts to the communities would have been minimized if the original small fires had been controlled earlier. Instead, major roads, critical infrastructure, and public safety were compromised significantly. Over 185,000 hectares of traditional lands were impacted, and a community of over 3,500 people was threatened. This led to the general evacuation of Pelican Narrows.

In the area of funding, wildfires have significant financial and human resource costs to the bands and their agencies. Expectations that these costs will be absorbed by the band are unrealistic, based on the current funding practices and models. Both health services and the band are mandated to have emergency response plans in place. However, no funding is allocated to this. During this event, it was clear that having an emergency response coordinator, ERC, in place to provide leadership and coordination through a band-led emergency operations centre had major benefits for all stakeholders.

There are unfunded costs associated with community security, local fire suppression, and maintaining sustenance and supply chain to essential services remaining in the community. It is essential to have health workers and other community agency staff working with community members at evacuation sites to provide support and continuity of care. This is another unfunded cost.

These are only some of the costs associated with community emergencies that are expected to be borne by the band and are not clearly defined in reimbursement models.

I am respectfully requesting the federal government to review the attached information package and to consider the following requests related to forest fire management and response.

Operational terms need to be clearly defined along with current fire actioning policies and made available to first nations stakeholders.

During an emergency event affecting a first nation, it should be deemed standard procedure to have first nations representation at all provincial/federal meetings where decisions will be made regarding event management, strategy, or provision of services affecting the first nation.

● (1115)

Standard operating procedures or guidelines utilized by Wildfire Management to define the actioning threshold for a fire need to be reviewed. In our opinion, the fires could have been managed better to minimize the effects on the communities and the large traditional land area. We are requesting a review of the fire suppression efforts of Wildfire Management by an impartial third party. This should result in improved outcomes in future fires.

Congregate shelters have had ongoing concerns regarding such things as the safety of at-risk populations, maximum length of state, utilization of traditional foods, and activities to name a few. Where congregate shelters are absolutely necessary, a first nations committee should be engaged to advise on standardized shelter management policies and procedures.

The La Ronge 2015 wildfires resulted in INAC giving a verbal indication of funding for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, LLRIB, health emergency response coordinator position. This should be extended to include the PBCN health ERC position as well.

Standard covered services should be clearly defined by INAC/FNIHB.

INAC and the province should work with first nations to identify locations within first nations communities that could serve as alternate shelter locations, and support them the same as any other shelter facility.

Permanent clean air shelters should be supported to reduce health risks during times of delayed evacuation, when sheltering in place and/or as respite during poor air quality due to high smoke levels.

First nations should be supported through funding and manpower in the areas earlier identified as funding deficiencies. As stated, the recent wildfires of 2017 have had significant impacts on the PBCN northern communities. Two reports that document the Lac La Ronge 2015 and the PBCN 2017 wildfires will be completed by March 31, 2018. These would greatly assist in future planning and policy review.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to address the standing committee, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Chief. We appreciate you taking the time and your extensive travel to get here. *Meegwetch*.

We're going to open up to questioning.

Mr. Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you both for joining us this morning.

I would like to begin with Peter Beatty. I understand there were 2,300 residents who were evacuated this past summer. Could you elaborate on the type of resources that were required for that evacuation, and also, what resources, to your satisfaction, were at your disposal to manage the evacuation?

Chief Peter Beatty: Initially when we declared the emergency evacuation, we made contact with the province, social services, and emergency services to let them know that we needed to get people out of the community. They sent in school buses for the priority one patients. These were the elderly and small children and so on.

Of course, I raised some concerns, which were later addressed when they sent in coach buses, which were a little more comfortable. We had some real concerns with them sending school buses to the community to haul out our priority one patients. That's not a very comfortable ride when it's approximately four hours to Prince Albert or five hours to Saskatoon.

Those were the resources that we had, in conjunction with some private vehicles that left the community at that time. When we went to the priorities two and three, we had the coaches there to transport those people. Then for the general evacuation, a lot of people took their own vehicles to leave the community. We didn't have a lot of resources provided. Of course, for the people who wanted to go out on their own, we had to assist them with the gas they needed. I think the lunches were provided when they got to Prince Albert or Saskatoon.

The majority of the evacuees were taken to a congregate shelter in the soccer stadium in Saskatoon. Some were in Prince Albert, and I forget the name of the facility they used there. I don't think it was a congregate. It was mostly hotel rooms that we initially provided for them. Then we contacted the Red Cross, and they took over from there in terms of getting people into hotels in Prince Albert and Saskatoon.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Could you elaborate with respect to the geographical challenges you faced? I know you're dealing with a vast area, and also a number of different communities.

Chief Peter Beatty: Yes, okay.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Maybe Mr. Kent, you can give us a sense of some of the geographical challenges that exist in the area you work in.

Mr. Richard Kent: In northern Saskatchewan, we have many remote communities. We're in the forests. We're Saskatchewan with a 100,000 lakes and forests, so we don't have a whole lot of roads. There's normally one road in and one road out. This is difficult for us, because the roads in and out of the communities were shut down quite often because the fire was approaching the roads. We didn't have a large window of opportunity to get people in and out when we needed to. To get that many people out by air just wasn't going to happen.

These are conditions that we meet all the time in our forested areas. There are not a lot of roads. They're all gravel roads. There are very few paved roads, and they get shut down by fire. The provincial government will shut roads down due to the fires approaching and the danger of having people travel through those areas.

Those are just some of the conditions that we need to look at. As the chief mentioned, bringing school buses in on a hot day with no washroom facilities on them for priority one people is kind of ridiculous. I think we need to ensure that the communities have the proper training so that they can start looking after some of these issues on their own before they have to get outside help.

Those are some of the issues we have.

● (1125)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Just to pick up on your last point, what are some of the lessons learned from this summer and how can we use those lessons for future preparation?

Mr. Richard Kent: We've had many lessons learned because we've had emergencies in Saskatchewan, due to forest fires, flooding, and everything else over the years. One of the lessons learned is that values at risk that may be identified by the province are not the values at risk identified by the first nations communities.

An example of that would be that a value at risk with the province is a structure, building, cabin, or something like that. When we talk to our chiefs, elders, and people in the communities, the values at risk for them are the forests next to the communities. Some may go out to Safeway to do their shopping, but our communities go to the forests to do their shopping. That's where they gather their food, berries, and medicines. However, that's not looked at as a value at risk in a lot of cases.

The other lessons that we've learned are that there are cultural differences and we have to ensure the communities look after their own people. The communities need to tell the emergency staff, whether it's my staff, provincial staff, or federal staff, that there are some things we need to do that are culturally different. We need to ensure that they have a say in that.

The Chair: Just for clarification for committee members, can you tell us a little about what a level one patient is? Is this a person with medical needs on a daily basis? Are they at the health centre or are they independent? Give us an idea of what you mean by level one.

Chief Peter Beatty: Priority one patients are chronic care patients. They could be diabetics who need dialysis services two or three times a week. These are people who need that service. They have to be taken out of the community. Some of the other ones are chronic heart patients or people with very serious health conditions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move to the Conservative side to MP Kevin Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you.

It was me who put your names forward. We've had a lot of fires in our province in the last number of years and I know we're studying B.C. a lot because they had horrific incidents this year. We had some in Manitoba. Thank you both for making your way to Ottawa this morning.

Who ordered the school buses? That's the first question.

Chief Peter Beatty: The province. I'm not sure which agency that would have been, whether it was the Red Cross or the emergency management organization. I don't know exactly who made that call, but they sent in school buses.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: When did they change the school buses to coaches and who ordered that?

Chief Peter Beatty: We had conference calls with the province, social services, wildfire management, and other agencies within the province that we work with in emergencies. This isn't the first one we've been through. One of those agencies would have ordered those buses.

● (1130)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You said you were excluded from teleconference calls.

Chief Peter Beatty: The way it was structured was that they would have their meetings, whether it was a teleconference among themselves or in a face-to-face meeting. After that, they would join in to our conference call with them. They did their management strategies with the fire and so on within their closed group—I'll use that word—and then they would come on to our conference call after.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You talked about insufficient funding for health equipment and support. What is the funding you get for this and how much more would you think is required when you're dealing with this?

Chief Peter Beatty: In the case of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation health services, the emergency response coordinator was a funded position through the Prince Albert Grand Council. I believe it came from the first nations and Inuit health branch, FNIHB. That funding is coming to a close. I believe that they funded that position at $75,000 a year.

As I stated in my opening statement, we know that La Ronge had been given verbal confirmation that they would be funded through INAC.

We're asking for the same funding as well. If we were funded it would be at that minimum of $75,000 per year.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Thank you for your presentation and your recommendations, and also you, Mr. Kent.

These fires started in August and your staff had gone home by the middle of August. How does that happen?

Chief Peter Beatty: I want to make a very quick point.

It's extremely rare in Saskatchewan to be having that type of situation. We're into August and it should be starting to cool off and you wouldn't be expecting forest fires.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I agree with you.

Chief Peter Beatty: That spring we had very high water levels.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Oh yes, unprecedented.

Chief Peter Beatty: Nobody was thinking about forest fires at all until we hit July and we hit extremely hot temperatures and no rain, right through August. That's when they started, at the beginning of August, I believe. They were aware of this; some of them started August 5 or 8. We had hot weather and high winds.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Yes, we did.

Chief Peter Beatty: We went from one extreme to the other.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Mr. Kent, that's the issue. These fires start and then nothing happens, and then four or five days later we have a massive blaze. Maybe talk about that. The issues are with these bands. They let the people know there's a fire and nothing happens for two or three days, and then we have these catastrophes.

Mr. Richard Kent: Yes. As the chief has mentioned, we have to be prepared and we have to make sure that we are ready to stop the fires before they get into the communities and disrupt the life of the community and send people home.

In Canada we're having emergencies at all times of the year. The Wollaston evacuation was May 11, 2011. This one was in August and September.

We have to be prepared. We have to have trained people. We have to let the communities decide how the emergency is run, because they know what's best for their community.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Could you address that? In August there's no staff to fight these fires?

● (1135)

Mr. Richard Kent: Yes. When we're getting ready to shut down the forest fire staff—that's staffed by the provincial government and some of the firefighters are from our first nations communities—we don't expect, and we normally don't have those fires. But when we do, we have to make sure we have staff and people we can call in quickly and stop the fires before they get close to the communities.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Did you do that?

Mr. Richard Kent: In this case, no, I don't believe we did. I believe the province needed to respond a little more quickly to those fires, and we need to have more staff ready to go within first nations communities.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Chief Beatty, when you're evacuating up to 2,800 people I did hear a lot—

Am I done?

The Chair: You have about eight seconds. You were just getting on a roll.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: No, that was it.

The Chair: MP Jolibois from the NDP is next.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): Chief Peter Beatty, thank you for coming. I appreciate your being here and giving this overview.

Richard, thank you. I'm a member of Parliament for northern Saskatchewan. Before I became an MP I was in municipal politics, and I did evacuation from the municipal side. I'm familiar with what it entails.

Last week we learned that there is no agreement between Saskatchewan and INAC to look at forest fires in our region. How can we ensure that the province gets to the table and signs an agreement and they do their part to ensure that all indigenous peoples are supported when they're evacuated?

Mr. Richard Kent: We need agreements. We need agreements in Canada because eventually all of us need to ask for help. We look after ourselves first, and then we go out to the community. Then we may go to the province, and then we may go federal. We do need agreements, I agree, but in some instances, these agreements were being negotiated between the federal government and the province, and we didn't really have any of our first nations communities involved.

A couple of years ago, when those agreements were getting ready to be signed, our chiefs said, “Whoa, hold on. You're making an agreement that deals with our communities. You need to talk to us.” In one case in Saskatchewan, they were looking at funding $1 million to the province for positions for the province. We need the positions. That's building capacity in the province, and that's great, but what about the capacity in the first nations communities?

That hasn't gone on, and from what we're hearing, they're looking a little differently at that. It's just a problem that we have to deal with. We do need agreements, but the agreements can say, “When we need you, we will call you, and we'll pay you a normal fee for service when we need you.”

Chief Peter Beatty: In terms of the agreements with the province, we were not aware that there was any kind of discussion going on between the province and the federal government in terms of the funding required to facilitate our being able to respond to forest fires.

I think there has to be some effort on all sides, our side, the province, and the federal government, to come up with an agreement to facilitate our being able to respond in a timely fashion. If we're involved, we know what we need to get done and how to go about doing that in our traditional way. I look forward to that kind of discussion.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you.

Still further to the province, my experience thus far in evacuations with the.... I'm a treaty person from Clearwater River Dene Nation, but I live on the municipality side. Every year we face this, and the province steps in and does what it's supposed to do, but there's one argument that fails all the time, and it's the hiring of local residents to fight the fires, be it on the treaty side with the first nation or the municipality side. How can we move that discussion forward?

● (1140)

Chief Peter Beatty: We did run into that. It's fresh in my mind that we did try to get our certified firefighters.... They're called level three firefighters. Level one are the initial attack crews funded by the province. They're very well-trained men. You also have the first nations firefighters at level two. Then you have level three, certified firefighters who are trained and certified to fight fires within the community.

We had a heck of a time trying to get anybody out on the fires, especially in terms of our own local people who are certified. We couldn't get them out on the fires to do any of the work that was needed. If you're going to put out a fire, you need boots on the ground. Dropping water from an air tanker or a helicopter, bucketing, is not going to put a fire out.

If any of you have any experience in fighting forest fires, you know you have to dig it out of the ground. You have to do all of that hard work if you're going to put the fire out. If you want to manage the fire and direct it around communities, you may well be able to do that with heavy equipment, then air tankers, and then helicopters, but I think that has to be rethought, that part of the firefighting strategy, especially within proximity of populated areas and infrastructure.

That has to change because right now what's happening is, they're managing fires. You have to look at it in terms of when you action a fire. Their policy, I believe, states that, when an infrastructure is in danger, that's when they action the fire. Action means putting men and equipment there. You can use that same terminology when you're monitoring a fire via satellite monitoring. We had access to that as well. We knew when those fires started, and when they were small and manageable, but there was no action because there was no direct threat to any infrastructure. When they did blow up, then they tried to manage it, but it was too late.

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning moves to MP Harvey.

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): Mr. Kent, during this year's evacuations in Saskatchewan, the FireSmart program was utilized as part of that process. Can you comment on the successes with the FireSmart program, some of the possible challenges associated with it, what could be done differently, and what is working?

Mr. Richard Kent: Yes, I can, but the person who runs FireSmart within Prince Albert Grand Council is Cliff Buettner, who's with forestry and in my department as well.

The FireSmart program is working extremely well. It basically clears the fuels around communities, and in the forests surrounding communities, and makes firebreaks. It gives the community a chance to survive a wildfire if it gets close to the community. It also gives information to people in the community on how to make their community and their homes "fire smart"—for example, trim the branches eight feet up, make sure the trees are spaced far enough apart, and clear the ground fuel.

It's a great program. It's been working very well. We've had a lot of success stories with it. Instead of putting in for year-to-year funding, we're putting in for a five-year program so that we can look to the future, create these safe communities right across Saskatchewan, and give the communities a fighting chance.

● (1145)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: What level of engagement has there been with the FireSmart program? How broad has the adoption been in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Richard Kent: We have a lot of communities done, but we also have a lot of remote communities. There's a long way to go. We've been working with INAC's emergency manager, and they've been very supportive of the program. They can see that it's working. We can show that it's working. We have statistics to prove that it's working.

We're very pleased with what's been happening, but there's a long way to go. We have a lot of forest, and it does grow back, too.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: What are some things the department could do, in your opinion, to aid in further adoption of that program?

Mr. Richard Kent: I think what the department can do, and I believe what the department is doing, is to listen to the experts in the field. Those are the people who are employed with Wildfire Management and with the Prince Albert Grand Council in forestry. We train the Wildfire Management people on, as the chief was mentioning, types one, two, and three. So listen to what the experts are telling you and try to follow their guidance.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you.

Chief Beatty, your community has experienced wildfires and evacuations. Could you summarize what you feel are some of the lessons learned from that experience? What worked right this year? What went wrong? While there were challenges, not everything went wrong, obviously. Could you talk about some of the positive outcomes and some of the areas that need improvement?

Chief Peter Beatty: I'll start with the evacuations. Obviously, we mentioned what was wrong right off the top, but one of the things we appreciated was the communications we had later on in the process of the evacuations. We were able to talk to emergency management officials in the province. We also had Indigenous Affairs there with a representative, along with our own emergency operations centre personnel that we had set up. We took that initiative because of the experiences of other communities in prior years. We knew the importance of having that emergency operation centre staffed by personnel from the grand council. Richard was part of that, as well as our personnel from our own first nation.

The other thing we learned was that the policy of the province is really something we call the "let it burn" policy, although they don't have that on paper. In our view, in practice, that is what it is—letting it burn to a point that it becomes a threat and then you try to action it. We learned things like that, which need to be changed over the next few years.

As I said in my answer, with the extreme conditions we're running into now, year after year, in terms of climate change, we have to change that thinking. We need to rethink that whole fire management policy and how you manage fires that have the potential to threaten communities or infrastructure, like roads. One of the major arteries into northeast Saskatchewan, going to Creighton and Flin Flon from Prince Albert, was closed for almost the full length.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Just quickly, before I run out of time, we've talked a lot about first nations themselves, ensuring that the indigenous peoples within those communities play a very proactive role in the process all the way through. Whether it's through the Aboriginal Firefighters Association or through existing programs, what do you think some of the most important areas of focus should be in trying to encourage an increase in our level of knowledge and the level of input from indigenous people themselves into how these plans go forward?

● (1150)

Chief Peter Beatty: It's very important that we become engaged in any of those strategies to address emergencies, whether it's fires, flooding, or whatever. It is very important that we have input into any kind of management strategy for fires and the suppression of those fires.

Peter Ballantyne being such a large area, a lot of us in our communities have a lot of knowledge and experience in dealing with that, including emergency evacuations, and so on. There is valuable input that anyone can get from our communities, if only they would approach us and engage us in that process.

The Chair: Very good.

Questioning now moves to MP Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to give the committee notice of a motion that I would like to move at some point: that in the light of the interim report published by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls on November 1, 2017, the challenges highlighted by the commissioners related to working with the Government of Canada and the Privy Council, and the commissioners' seven procedural recommendations, the committee invite the Privy Council Office to appear before this committee to respond.

Thank you for indulging me, guests.

The Chair: I'm sorry, that was a little procedural, and it was on a different topic.

MP Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: There are two areas I would like to go after a bit. Mr. Kent, you said early on in your presentation that the largest threat comes not from the fire but from the response to the fire. What would that threat look like? Is it loss of life? Could you flesh out what that threat is?

Mr. Richard Kent: What we're talking about is the social impact on the community when we move people. As the chief was mentioning, we get out the priority one people: people with COPD, elders, those with diabetes. We move them out to a centre wherever we can. When I say “we”, it's the province that sets this up. Then priority two and priority three people start to move. We're starting to separate family units now, because one area is full and we've got to fill another. We really need to ensure the communities are looking after them, because they know which family units should be together. Those are the kinds of problems that we're seeing.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's basically getting to the point that in one of these events if there is a loss of life it's typically not directly due to the fire, it's due to one of these other scenarios. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Richard Kent: Yes, we're not talking about the loss of life directly from a fire in that quote that I gave, but really there is a social impact on the community that in a lot of cases is greater than the impact of the actual emergency, the fire.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Beatty, you talked about being part of the discussion at the provincial table. One of the issues that we've heard about before is that individuals who live in the communities often don't really have a sense of what is going on and their only gateway to what is going on is through social media, and a lot of the times that information isn't necessarily good information. What has been your experience with getting that information out to your community members?

Chief Peter Beatty: My experience is that, yes, there are a lot of social media messages that tend to differ greatly from what's really happening on the ground. In this instance, we provided information to those evacuees who were in the evacuation centres in the hotels. We had our personnel go there on a daily basis to give them information on how the fires were coming along, give them maps to look at, and also give them information on any services that they might need.

Also, I used MBC Radio, which is the Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation in northern Saskatchewan, to get that message out there as well.

Those are basically the things that we use to get that message, the correct information, to our evacuees.

● (1155)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

The Chair: The questioning moves to MP Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thanks to both the witnesses for coming out today.

My first question is in regard to adequate resources. I know that a first step toward ensuring emergency preparedness is to guarantee that a standard and adequate level of resources is available to the communities that are potentially threatened. Across Canada, do you think that the indigenous reserves have adequate resources on hand for fire protection and damage mitigation?

Mr. Richard Kent: No, I don't believe we do at this time. We need to do a lot more training with the communities. We need to do enough training with the communities so that they can run any type of emergency, whether it's a house fire, a forest fire, or evacuations. We need to ensure that they get the training, they get people trained in information services, because, as was mentioned, there's a lot on Facebook and Twitter and everybody saying, “your house burned” or “your cabin burned”. We need to ensure the communities know how to set up proper lines of communication, how to get it out there, how to run emergencies, where to put people, how to put them in culturally sensitive areas, and how to go about dealing with provincial and federal governments. The training and the building of capacity within our communities are needed.

The days should be gone where we declare a local state of emergency, and then we just stand back and let the provincial and federal governments come in and look after it. They're perfectly capable of looking after themselves. We need to provide them the tools and the training to do it, because nobody can look after their community better than their own community.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is there a standard for a minimum of resources to be made available to each community? Do we have any standard laid down?

Mr. Richard Kent: Not really, because we're talking about different emergencies. In different emergencies you need all sorts of different equipment.

What I like to use instead of a standard list is what we call an “adequate” list. Let's not meet this certain basic standard. Let's meet the adequate standard to look after our communities.

So really, there isn't. We have provincial emergencies acts and fire acts, but they don't apply to first nations communities. Hopefully, through this indigenous fire marshal's office we can look at creating those—a fire act, an emergencies act—so that they apply to first nations communities.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Whatever resources are available, how can we educate the communities to make sure they know that in case of a fire, these are the resources available to them? What is the process they would go through?

Mr. Richard Kent: Again, I think the process would be tied closely to this indigenous fire marshal's office. It's really there to gather a lot of data.

We know we have a lot of equipment within our first nations. For example, we have coach buses within some first nations that we're offering the chief. We have a lot of equipment within first nations that we can share within first nations, but not only within first nations. We all want to be good neighbours. We want to share it with all of our neighbours, whether they are first nations or not. We should all be working together.

We need to collect that data of what's available and when. This is another example of why an office like that is needed, to get all the data housed in one area so that we have one place to go to find out what's available.

● (1200)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Chief Beatty, would you like to add to this?

Chief Peter Beatty: The resources that are needed in each of our communities, especially the ones with road access.... I'll talk about structural fires as opposed to forest fires. For structural fires, basically what you need is a fire hall and a fire truck, as well as trained personnel and the proper equipment to address a structural fire, a house fire.

We didn't have that in our major community in Pelican Narrows. On their own initiative, the community put together money to purchase a fire truck, and then I believe they worked with Indigenous and Northern Affairs in trying to acquire a fire hall, which they are in the process of doing. This was after we lost a number of young people, children, to house fires. We didn't have the proper equipment. We didn't have a fire truck. We had nothing other than the fire hydrants, because there is a water system in place. There are no trained volunteer or paid firefighters.

Another community is going along the same lines, the community of Southend Reindeer, which is 222 kilometres north of Lac la Ronge, on the south end of Reindeer Lake. Thankfully, they have been able to get funding for a small fire hall. They are in the process of getting a fire truck as well, and getting structural firefighters trained to use that equipment properly and to be able to respond.

In terms of our reserve communities, where we live on reserve, we have first nations firefighters who are funded by the province, but they react to fires only when they're allowed to by the province. They're not really under the direct control of the local leaders. That's something we need to work on as well.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much for your presentations. It was very informative, especially from a chief who comes from a community where people were evacuated last year.

Thank you again, *meegwetch*, for coming out.

We'll suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes and then come back for the next panellists.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: I'd ask members to reconvene quickly so we can get a robust discussion from our panellists, who are representing the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada and the First Nations' Emergency Services Society.

Both groups will have up to 10 minutes to present. After that, we'll go into a series of questions from the MPs.

Go ahead, Blaine.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins (Executive Director, Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada): Good afternoon, and thank you for having us here.

Again, I'd like to acknowledge the unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

My name is Blaine Wiggins. I am a Tyendinaga Mohawk from the Bay of Quinte and also the executive director for the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada. I live in a small community just north of Williams Lake, B.C., so I've had some first-hand experience as a community member, a volunteer firefighter, a professional emergency service practitioner, and an evacuee during the fire season.

I'd like to introduce our president, Arnold Lazare.

Mr. Arnold Lazare (President, Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada): [*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

I've given you greetings in Mohawk.

My name is Arnold Lazare. I'm a Mohawk from Kahnawà:ke. I'm currently the director of public safety for the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke. I'm also president of the Aboriginal Firefighters Association.

I'd like to thank you, Madam Chair and honourable members, for having us here today. As Blaine mentioned, he has experienced evacuation, so I'll turn this back to him.

● (1210)

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Thank you, Arnold.

We often get asked, especially after events, what the problem or the main concern is, and what the challenges are within first nations communities in the fire service and emergency services. The problem with the question is that there is an expectation that it's a simple question and there is a simple answer. The reality is that nobody wants to listen occasionally to the long answer.

Several years ago, we sat down as a national organization with representation from emergency services across Canada, and the one thing we asked ourselves was, “Would more resources resolve the issues we are dealing with?” We came to the quick conclusion that no amount of resources would have different outcomes than we already have if we don't change the way we are doing things. When I say “we”, I mean all of us: first nations communities, the federal government, and provincial governments. Since we had that discussion, several years ago, although we have been working very hard to educate, bring awareness, and bring a strategy, the reality is that our outcomes have not changed dramatically.

I know we have a very short time, so I won't get into details, but these are some of the issues that we identified as problems. One is disparity of resources from region to region. There are have regions and have-not regions. We have a lack of data collection. Data collection isn't just about collecting information; it's about deciding what we need to do and how we need to respond to that, which is a fundamental aspect of fire prevention and fire safety for any community. We have no established coordination of fire services, although there is established forestry coordination, and some of that does involve first nations fire crews. What is left out is municipal fire services, and specifically first nations fire services.

Each province has fire protection legislation. Our first nations communities are not afforded any type of fire protection legislation, which includes linkages to building codes and fire life safety codes. It's also important to note that although this is a strong pillar that supports protecting our communities and our citizens, any type of legislation needs to be designed by first nations and for first nations. We are in the process of actively engaging the Assembly of First Nations and the national housing and infrastructure chiefs to seek support and a mandate to address this specific gap, among others.

As I indicated, we sat down several years ago and we defined and focused on four specific areas that we feel would address many of the issues in first nations communities related to fire and fire safety. Fire prevention is the biggest one. Again, I could spend hours talking about just this one issue. There is a lack of fire prevention, and a lack of focus on fire prevention.

I spoke briefly about legislative standards. Legislative standards alone aren't the answer. It's the ability of first nations communities to have the resources and the capacity to utilize those standards.

On fire service operations, again, we have no standards across Canada, or even within regions, when it comes to basic things like training and equipment. We don't do environmental scans. We don't have robust fire protection programs. We don't have community infrastructure support. We have challenges with volunteerism. The majority of fire services in first nations communities are based on volunteers. We have very few paid fire services in first nations communities. Again, these are just some very small examples.

The last area that we are focusing on is national coordination of aboriginal fire services. We haven't rested on our laurels and come up with a great idea. We've been working very hard. As an example, we continually have discussions to gain support and seek and share information back with our national partners, including the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, the Canadian Volunteer Fire Services Association, the Council of Canadian Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners, the Canadian Fallen Firefighters Foundation, and the National Fire Protection Association, just to name a few groups that we work proactively with.

Other areas for national coordination include emergency medical services. Many of our first nations communities are located a long way from higher-care medical. There is a gap there, even on who is coordinating and offering emergency medical services.

● (1215)

I won't repeat some of our previous witnesses, but the issue around emergency management is a very, very big issue.

Again, just speaking really quickly—I don't want to take up all of my colleagues' time—some of the issues we saw this summer were the lack of response to first nations communities within British Columbia, which is where I'm based; and some of the fire departments were not permitted to protect their own fire departments, including first nations fire departments. While doing their best efforts to enforce and protect evacuated zones, both police and military impeded fire, and health and safety services.

While the fires are over, we still have the impacts post-event. There were some major gaps, not just during the event, but during preplanning. This is one of the things that can go wrong, just the inability to do a preplan. Once a fire or incident is in play, we can see some catastrophic events. We're very fortunate that we haven't see them here in Canada yet, and I emphasize the “yet”. All of our focus has to be around—again I'm repeating some of my colleagues—building capacity within first nations.

If I can very quickly share a story, I was the executive director for the First Nations' Emergency Services, so I know my colleagues here very well. In 2009, I was invited to Australia to work with the federal government to basically showcase how we, as an aboriginal organization, work with federal and provincial governments to improve emergency management within first nations communities. Unfortunately, I arrived in early February 2009, during the catastrophic fires we had. I was able to see first-hand how not having this capacity in place can have devastating impacts.

We saw that just recently in California. We are seeing a much different environment now. We are seeing much different fire behaviour now.

If I can just leave off, while the fires are over, the post-event of those fires, the psychosocial impacts, the economic impacts, the health impacts, the ongoing impacts, the ability to gather traditional foods, and hunting, are ongoing. Again, I lived this first-hand every day where I live.

I'll turn it over to my colleague for any final comments.

Mr. Arnold Lazare: AFAC has been advocating since 1992. We are very pleased that the government announced last February the implementation of an indigenous fire marshal's office. I'm not going to read the pamphlet to you, but it explains our goals. At the end of the day, our intention is to create capacity within first nations communities.

We're not in the business of getting into business. We're in the business of getting ourselves out of business. My home community is a “have” community, so we have some good examples of what to do. We're partnering up with many agencies, as Blaine has mentioned, to look at what worked and what didn't work. We're confident that with everybody working, we're going to effect positive change. More importantly, by building capacity within, the communities will be better served, by themselves for themselves.

The Chair: Excellent.

I'm going to move over to the next presenters. You have 10 minutes to present, and then we'll get into questioning.

Mr. Jeff Eustache (Manager, Forest Fuel Management Department, First Nations' Emergency Services Society): Thank you, Chair, and honourable members of the committee, and the host nation of the Algonquins.

My name is Jeff Eustache. I'm a registered forest technologist with First Nations' Emergency Services. I'm also the manager of the forest fuel management department.

I give my regrets for our executive director, Brent Langlois who could not attend today.

I'll turn it over to Curtis, for his introduction as well.

Mr. Curtis Dick (Fire Services Officer, First Nations' Emergency Services Society): Good morning, everybody.

Thank you for being here and allowing me to be here.

Mr. Jeff Eustache: I'll give you a quick overview of what we witnessed during the 2017 wildfires.

They came about very quickly this past summer in B.C. In May and June, we had a very unusual wet weather event that created much flooding through the interior of B.C. That's when the emergency response kicked in for many first nations. That was quickly followed by a very dry unusual weather event for the rest of June that resulted in a severe wildfire risk.

On July 7, fires ignited in the Kamloops and Caribou regions of B. C. It caught everybody a bit off guard, I believe. They just happened so quickly that it created a significant impact to the communities in both those areas, first nations and non-first nations alike.

I'll give you a quick snapshot of FNESS. We're a non-profit society in the interior of B.C., managed by our first nations board of directors. We offer structural wildfire prevention, fuel management services, emergency management, response recovery, and planning. We are just getting into that again this year. We do critical stress incident counselling through a contract with the First Nations Health Authority. We also provide training, education, and awareness in the areas of wildfire suppression, governance, and leadership.

With regard to emergency management, wildfire prevention, and suppression by first nations, over the last few years the Province of B.C., the federal government, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada have been working on an agreement for the province, through Emergency Management BC to look after emergency response planning on federal lands for first nations in B.C.

Our First Nations Leadership Council, which is comprised of the Assembly First Nations, B.C. region; First Nations Summit; and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs has been working diligently with first nations communities, FNESS, and other organizations for the implementation of that agreement.

It's quite a significant agreement where the three parties would actively engage in the response with regard to management planning. The Province of B.C., through the B.C. Wildfire Service and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada also have an agreement where B.C. Wildfire Service provides fire suppression on first nations lands in the event of wildfires.

In summary, the events that occurred this past wildfire season occurred so quickly that the ability to effectively respond, with current agreements noted above, created issues for the provincial and federal governments, and first nations agencies and organizations. There were significant structural losses to first nations homes and assets. Wildfire suppression and emergency management response efforts were also tested and many issues resulted. There are provincial and federal reviews occurring and planned over the winter and spring of 2017-18 related to prevention, suppression, and emergency response.

It is very clear that the first nations organizations, First Nations Leadership Council, FNESS, and first nations communities need to be engaged and involved at all levels to ensure that first nations communities and organizations have direct and meaningful involvement in planning and decision-making, and resourced for effective engagement to ensure these agreements work effectively in future years.

There are various documents from the First Nations Leadership Council that we can make available to the committee with regard to resolutions our leadership has passed over the years to ensure that effective engagement occurs with the provincial and federal governments.

Many of the presentations earlier, by the chief and other presenters this morning, were similar to what happened in B.C. Basically, the events occurred so quickly, it was difficult for those agreements to be implemented effectively. Some of the communities had a bit of difficulty engaging with Emergency Management BC on the implementation of that response and recovery. It provided some issues for the first nations to get access to those resources through EMBC and the federal government. I must admit that first nations did very well with some of those challenges.

There were also challenges around the suppression agreement. We have first nations communities that have the training capacity, and the ability to respond to wildfires. Unfortunately, because they are not engaged in that agreement with the province and the federal government, they had an inability to get suppression crews directly onto their doorsteps to fight those fires.

● (1220)

Many of the first nations communities declined evacuation orders and stayed behind to fight those wildfires. I think if they had not made that decision, there would have been greater losses to their first nations communities.

They do have that ability to fight the fires. What they don't have is the ability to actively engage in those agreements. Also, with the agreement with the EMBC for emergency response and planning, I think we need to do a little more work in that area so the first nations communities are available to implement those agreements before they happen, in terms of the preplanning preparation.

A lot of first nations communities in B.C. don't have resources when it comes to emergency management. They have a lot of emergency management plans, but when you don't have the resources to implement or work them, you're basically taking them off the shelf during an event.

A lot of things occurred to the province, and there are going to be many reviews over the next few months and into the spring in regard to what occurred. We suggest that the first nations be actively involved in all those reviews at the local community, regional, and provincial levels, to ensure that first nations are well-prepped and involved in decision-making on how these resources are deployed for future events, and that the preparation is there for our first nations communities.

We have the organizations, the capacity, and the resources in the first nations communities, whether it is wildfire suppression or structural fire protection. We just don't have the ability to have them deployed immediately, so we'd like to see some of that occur in the future.

I want to read off a reference that one of our staff members gave me in terms of recommendations. First nations communities need to change—and I don't think the wording should be “to change”. I think the process has to change from victims who are protected into resources that are utilized, so that we can effectively utilize the communities and resources that we have.

We have gone through many years of training, capacity, and skill development. We just need that opportunity to have those crews implement that training on the ground when these events occur.

Those are some of the biggest points I wanted to make today. I'm not sure if Curtis has anything more to add.

● (1225)

Mr. Curtis Dick: Sure. Thank you, honourable members. I'd like to add a couple of things, first to build on the resource capacity of our community members.

As fire chiefs in communities, we're often billed as the go-to person during an emergency, whether that's emergency coordinator or fire chief. Not only that, you're also the maintenance director, you're also the housing supervisor, wearing many different hats as one person. That's not always at the forefront of their job description. It's at the side of their desk, and they're saying, “I'll have to get to it.” We're being very reactive as opposed to proactive.

I don't want to talk about everything the guys have already mentioned, sort of beating it to death. More importantly, we have to recognize the capacity within first nations communities. I recently went to an emergency coordinators conference in Vancouver and I read in one of the opening statements, “despite having taught first nations communities”. We have a lot to teach, as well. We need people to come and see what we're capable of doing. We don't have all the toys that many municipalities have. We don't have the ladder trucks. We don't have all that stuff, but more importantly, we have human resources. We have local knowledge. We know exactly where the fires are going to burn from, when the winds change, what the water conditions are like. We have all that local history that is not documented in these plans.

We need to be active. We need to be active partners in this, rather than just people. Like Jeff said, we don't want to be the victims, we want to be the resources in the communities. We're able to help as well, that's what I'm saying.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning begins with MP Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): I thank all of you so much for being here today. I had the great honour of meeting Mr. Wiggins, Mr. Lazare, and Mr. Kent earlier this spring. We were discussing this very topic around fire safety. I thank all of you for being here today to provide further information and to help educate all of us on the importance of a fire marshal in particular.

Chair, could you let me know when I have one minute, because I have another question I would like to ask on the emergency front?

What void do you see the fire marshal being able fulfill within indigenous communities?

● (1230)

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Probably one of the biggest voids that will be filled is addressing inconsistency and bringing consistency to issues like public education. Many of our first nations communities have no public education, no fire education, no fire prevention. If we talk about emergency management, while the idea has not been really flushed out, I believe there's an opportunity for an indigenous fire marshal's office to support both regional organizations and communities.

If I can use an example, from region to region to region—I know my esteemed colleague Mr. Kent talked extensively about Saskatchewan. They have a fantastic program for emergency management there. I draw on my experience in 2009, when I returned from Australia, and we had a catastrophic fire season in B. C. At that time, FNESS had a very robust emergency management division that supported first nations communities, both the communities that had high capacity and the communities that had low capacity, so we could bring consistency. I believe during that fire season, over 50 FNESS personnel were deployed to various fires in the Williams Lake area, the Tsilhqot'in area, and the Lillooet area, and they were there not to do things but to work with the communities and to address the small gaps.

I'll utilize an example. Because we had fire behaviour rules, all the community needed was just somebody to help them do some preplanning around fire behaviour. They could do the rest, the emergency social services. They had an emergency plan in place. Then we moved ahead a couple of years and the regional director general of B.C. unfortunately decided to disband that program and eliminate the funding. These are very, very knowledgeable people. I've had the opportunity to work with them in the field. I worked with them this summer in emergency centres in the communities, but when you're doing stuff off the side of your desk to try to help communities help themselves, it doesn't lend itself to consistency.

Again, our organization isn't about building an empire; it's about building capacity within communities. I would just note that AFAC is basically the regional organization, so FNESS is a member of AFAC. The Prince Albert Grand Council is a member of AFAC. We're an organization of organizations, and it's ultimately all about consistency.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Is it also not the fact, though, as you mentioned in your speech, that there is no fire protection legislation for first nations communities? There is no fire marshal for first nations communities and the provincial fire marshals have no jurisdiction within first nations communities.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: No, and as an example, in the province of B. C., there's an emergency management act that requires capacity within non-first nations communities. When a first nations community signs a modern-era treaty, then it is required to engage in that, but for the majority of first nations communities—and, again, we have to understand that there are haves and have-nots. There are communities dependent on INAC funding and there are communities that have been able to develop a local economy. A majority of our first nations communities are in rural and remote places where we're developing a local economy, developing local taxation, developing local capacities. There is some fantastic traditional knowledge. I really articulate and echo the sentiments. When I was deployed to Terrace during the 2007 floods, I went from community to community to draw on traditional knowledge about floods, and that actually helped our response. That helped the federal government, which I was working with at the time, and Emergency Management BC, to develop responses.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I'm sorry to cut you off, but that means there's no one working on building codes, no one working on fire prevention and, as you already mentioned, no one working on education. There are so many different facets that the fire marshal's office will cover to offer, as you mentioned as well, consistent processes and legislative framework across the county that can play a pivotal role so that you won't have the disparities that exist from one region to another to another.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Yes, and the major difference between emergency management and fire is that fire is about behaviour and infrastructure. Emergency management is about capacity, preplanning, and expectation, and about knowing what to do when the time comes, and not trying to figure it out as it's happening.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I see I have a minute left, and you just segued perfectly into the emergency side. You hit on a really perfect point. Given that climate change is happening and these extreme weather events are going to become more and more frequent—the one-in-100-year storms are now happening every three to five years—it becomes imperative not only that we be prepared, and that we work with indigenous communities in order for indigenous communities to define what is best going to protect their communities, but also that we utilize the indigenous knowledge and the institutional knowledge within government and within the communities in order to even better define how we can best protect indigenous communities.

● (1235)

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Yes. At the end of the day the win is when first nations can do for themselves, and as articulated, if nobody is coming to help, help ourselves.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Not only will they help themselves but they'll even help educate us, because not just indigenous communities are being affected in a lot of these remote areas.

Mr. Jeff Eustache: I think that's where it's very important that the first nations organizations and communities are actively involved in the reviews that are going on in B.C. in planning prevention and emergency management for future years.

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning goes to MP McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses, not only for being here today but for the really important work you do every day.

I'm from Kamloops, British Columbia, and I remember hopping on a flight back to Ottawa on the morning of July 7, and life was calm. I arrived here, and all of a sudden we had a very difficult challenge facing us. I don't think we could breathe a sigh of relief until the Labour Day weekend with the actual acute crisis we were facing. We still have some post issues to deal with.

I'll give my first question to both people. There is a pretty good consensus around the national indigenous fire marshal's office. Would you say that in indigenous communities across this country this is a well-supported concept? The second part of that question is whether that would be step one and for step two a priority would be legislation.

Mr. Arnold Lazare: Yes, there is a consensus that a fire marshal's office is beneficial. We're currently in the consultation stage. We have done studies to look at the fire programs, and the initiation of a fire marshal's office keeps recurring. Once again, by looking at getting consistency across the country, the standard is going to be created. As we move along, the other agencies will see the benefit. We're confident that it will roll much faster in consistency and buy-in. Once again, it's important to get the buy-in of the chiefs, and we need to change the outlook.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: We've identified one of the challenges we're working on right now. We did our first presentation to the Assembly of First Nations National Housing and Infrastructure Forum in Montreal last week, and the number one thing that came up is funding and the protection of funding. I know the number one job of Brent Langlois, my colleague from finance and the executive director, is to maintain funding and ensure that programs and services aren't cut.

One of the things we need to do is make sure that, as part of our mandate to create a new organization, we're not stealing any funding. For decades now it's been a limited pot, and whenever you accomplish something new, the number one concern is where it's going to come from and who is going to lose. Certainly, in our discussions with the minister's office and staff, our mandate is that we're not going to steal anybody else's funding, and we won't offset.

We will be collaborating with the regional organizations. They've done some fantastic work, and if anything, we can take advantage. The number one goal of the office is to not have an executive director in any region, who has an existing emergency services organization that's doing good work, worry about whether they can do that good work next year. Again, as a former executive director who had to go through the switches being cut off, it impacted the community.

One of our biggest challenges in emergency services is that there are not a lot of professional first nations practitioners out there. Whether it be with fire, emergency management, or public safety, there are very few jobs. Also, the few jobs and the few trained people we can get are easily stolen by mainstream. We recognize that, even if we can create a structure and an organization that is not well-funded but just adequately funded, we can't compete with mainstream fire. It is one of the best-paid employment services one can get into now. We know this is going to be a constant challenge, but I think we're up to the challenge, because we're all getting old. We have to train the next generation.

● (1240)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Jeff, do you have anything to add to that? Would you say there are good services?

Curtis.

Mr. Curtis Dick: I wanted to share a couple of things in regard to what Blaine is talking about. I do fire prevention governance workshops with chiefs and councils, and it's really tough to say that there are no standards that are practised that we follow in regard to fire protection in the community, especially with fire protection governance. It would be nice to see this standard put in place because a lot of first nations, region to region, are going to differ a little bit. What applies on the west coast may not apply here in Ottawa.

It's going to be really interesting to see if this will benefit a lot of first nations communities. That way, they'll have a base level of fire protection coverage, period.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: My next question is on the wildfire response. We heard about some community members being very reluctant to leave their communities. We heard about their knowledge, and I also heard that from cattlemen, that they know their land, and they want to stay and protect it. They don't want to be evacuated.

I understand that Australia has a very good program. You talked about what didn't work well in Australia, but I understand that they have a sort of certification program where, whether it be ranchers or whether it be communities, they can have a basic level of training and be certified, and then there's a greater comfort level with community members staying in their community.

Are you aware of anything there? I know the cattlemen talked about that.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: I'm sorry, I didn't catch the first part. I believe you were talking about training standards.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Apparently there's a program in Australia where they are not typically people who are on the front lines of a fire, whether they are the cattlemen or people in communities, where they train them to a very basic level and then when the evacuation orders happen—

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Yes. The way the system works in Australia is that, basically, if it's a city, they run it themselves. Outside the city, it's the state fire service. Whether it's an aboriginal community, an incorporated community, or an unincorporated community, it's the state fire service that runs it.

Basically, it's the field of dreams concept. We'll build it, and you come. The state runs the fire service there. They do all the training standards. If we had that equivalent system here, where a province ran the fire service, and any first nations community said, “We want a fire department”, or a non-first nations community, the province would then come in and provide the equipment, the infrastructure, the training, and it's a set standard.

I'll use an example of one of the states that said they were having a problem with volunteerism in the fire service. I asked what their numbers were, and they said it was about 300,000. I thought that was incredible.“Your country has 300,000?” They said, “No, no, the state has 300,000.” We don't have 200,000 or approximately 200,000 volunteer firefighters in the country. They're doing a much better job at running it, but they do it state-wide, and the funding isn't an issue. It's not a fight. It's not a jurisdictional issue. There's one standard.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Blaney, welcome to our committee. We'll give you a chance to ask some questions.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you all so much for being here and sharing that important information with us today.

I want to start off by saying that you talked about not being about to compete with mainstream, that you just want to be paid adequately, not well. I was thinking how many groups of people would say something like that. I definitely hope to see that reviewed and changed.

You also talked today about a lack of standard equipment and regional disparity. We know that in many areas there are limited infrastructure amenities for firefighters. We have heard of communities without fire trucks or even access to water.

Could you tell us what infrastructure concerns you face regularly and what top three priorities you have for the federal government?

Mr. Arnold Lazare: In terms of the top goal, it is fire prevention. Even in the best-served community, if the occupants of a house or an apartment don't know what to do, you're going to have fire deaths.

In first nations communities, when coupled with housing issues, if there's a fire, the death rate is higher. One big goal is to ensure that every community has a fire prevention champion. It doesn't necessarily have to be a firefighter. A lot of times, we use the schools, but we need to make sure that the children of the community are aware. I often refer to a small community two hours north of us. They had a fire. The child hid in the closet and unfortunately, succumbed to the smoke.

The fire department went out and bought a $15,000 thermal imaging camera. It's a very nice piece of equipment, but it would not save lives. We suggested that he take $500 and hire somebody for a week to make sure that there's a full fire prevention program in the school, so that the kids would know not to hide. These are concrete items that we look at and we advocate for.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. Does anybody else want to answer?

Mr. Curtis Dick: I also want to add that part of our training and education for first nations communities was that our organization handed out over 26,000 smoke alarms and also fire extinguishers in B.C.

We reiterate that you don't need a fire department to have a community champion. When a community champion has that education to provide to the rest of the community on an ongoing basis—we follow up on a monthly or bimonthly basis. We follow up with them to make sure that they're implementing these programs that we went and taught these people to spread throughout their community. It's also with the schools, as well. Whether you're fire department or not, we provide the same education to everybody.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: In this committee, there's a lot of talk about the right to free, prior, and informed consent regarding issues that impact indigenous communities. Could you tell us about the engagement process between different levels of government and indigenous people in terms of creating management, prevention, and recovery plans?

Mr. Jeff Eustache: The Leadership Council of the first nations in B.C. are actively involved in the recommendations that come through that. We are in a process through FNESS, the First Nations Leadership Council, and Emergency Management BC. We are actively working towards some of those recommendations of engagement with first nations.

It could be a little bit stronger on the prevention and wildfire suppression end of things, but I know FNESS is actually working with our First Nations Leadership Council to ensure those recommendations are implemented.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I am also aware that some communities have people called land managers, rangers, and keepers. You talked about the multiple roles that you play in your community and many communities have people doing that work, but how often it's put to the side of the desk.

Could you just tell us a little bit about what resources are needed, so that all those issues don't get put to the side of the desk all the time?

Mr. Curtis Dick: First of all, depending on the size of the community, if they've got somebody with the passion to do it, identify that champion and building from there. Once you find that champion in the community, other people start stepping forward. You lead by example within the community and you find that champion to build that, whether it's the fire department or whether it's wildfire services in your community. There's the capacity building right there. Once you've identified and endorsed them by the chief and council and by an organization, you get all the support you need and you build from there.

It's just identifying those people. Our organization has been fortunate enough to know those people. We're the boots-on-the-ground organization that is able to identify those people.

● (1250)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: There was a lot of talk from both of you about design by first nations for first nations. I am just wondering whether you have any best or promising practices that you've seen in different communities that we could celebrate and share today.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Yes, and it would be remiss of us not to say that not all first nations have a challenge with capacity. There are many good examples in B.C. of very robust fire service. I think that is the challenge we deal with. In the evolution of fire service, we had first nations really pushing our leaders—some of them sit on boards now and do that leadership role—in the seventies and eighties for funding for fire service, because even then it wasn't a part of federal funding.

We had communities that didn't know a lot about fire service and a federal government that didn't know a whole lot about fire service. The end result was about 30 years of focus just on fire suppression, not the rest of the fire service. Fire suppression accounts for about 2% of the fire service. In terms of firefighters' time, what firefighters go and do to fight fires is 2%, while 98% is around safe buildings, public education, fire prevention, building inspections, and pre-planned examinations. We're playing catch-up, and that's really what we need to do.

When we talk about standards, it's around standards for the fire service, and again, it's about building on the capacity that exists regionally and within the communities. As Curtis articulated, we don't necessarily need fire departments in each community. What we need are fire risk management, fire plans, and good prevention. That's what saves lives, especially in rural and remote areas, regardless of whether it's first nations or not first nations. If you don't prevent fires, a rural fire department very rarely gets to save a life or a building.

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning now moves to MP Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses. As Mr. Bossio said, this really has been an education today.

I was particularly taken with the testimony around the incredible value that traditional knowledge can add to firefighting techniques across the country.

I'd like to offer you the opportunity to expand on those remarks, because I think that Canadians in general have a lot more to appreciate about just what kind of knowledge is passed down generation after generation, knowledge that isn't just about an immediate environment, but about an entire landscape and hundreds of kilometres. How would you characterize the opportunities for firefighting services across the country to learn from indigenous firefighting knowledge?

Mr. Jeff Eustache: I'll speak from the fire perspective as the chief did earlier. There's a lot of knowledge around fire and fire behaviour, and how a fire reacts to certain conditions. A lot of the first nations have a lot of that knowledge in terms of when the fire is coming, based on their local knowledge of how that fire is going to behave and react to certain weather events and topography. They have a lot of knowledge about how to do that, how to react to that, and when is the right time, as the chief mentioned earlier, to respond to that fire.

There's a lot of that fire behaviour knowledge about how to suppress fires and also how to work with fires, even on prescribed burning. There hasn't been a lot of prescribed burning in B.C. over the last 60 years or more, and that's probably resulted in a lot of the problems we're having today with the intensity of the fires where the forest has grown or has grown in certain areas in the province.

First nations used to burn regularly. We haven't had the ability to do that for quite some time, so on prescribed burning, prevention, and suppression, there's a lot of knowledge in our communities that we can work with. Even in responding on the emergency side, there are a lot of cultural-type perspectives that need to be incorporated into emergency response and planning. There are a lot of issues with taking people out, a lot of cultural things that go behind that in how people react to leaving the community.

Those are the ideas that I have around traditional knowledge.

● (1255)

Mr. Curtis Dick: If I may, I want to share a quick story. I was in northern B.C. last year. In the community I went to, they talked about wildfires.

There was an old guy who sat in his field and set it on fire. I guess he had quite a big field, and as he let it burn, the forestry ministry and the wildland firefighters showed up and were all getting nervous. They asked if he knew his field was on fire. He said, “Yes, I do.” He was sitting there having a sandwich. As he sat there with his sandwich, those guys were making a plan to attack the fire, saying where they going to build a guard. He very calmly told them to just leave it, that it would be okay. He had been doing this for probably 30 or 40 years, but the ministry and the wildland firefighters didn't come and introduce themselves and ask what he had been doing to protect his property while it was still standing.

It's the lack of communication that's happening. For the stuff that Jeff's been talking about, the wildland burning that's been happening for years, how many communities do we know that are actually doing that? We have to step outside the box and say, “Let's introduce ourselves to our neighbours, and let's not wait until an event happens.”

Thank you.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: Just very quickly to add, I think we have to look at it historically and for many first nations communities, where they are now is not where they were but where they were put. They put themselves in the right places and safe places. In many cases, where they were put now has put them in harm's way. Of course, through federal policies we have to admit we have lost a lot of our history, some of our culture, some of our languages. So some of that traditional knowledge has been lost but for much of it, especially if you get into rural environments, it's just about being willing to ask and being willing to listen. There's so much that can be learned before and during events from first nations communities.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you for that.

I represent a riding that has 41 municipalities and two first nations reserves, so there are a lot of volunteer firefighters all across the region that is known as the Pontiac, which is, as we have mentioned today, Algonquin territory. What could a fire marshal institution, working I would presume in collaboration with all of the different provinces, bring to remote non-indigenous communities in terms of additional protection? I've got a feeling that there are a lot of rural communities across the country, indigenous and non-indigenous, that would like to see greater coordination across the country. I wonder if you could speak to that.

Mr. Arnold Lazare: There are a few first nations fire departments that protect non-native communities. They do exist. With AFAC, we're inclusive. There's a lot of idioms saying, is it first nations, indigenous, native? We always take the inclusive stand. We're looking at the Tapirisat, the Métis, the Inuit. We're not limiting ourselves to one nation. We're saying that by providing good training and good education we're helping the community, which may be native or may not be native. We do know that by building capacity anywhere we're increasing fire protective services.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: From a programs and services level, quite simply rural first nations will know, in collaboration with our partner here at the regional level, that they are going to get the same level of services being where they are. And they're going to know that this organization is not going to have to fight for those services, that there's a guarantee of the services. Most important, they'll know that the services that are coming to them have been designed by first nations and are being delivered by first nations, and not based on what budget is available. That's probably the most critical component: that we can meet the needs of that community.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Anandasangaree.

● (1300)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I realize that we're out of time, but I just wanted to see with respect to Thursday's witnesses whether we have....

The Chair: I just passed a note saying that we seem to only have two people coming on Thursday. I think the clerk is actively trying to find some, but I put forward a suggestion of perhaps a Manitoba presenter who might be available.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: There's a suggestion that we have Judy Klassen from Manitoba if there is space for another witness.

The Chair: If there's agreement, we could see if she would be available. She was active in the fire providing services.

MP McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, I have no objection. Obviously it's important to have as full a panel as we can. If there is a list, then I would presume that for the clerk this would be a backup plan as opposed to pre-empting some of the already suggested witnesses.

The Chair: Agreed.

Arnold, I owe you two minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'm all right.

The Chair: Make it powerful, Arnold. Very short—your most insightful question.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right.

I'll go back to Mr. Wiggins. In the previous line of questioning, we were talking about folks who are given an evacuation order who, in some instances, refuse to leave or don't want to leave. In Australia there seems to be a system where they can provide a document saying that because the person has a particular type of training, they don't have to abide by the evacuation order. That was what we were getting at.

You have a minute and a half to talk about people who want to stay in place rather than abide by an evacuation order.

Mr. Blaine Wiggins: I don't want to go on at length about the Australian programs and services, but they pretty much have what they call the “stay and defend, or leave” program. It's that cut and dried: stick it out here or go, but go early. That's probably something we could learn from, as well as the training that goes with it.

But I'd like to turn it over to my colleagues at FNESS—because they worked very closely with the evacuations in B.C.—to draw on some of their experiences and thoughts regarding the training, the policies, and self-direction.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Mr. Jeff Eustache: In an emergency, the first nations in B.C. activate their own emergency evacuation orders through council resolutions. They also have the ability to stay if they choose to. It's the province that gives them the advice to leave based on the wildfire threat and risk. I just wanted to clarify that they can do that.

Some of them chose to suppress the fires as well. I think it's important...and as I mentioned, they have the training, the capacity, and resources to stay and fight the fire; they just don't have the ability to do that under the current agreements. The model in Australia, I think, would work out very well if the first nations in B. C. had that agreement with the province and the federal government, under the proper certification, training, and capacity, to be registered to fight those fires.

The Chair: I think we've exceeded our official time.

We've had a robust conversation. We appreciate your participation. *Meegwetch* for coming out. We appreciate your insights.

The meeting is adjourned.