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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody.

We'll start the meeting with respect for the guests that we have, who have come a very long way to present to us. We are very interested to hear about emergency measures for your own community, and your recommendations for those that were evacuated.

We sit on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people, something that all Canadians should recognize in our history, especially now that we've started on the journey of truth and reconciliation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we will continue our study on fire safety and emergency management in indigenous communities.

We welcome you to the committee. You'll have 10 minutes to present, after which we'll have an opportunity to get questions from the members of Parliament on the committee, and there will be a back-and-forth discussion. Just once in a while, if you look up at me, I'll give you an indication of how much time is left for your presentation.

Bonjour. I'm glad that you're here. I hope you had a good trip. Now it's over to you. You have 10 minutes.

Chief Joe Alphonse (Tribal Chairman, Tsilhqot'in National Government): [*Witness speaks in Tsilhqot'in*]

Thank you for giving us this opportunity. We're thankful to be here to present to the standing committee and honoured to be on Algonquin territory. I want to acknowledge that, first and foremost.

The Tsilhqot'in people have fought long and hard for the establishment of our aboriginal rights and title. That's been my career. I have spent eight and a half years as chief for Tl'etinqox, Anaham, community. Nine years before that I was director of government services for Tsilhqot'in National Government. Nine years before that, I held just about every position from fishery coordinator to natural resource community liaison. I did just about everything within the tribal council except for being an accountant, so I've seen and worked my whole career advancing our aboriginal rights and title.

The Tsilhqot'in case has been my career. At the time of winning our aboriginal title in B.C.'s supreme court, I knew it was time to go back to my community.

I'm a fifth-generation chief in my community. Chief Anahim, the grand chief of the Tsilhqot'in during the Tsilhqot'in War, was my great-great grandfather. Chief Casimir was my grandfather, the last hereditary chief in our community.

I tell my community, I don't fear you but I fear my ancestors on the other side. One day I'll meet up with them so I have to do and conduct myself in an honourable way.

The fires we experienced this summer, I don't ever want to experience that kind of intensity again. That was...but it was also an act of self-government. We talk about self-government and we want self-government, but the reality is that people aren't ready for that, or so it seems. The moment we decided.... In 2009-10, my community was evacuated. We were also evacuated in 2003, which was the last time there was a major report on wildfires, a firestorm report.

In 2010, when our community was evacuated, we had our members in gymnasiums with cot after cot after cot, which reminded our people of residential schools. To be lining up in cafeterias just like residential school, eating foods that are not traditionally appropriate for our people, and worrying about our homes, hearing rumours and reports of looting and so on and so forth.... Social media is really a powerful thing and it plays a big part, especially when a big thing like that is happening. It adds to the confusion. You have to be aware of that.

We also have a lot of band members who were living in other cities in 2010, and they came to Williams Lake to help our community members. We're proud people. We don't want anybody looking after us. We'll do it ourselves. Our members came to volunteer, and they were university students. In one case, it was on the fourth day, they learned there was actually a spare room for the volunteers, and that spare room was filled with refreshments, sandwiches. If you wanted to have a nap, there was a cot over there. There was a couch. There was a TV. Our volunteers discovered that on the fourth day.

Two of our university student volunteers were walking in, one a master's student, at the same time as two non-aboriginal ladies were walking out, and one of them said, “I don't trust them” and told the other to go back in and keep an eye on them.

● (1105)

Right then and there, we said that we will never listen to an evacuation order ever again. We will not be a burden to anyone. We will look after ourselves.

We put a tremendous amount of resources into training our members. From 2010 to the fires this year, we've probably trained about 400 firefighters. We have a long history of fighting fires. We live in the Tsilhqot'in. We're in a fire zone. This isn't going to be the last fire that my community is ever going to face. This will continue. We're surrounded by lodgepole pine. When you open a book on the lodgepole pine, the first thing you read is that it's fire dependent. If you look at the pictures or slides, there's dead trees sprinkled all throughout. That's the case. That's what we live in. We're fine. Generation after generation, we learn how to deal and how to look for it.

I grew up fighting fire. My first job was at 15 years old. All throughout high school, I fought fire during my school days. I knew if I got on a fire and I fought fire for five days, I would make more money in those five days than the other kids who stayed on the reserve and worked for their community all summer. I had a lot of experience fighting fire. After graduating from high school, the B.C. Forest Service starting establishing native-unit firefighting crews. I was asked to head up our native-unit firefighting crew in Alexis Creek, but my views can be viewed as extreme at times. When I looked at that list of all the firefighters they had, I told them, “I think you have too many potheads on your crew. If I were to run it, I'd be constantly wanting to fire everybody, so I think I'll save my stress and go work for fisheries instead.” Also, I had had enough of fighting fire. It's not the cleanest job in the world. You have to get dirty to be effective fighting fire. I had had enough at that point.

When the evacuation order happened, the RCMP came into our community. I was stranded in Kamloops. I had to go pick up my baler. I have a small hobby farm. I do the chief thing on a part-time basis. That's my part-time job, I tell people. I'm a full-time rancher. On my way back, the fires around 100 Mile and Barriere stranded me in Kamloops.

Following social media, the fires that were happening around Williams Lake erupted and we were hearing reports of RCMP officers coming through our community banging on doors, kicking down doors, threatening our members, and asking for dental records if people didn't want to leave. “Give us your dental records, so that we can identify you after the fires,” and comments such as that. I got hot under the collar. I had a hard time finding a hotel in Kamloops. I finally found one. One of my other councillors was in Merritt picking up a vehicle. We were in the same situation. We were in contact with each other.

The next morning, I got a Facebook post. One of my councillors wrote that there were only a couple of other councillors including him who were in the community that night and said that was the only leadership. There needs to be more leaders in our community. We have 12 councillors and one chief in our community. “Where the heck is the chief?” he said.

I read that post and I was like, “I'm coming back to Anaham. If I have to run all the way back, I'm going to run all the way back to scalp this guy”. I told my councillor in Merritt, “You meet me and I'll get as far as Barriere and I'll wait at the gas station in Barriere.” We caught up to each other in Barriere and we continued on. We made it home that night. The next day, when we got in, the RCMP came in and informed us that there was an evacuation order and for our community to leave.

● (1110)

I said, “We're not leaving.”

Instantly his whole demeanour changed, and he said, “We're going to put up roadblocks on both sides of your community, and if you leave, you can't come back.” I said, “We have no intention of leaving, so it doesn't matter if you have roadblocks.” The response there was, “Your children can't make decisions for themselves, so we're going to come back with the ministry of children and families and take your kids.”

I said, “In that case, we'd better put up a roadblock and keep you guys out of our community then.” He looked at me and said, “Your roadblocks won't slow us down.” At that point, I lost my temper and told him, “Maybe our roadblocks won't slow you down, but bullets flying past your head would definitely turn you around.” Suddenly I realized what I'd said and thought, “Holy cow, I'd better have a good comeback line or I'm in jail.”

I told him, “Maybe before you come back in here with an attitude you need to go back to your RCMP office and talk to your RCMP lawyer, because what you'll probably find is that on Indian reserve land, your evacuation order does not apply unless chief and council sign, and we are not about to sign any evacuation order.” At that point, they left, but we had to assert ourselves, and it was upsetting. It seemed like every government agent who came through...and I got tired of hearing this over and over: “Do you guys even have a plan?” or “Do you even know how many people are in your community?”

Since 2010 we've developed our policies around firefighting and emergency. We're on version six. To date, I haven't met an agent or organization anywhere that has more of a plan than we have.

When you're going to make a stand, you'd better be prepared and you'd better know what you're doing. We're involved with a logging company, Tsi Del Del logging, the largest logging company in and around the city of Williams Lake. We log 400,000 cubic metres of wood. We have some of the best heavy equipment operators you're going to find anywhere. We have over 400 people who are trained firefighters certified under the B.C. process. Suddenly government agents are running around asking what kinds of qualifications we have and what kind of training we have. It's the same goddamn training they have. They're the instructors.

I will say this. I often tell people this. The fires this summer were never a threat to our community. The bureaucracy and the governments that were all around us were a threat to our community during this crisis.

Leave us alone.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Chief, for that very powerful message.

I've allowed us to go over time a bit. I hope the committee understands that we wanted to hear the story of this community that stood up to defend themselves.

Now we're going to have an opportunity to go to MPs, Chief, and they'll be asking you questions. We'll start with MP Will Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Chief, for those powerful remarks, and thank you for your recognition of our privilege of communing here in Algonquin territory. As the member for Pontiac, I have the privilege of representing many from that community just north of here.

I also appreciate your underlining of how many years you've spent on the front lines, securing the rights and title of your community. I think the whole country has watched and has learned in the process. For those teachings, which have run through judicial decisions but also through interactions with you, I know that a lot of people are very thankful for what you've brought to the table.

Obviously the most recent fires were an intense experience, and I'm sure there are lessons learned on your side that go beyond the frustrations you felt with regard to interactions with the civil service provincially, with security forces, and with the RCMP. We've read about those frustrations. We've heard about them first-hand today.

You've mentioned that over 400 individuals in your community have been trained up and are ready to go. In relation to your own community's performance in the context of fighting this natural disaster, if you will, what lessons have you learned about your own community's performance, leaving aside the frustrations? What was done very well? What could have been done better? How are you going to learn from this summer?

Chief Joe Alphonse: I think, just like anything else in life, after the fact you can improve on a lot of things. At the end of the day, we're thankful that we went through this process, and we'd do it again in a heartbeat. Now that we've gone through this once, we're even more prepared. We will go back and review all our policies, making sure that every last step of our policy is well reviewed.

It's important as a community that you be prepared. If you don't have an emergency response plan, you'd better get on it and better start planning it, because in today's global warming age, this is the new norm that we live in. It's going to happen sooner or later. You, as a community, can't spend enough time talking about safety measures in your community and pouring financial resources into training and equipment. No matter how prepared you are, you will never be prepared enough when catastrophe hits.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you, and I appreciate the clear message of your testimony today, and at the time the fire was occurring, which was that you're going to stay and fight.

At a local level, as your community takes on responsibility for fighting these fires, for evacuating as necessary, what kinds of resources do you think will be required, in addition to what you have already?

● (1120)

Chief Joe Alphonse: The problem is not at our level. I think the problem of financial resources is with the province and Canada, but it wasn't until our situation arose in just about every newspaper across Canada with my statement on INAC policies.... My community was the most dysfunctional of Tsilhqot'in communities when I stepped in. We had close to a $5-million deficit. It had taken me eight and a half years to climb out of that. For us to leave now and lose even five or 10 homes in a fire, we would never recover, because INAC's policies are to impoverish our people.

When I made that statement, we got a response. We had the regional director general in Vancouver show up in a chopper the next day in our community. While she was there, promising that their finances were going to be left in place, her FSOs in our administration room were threatening to cut off our funding.

Right from day one, I told people that they had to look after their finances. We hired an auditor and I told him to look after this, because we're going to get called, I guarantee you. Prepare the finances for an audit, because we're probably going to get audited. They're going to do everything they can to try to discredit us, so be prepared for a forensic audit. That's how I won my finances, and today we continue to fight that.

They want to go over every line, line by line. We spent $3.1 million on the fire, and we've only been paid back $840,000, and they want to go over everything. If you issued a $2 cheque, they're going to question you about that, asking what that is and telling you to justify that. You have to spend 15 minutes on every last fricking transaction. When they finally agree to pay you, they're not going to tell you what they're paying and what they're not, as if to set us up. Now when our pan-audit goes through, I can see the INAC FSO having a field day clawing back all of the finances that went in through all of this, to continue to try to keep us impoverished.

I told Justin Trudeau when he came to Williams Lake to cut B.C. right out of the whole deal. We'll make this nation to nation: Canada and Tsilhqot'in.

When you provide us with funding, we have strict regulations as first nations people, so when Canada does this for a B.C. wildfire, why don't they have the same standard for them? I don't mind. I love being in those situations, and I've gone to the Supreme Court of Canada. I feel we have to be accountable to my members. I don't mind being held to a high standard, but if you're going to do that and share those finances, why don't you hold that same standard to every other agent, especially non-native agents, because non-native people think that we got it for free. If they're held to the same standard, I guarantee attitudes will change in this country.

The Chair: Very good.

Our questioning moves to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses for coming such a long way. Also, your pictures are very powerful, so bringing them along makes it real again. Of course, your area is farther north than the area I represent, where the fires also impacted quite dramatically.

I have a couple of quick questions. Did you lose any homes?

Chief Joe Alphonse: No.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Had you not been there with some of your workers, do you feel you would have lost some homes?

Chief Joe Alphonse: The former RCMP sergeant at Alexis Creek, who is now in Williams Lake, tells me I'm being very modest when I say that if we had left we would have lost 40 homes, our band office, our health building, our gas bar, and our church. We have 140 homes in our community.

● (1125)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You never did a band council resolution to evacuate, but some of the families decided to go and some decided to stay and fight. Is that what happened?

Chief Joe Alphonse: No, we have our own process. In our policy, we declare our own state of emergency or alert, and then we go door to door and inform everyone. The whole community is aware that we are in an emergency state. We employ 25 security guards, 24 hours a day, and in the event of a fire threat to the community, they have the authority to knock on doors and wake people up. We all meet down at the band office headquarters and then decide what to do.

Anybody over 65 years old was moved away, but we didn't move them to Williams Lake. In those types of situations, we move people as far away from the fire as we can. Anybody over 65 was sent to Abbotsford. People under 50, say, 40 to 50 years old, who weren't physically strong enough to fight fire went to other first nation communities where they were looked after and were able to move freely.

Just because we didn't sign the BCR.... You sign a BCR and you hand your authority over to the regional district. We had our own process and we followed it.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I didn't realize that the BCR would turn authority over to the regional district. You had your own system in place, and it sounds like it worked very well for you.

You said you're a rancher. I would think fencing has been a big issue, the loss of timber. Have you been able to analyze the impact of those losses? Is there any plan to support the recovery in your communities?

Chief Joe Alphonse: We're in a recovery process right now, and we're trying to replace all the fencing and everything else, even the fireguards we've built. For the Plateau fire alone, just the outside boundary fireguard is a thousand kilometres long. For the Hanceville fire, the outside boundary is about 600 kilometres. That doesn't include all the other roads or fireguards that were built within those, so there's a lot of work still ahead of us. I would say 75% of my caretaker area is gone—it's burnt now.

As a community, we had our own land use plan. Well, that land use plan is out the window now. We have to start from scratch again.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You indicated that you submitted a number of bills for your work to government and you haven't been reimbursed. Is that true?

Chief Joe Alphonse: It was $3.1 million, and $840,000 has been paid, so the rest of that is.... You know, we're maxed right out at the bank. We're very fortunate that I have a very good relationship with our banker. Now that situation is bringing the recovery work almost to a halt, almost to a complete halt now, because EMBC is not going through the process.

Reading between the lines, it's almost as if there's one big, huge cash cow that they view and that now somebody else has gotten access to that cash pot and it's almost as if everybody, the old-school team, is doing the best they can to protect their own interests. Well, we're here and we're not leaving, and we better come up with a better system.

When I get home, I'm prepared, and I've been pushing my Tsilhqot'in chiefs, to demand that there be a full inquiry into this summer and the handling of these fires. What we've learned, what created this is the mismanagement of our forests over all these years, so we will not allow that to happen again. We're going to insist on and push on every aspect of management of our resources in our territory from this day forth.

● (1130)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: This will be fairly quick. Social media and Internet access can be a mixed blessing. In some ways they help inform people, and in other ways they spread misinformation.

Does your community mostly have Internet access?

Chief Joe Alphonse: We have a couple of towers in our community, and community members also use satellite dish for Internet communication. That's definitely one area that needs to improve within our community in the Tsilhqot'in, for sure.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Questioning now goes to MP Rachel Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much for being here and for your long journey. I'm also from B.C., and I really respect how big a journey it is.

Thank you so much for the testimony today. I think it was incredibly important. One of the things I really heard from it that was sort of a shock for me, I guess, was how little the regions around you, the RCMP, for example, understand how prepared you actually are.

Could you tell us a little bit about why it is that these emergency services and RCMP don't understand the capacity, the amount of work you've done, the training you've done, and how prepared you really are? Where's the breakdown in communication?

Chief Joe Alphonse: You know, I think it all comes down to attitude, the attitude we have toward first nation people, stereotypes, whatever. Every government agency that came running in.... I got to the point where I told our EOC coordinator that I was sick and tired of government officials running in and every last one of them saying things like, “Do you even know what you're doing? Do you even have a policy? Do you even know how many people you have in your community? What are your plans? What are you going to do?” In the end, I just started telling them that we were going to run down to the river and take all our clothes off, and that we had logs there, so we'd tie the babies to the logs and throw the logs in the river and then we'd jump in.

But it wasn't until the Department of National Defence, somebody from Ottawa, called me at home, called me late at night, and I decided, since this was a military guy, I was going to go through our emergency operations policies. I spent one full hour with him and talked to him, detail by detail. At the end of that hour, he said he was sorry for underestimating us, for not realizing that we have policies.

I figured he would understand because this was very much like a military-style operation that we ran in our community. We took.... There was no more band office in our community, and that structure, all our stuff. There was no more health, no more chief and council. In our Tsilhqot'in way, before contact, we had lots of chiefs in our community. Each chief was responsible for certain things in our community, and in times when there was a threat to the community, a threat to the women, children, and elders, the war chief would take over.

When the war chief took over, everybody became subordinate to that person. That's what our emergency operations centre and policy was and how I explained it to our community. People bought into that. It was something they could relate to, and they related to that. It was through this crisis that we found harmony. For two months we had harmony amongst us. You exclude all the other government agencies, remove all of them, and just within our community we had harmony. Fire was never a threat to us, never a threat.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I really appreciated what you said about this action being a strong action of self-government. What I can hear from what you're saying is how strong the community must feel after this experience, knowing that they could care for themselves and that there was a plan. I'm very impressed by that, and congratulations for that leadership.

One of the things that were very clear to me in what you were talking about is the threats that you received from the RCMP and how painful and frustrating that was. Can you tell us if there have been any actions about fixing those relationships?

● (1135)

Chief Joe Alphonse: I think there has to be. I like to believe there is. If I didn't, I'd get out of the business altogether if there's no hope. I think we have a story to tell, we have a story to share, and we have experiences that not a lot of communities have gone through. We're prepared to share that story, the policies, and the procedures. We believe that we need to start thinking ahead.

This is the new norm. This is going to continue to happen, whether it's fires or floods or whatever. In B.C. and in the interior, in 2010, we talked about a fire centre and developing that, and that's back on the table. I'm pushing as hard as I can to establish not only a fire and evacuation centre, but most importantly, a training facility to train members. Why is there no such facility anywhere in B.C. to train people for this type of situation?

We had CRD, the City of Williams Lake, do an evacuation order. I still can't figure out why they did that evacuation order because 13 days later nothing had changed, only that the fires were closer and they invited everybody back into the city. I made a recommendation to local MP Todd Doherty, somebody I grew up with. I said, ”You have to have a forum in Williams Lake. People have lost faith in that system. You have to talk and bring people in because if you don't do that, the next time there's a real threat, people aren't going to leave, and you're going to need more than an army to remove people from that city.”

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The other thing you talked about was your previous experience of being evacuated and hearing those comments that were quite frankly quite racist. I'm just wondering if you think there is a need to start training volunteers for any community across Canada that may face these kinds of challenges when they're dealing with emergency services.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Any volunteers, anybody who represents any form of government, should have first nations training, sensitivity training, whatever. Why is it that at the first sign the RCMP officers are threatening to remove children? It's just boom, at the first sign of any confrontation, “Oh, we're going to take your kids.” Not here, not in this community.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's sad that it has not changed. If we talk about reconciliation, it's really about stopping threatening to take the children away.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Have faith in our system. The biggest thing, when I come out here, is that I'm proud of my community and for what happened there. People, especially the young people, saw all of this unfold. When that RCMP officer did that, it was very emotional for the women in our community. A lot of the women came up and told me that they didn't believe anybody had ever stood up for them like that. Now our young people watch all of this and they're taking all that in and they're learning. Everyone who could work was working.

Over the years in politics you often hear people showing up and saying, “Oh, but you're not providing jobs and opportunity.” The biggest critics, I couldn't find them all summer. I had jobs for them and they were all hiding from me. I have an eight-year-old nephew and he was really upset because he didn't have a job. Finally, my younger brother told him, “You're going to be the night watchman at the house, so every night you have to go to every window and make sure there's no fire anywhere.” He was so proud.

We had that all throughout our community. Young people are confident now that they can do this. That's the biggest thing in the first nation community because we've been told over and over again, “You can't do this.”

We have a report, this fancy little report. It wasn't a white person we got in to do that. It was one of our own people. It's full of detail. This is only one phase of the fire. We had interviews with certain members in our community, random people in our community, and it's from their perspective, and now we're going into the second phase. That's community meetings and stuff, and then the third will be the EOC and the firefighters.

But every step of the way, you have to stand up and be prepared to fight for your community.

● (1140)

The Chair: Okay.

Let's get some questions from MP Salma Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair

Thank you, Chief, for your very, very powerful presentation and providing us insight.

My first question is in regard to data collection. We've heard from many of the witnesses during the course of this study that a major issue facing the emergency preparedness response and recovery of indigenous communities is that there are large gaps in data collection related to the frequency of fires, available resources, and the best practices.

Have you noticed in your time working within your community—and I know you have worked very closely in the process of recreation and all that—that there is lack of data, and how can we make sure we have enough data available? What improvements would you suggest, and what data have you found is more useful to help in this?

Chief Joe Alphonse: I didn't get all of that question.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: There are data gaps when it comes to whether the community is well prepared regarding the frequency of the fires. What do you think we can do better to make sure we have enough data to help evacuation and then resettlement of the communities?

Chief Joe Alphonse: From the government's perspective, I couldn't make a recommendation because I don't really know what the process is like.

However, from my community, my experience as a director of TNG, knowing the importance of keeping proper financial records and all that, I was very strict. Every last thing that was donated, we tagged and monitored. If I didn't have that experience, that wouldn't have happened. Training is everything. You have to train, and you have to know what to expect. That's something that has to be worked on, not just in first nation communities but in all municipalities and any place where there are residents.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Do you collect some data within your community?

Chief Joe Alphonse: Do we collect data? What kind of data?

Mrs. Salma Zahid: In regard to what resources you have available, the frequency of the fires, and what is the best useful information.

Chief Joe Alphonse: If we had more resources, we definitely would. We could start recording a lot of that kind of stuff.

Like I said, we were in a $5-million deficit when I took over my community, and you have to be selective on where you're going to spend those resources. A lot of the training dollars that we have to get, we have to apply for funding to get that. We don't have specific dollars that we can spend on this kind of stuff or whatever.

If you want to talk data, it's all in my head.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Okay, so a large step in ensuring emergency preparedness is to take steps, making sure that the members of the community are aware of the resources available and to adequately train them in their use.

In your experience, is there a general knowledge of the resources available in your communities, and across other indigenous reserves that you have been involved with? What is involved in educating the people in your communities about their emergency management plans and the execution of those plans? In regard to youth, have you done something specific in training them?

Chief Joe Alphonse: We've trained 400 firefighting crews. We were on version six, and we're now working on version seven of our emergency response policies and stuff. We spend a lot of time.

With other first nations, it's up to the first nation community as to whatever they deem to be priority. Because we've been through so many fires in our area, we make this a high priority. Even upon hiring new employees, we have a copy of our emergency response policy and stuff given to every new employee. As well, there is the message, “If you're going to work for me, I might pay you from 8:30 to 4:30, but I expect you to be a role model 24 hours a day, seven days a week.” I really push that very hard.

● (1145)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Have you shared your plans with the governments or the RCMP, or the other agencies who help in the evacuation of the fires?

Chief Joe Alphonse: I don't think any of them believed that we had any plans, so I never shared any of that. They show me disrespect, so why should I show them respect? I don't think any of them believed we had policies until well into the fires. I think it was a shock for them that we had them. “Sure, go through the policies. There they are.”

Our EOC coordinator had that policy book in his hand at all times. With any situation, he would flip to the proper chapters, “It says here that there's a recommendation. This is what we should do.” Other people would also refer to those.

We have very in-depth policy on that, but I don't think other communities have progressed their emergency policies as in-depth as ours. I would actually challenge any community, even municipalities on that. Our policies are probably stronger than theirs.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: After the fire is over, do you have plans how to resettle the communities once the disaster is over? Do you have plans in place to resettle the communities?

Chief Joe Alphonse: Resettle...?

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Yes.

Chief Joe Alphonse: We've built fireguard upon fireguard. Throughout our communities, we had to do some back-burning and things like that. There's a lot of work here. It's all in the process.

We're almost fearful when we're dealing with the EMBC now. We're telling them this is work that's needed, and asking if they are going to cover that. It's almost like we have to spend a couple weeks negotiating and going through every last aspect before they'll commit to us. Then we carry out the work, and then they go through the whole process again of trying to see if that work was justified.

The Chair: Questions are now going to MP Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you for coming here today.

You're speaking relationship issues as to systematic issues. You're an anomaly, if you don't mind my saying. We have sat here for weeks listening to Saskatchewan, to Manitoba, and to parts of B.C. They're not as organized as you are.

Do we need a fire marshal to regulate this issue so that we know that on the ground, you're there. How would we know otherwise? We had Peter Ballantyne from Saskatchewan, we had Manitoba, and we had B.C.

You have boots on the ground. You're on version seven. If I had known that before and that was shared, maybe the reaction of the RCMP officer would be a lot different than it was that day.

Chief Joe Alphonse: I would imagine Catherine Lappe, the RDG from Vancouver, didn't have a clue who I was and had never even met me.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: That's not your fault. It's the government's fault I'm talking about.

Chief Joe Alphonse: She came right out to the community and asked. She didn't know; she asked. When we sat her down, she was polite about it and respectful. We went through all of our plans. She said, “From a financial...I'm here to do whatever to help you.”

That was the kind of leadership we wanted to see from every government agency that was out there, but it wasn't there. They just assumed we didn't know what we were doing.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: That's wrong, because we give you the money up front to look after this. I think what we have found out here in the last month to a month and a half is that we have no data. When we were talking about data, we didn't know how many were trained. We don't know the equipment that you have. We don't know any of this stuff until there's a fire and an evacuation. Then we're scrambling like this, saying, “What have you done? If you don't mind my saying, what have you done with the money that we gave you four or five years ago?”

Then they start pointing fingers when it should be the other way. We should be proactive like you have been, and sharing this, and saying that's the only way we're going to get this. You're sitting right now at $2.260 million down. You're not going to collect all the money. I think you know that. You stated that. That's wrong, because you've been proactive, but you're one of very few in this country, if you don't mind my saying—and we've heard that here for the last six weeks—and you're being punished for it.

● (1150)

Chief Joe Alphonse: It's okay. We'll fight. If we have to go to the small claims court, then we will do that. I don't mind a good fight. That's what keeps me going.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You did say there was a mismanagement of our forests.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: How so?

Chief Joe Alphonse: You look at, for example, deciduous trees. Those are the white trees that have nice little leaves. They turn nice, pretty colours in the fall. They fall off in the winter.

In the prime of fire season, you have a whole bunch of white trees with those leaves, and there's a roaring fire coming. When the fire hits that tree, it just dies. I don't know what it is. I'm not a scientist, but I know that to be true. I don't know if it's the gas that comes out of those leaves when the fire hits it or whatever, but fires just die, or they slow down immensely, enough to the point where you could tackle that fire.

Forest practices don't consider that tree to be of any money value, so they pour herbicides, pesticides, and everything they can on those trees to kill them so they're not competing for water, so the commercial trees that they're after have all the time and opportunity to grow. There are no natural defences out in the natural forestry world in the Tsilhqot'in anymore because of these practices. We're not going to allow the herbicides and pesticides. We want those white trees sprinkled all throughout. That's just a small example.

The beetle epidemic is another big issue.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Give me two lines that you want to see in our report when we're done. What would you want me to say on your behalf in that report? What do you want to see in the report when it comes out?

Chief Joe Alphonse: It's probably the same thing. We're not here to run anybody out, but if you don't want to acknowledge me and my community, then I'm going to push back hard the other way. There has to be mutual respect. We have to fight those crises together.

The other residents in the Chilcotin, we cooked for everyone. Our cooks were cooking 20 hours a day. People were scrambling trying to get out and they had nowhere to go. They stopped in my community. Our whole parking lot was filled up with campers, tourists, ranchers, and local residents. A lot of them barely had enough clothes with them. They had no food and no water. We cooked for them. We supplied them with food. We supplied them with water. We supplied them with fuel, and on their way they went. A lot of the local ranchers around there came to our community for support, and we sent firefighters to them. The one day when the fire actually took a really hard run at us, a lot of those ranchers came back to our community and helped us stand our ground and fight the fire. We were doing that not as non-native and native people. We did it as Tsilhqot'in residents. I think that's what you're striving for.

To further answer a previous question, I look at Cariboo Regional District, and I look at the head of CRD, Al Richmond. He should have known. He was there in 2010. He was there in 2009. He knows my community, yet he's the first one to waltz out. It's almost as though suddenly he has authority and says, “I'm the authority and I'm going to....” As far as I'm concerned, that bastard should be canned from his job. I've said that routinely in Williams Lake and I'll say it again. Get him right out of there. Get people who know what they're doing, people who are respectful.

● (1155)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Thank you.

The Chair: To close the questioning, we'll go to MP T.J. Harvey.

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I really want to thank you, Chief Alphonse, for your testimony here today. Certainly it has been very passionate testimony that is very pertinent to the discussion. To start, I really want to thank you for everything that you do for your community.

I want to switch gears a little and talk about the traditional knowledge and your community's ability to handle these fires, given hundreds and hundreds of years of experience. This isn't a new cycle; it's an old cycle. It's as old as your community and your people. With that traditional knowledge and your emergency evacuation plan, and the bricks-and-mortar, concrete, actionable, deliverable abilities of your community, how can the federal and provincial governments, going forward, do a better job of taking that into consideration and being there as a partner, as opposed to being somebody who's coming in and dictating what we believe or the provincial government believes to be an appropriate response? How can we do a better job of starting the conversation off on the right foot by asking what we can do to help you instead of coming in and saying, “This is what we think you need to do”?

You referenced the idea of calling a summit or a round table discussion in a neighbouring community to get a bunch of people together. Is that a starting point? What do you feel is the best way forward?

Chief Joe Alphonse: I think we need to have a full review. In 2003, Gary Filmon, the former Manitoba premier, did that in B.C. We need another one similar to that to review what went on this summer.

I'm very thankful for your question. I've been waiting for that question.

Every step of the way we had to fight and argue and really assert ourselves. The AFN assembly in Regina.... In August, I left for the community. The day after I got to Regina I found out that B.C. Wildfire Service laid off not 10%, 25%, or 50%, but my whole crew, 100% of our crew, and replaced them with Mexican and Australian firefighters. Not only that, but they had no problem appointing someone from Australia to be the very head person to plan how to fight that fire.

There are times when I don't want to talk to my firefighters because sometimes the stories they tell me almost send me over the deep end. The guy there is supposed to be in charge of the fires, and he's sitting there and says, “Holy shit. I don't know what to do. Where I'm from we only have brush and grass fires. Those fires are 30 feet tall. I've never seen that in my life.” Yet, here he's instructing, and they have laid off my whole crew.

I got back to my councillors and my emergency operations centre, and I told them to call a meeting right away. I said, “I want you to tell them that if they don't hire our crews back, we're going to personally escort every last firefighter out of the Tsilhqot'in. It doesn't matter if everything burns because just as many white ranches as Indian reserves are going to burn down.”

Why do we have to resort to those types of...before our firefighters are recognized?

Mr. T.J. Harvey: On that note, do you think this point of contact I'm talking about, or the way this relationship evolves going forward, recognizing that the way things have been dealt with in the past isn't the appropriate way.... If we set that as a benchmark and we say that we're going to do things differently, do you believe that an aboriginal fire marshal service model or a fire marshal model in general is the appropriate point of contact between communities such as yours and federal and provincial government departments? How would you like to see that?

Chief Joe Alphonse: We should get everybody in the same room and come up with a new system to figure out the standard firefighting process we're going to follow. One of our crews asked me what the Mexicans were doing out there. They spent the whole summer sleeping in the bush. They had a siesta on our fire all summer long. These guys don't know where the trails are. They don't know where the old wagon roads are. Our people know every last valley. If they need to get out in a hurry, they will. Some of our crews got shipped out to other parts of B.C., and they asked, “Why are we fighting fires here? We don't know the terrain here. We know our territory.”

B.C. Wildfire Service appoints somebody, and that person is there for 10 days. Then that person has to take a mandatory four days off. However, at the end of the four days, that person gets shipped off to another part of British Columbia, so there's always somebody new. When somebody new comes in, there is always the question, “Who are the players? What's the terrain? What are we looking at?” The whole fire is fought with people trying to figure out what's going on. You need consistency from day one.

Everybody is over there analyzing wind direction and everything else. By the time they finish all of their surveillance and everything else, it's two o'clock in the afternoon, and then they're prepared to head in. You should be on that fire at five o'clock in the morning when it's nice and cool and the fires are down. You don't go into a fire when it's at its peak in the middle of the day. Huge changes have to happen in the way we fight fire.

They're all afraid of being sued. Just let our guys go. We know how to fight fires. You bring in one bulldozer; one bulldozer is like 100 firefighters.

● (1200)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Just in regard—

The Chair: You're over by two minutes.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Okay, I'm good.

The Chair: I did want to hear you because your words are very wise, very poignant, and right to the point. I really appreciate your candour. Thank you so much for taking such a long trip to come up here to Ottawa. As you can tell, all of us are very appreciative. It's been our pleasure to meet you, Chief. *Meegwetch*.

We'll take a break, and then we'll have a new panel join us. We'll suspend for a couple of minutes.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: I ask everybody to quiet down, please. We have another panel. You're welcome to stay.

Grand Chief Edward John, welcome to our committee. We are on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people, and we are studying fires, fire management, fire evacuations, and emergency measures in communities.

You have up to 10 minutes to give your presentation, then we'll go to rounds of questioning. I'll open it up to you. Welcome.

Grand Chief Edward John (Political Executive Member, First Nations Summit): Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here, and also to be following the evidence presented by Chief Joe and his colleagues.

My name is Edward John. I am an elected member of the First Nations Summit executive, elected over 11 terms.

This summer was like no other. In British Columbia, as you know, there was a state of emergency. I did have the pleasure to be invited to Chief Joe's community, the Tl'etinqox, a Tsilhqot'in community at the Anaham reserve, as it is known in English.

The Tsilhqot'in people live to the south of where I come from. I come from the geographic centre of the province, and the language that the chief and his people speak is the same language that my people speak, so we share a common heritage. I know the communities well. They are in the middle of the interior. We are in the northern part of the interior, and there is a southern interior.

Most of the fires took place, of course, in the south, in the Williams Lakes-Quesnel area. There were fires to the north.

I happened to be in this community for one day at the height of these fires, really to see for myself. I was invited by the Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development in British Columbia. I requested that the head of Indian Affairs in the region, the regional director general, Catherine Lappe, attend as well, because there was no federal presence on these matters involving the first nation communities, so it was important that she be invited. We were brought in by helicopter to Williams Lake, and out to the communities. It was absolutely amazing to see the countryside on fire.

My office has provided to the clerk four documents: the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada-Emergency Management B.C. memorandum of understanding that was signed last spring; the Canada-B.C. wildfire response agreement, which was tabled with you; a proposal that we submitted to the Prime Minister calling for immediate resources to be put into our communities; and a resolution from our chiefs supporting the proposal.

I listened briefly to the testimony of Chief Joe. It was about traditional knowledge. The people who come from these areas and who know their lands and territories were completely disregarded in the face of so-called expertise. I am not downplaying the expertise by any stretch of the imagination, but here are people who know the lands and territories and understand all the nuances and contours of their lands, yet they are being disregarded in this situation. I think it's really important to understand the question that was raised on traditional knowledge, and I want to thank you for doing so.

The memorandum of understanding with Emergency Management B.C. is very well intentioned. We participated in the development of that, but we did not sign that MOU because it did not go as far as we expected it to. It was an MOU between B.C. and Indian Affairs—once again, the federal government transferring resources to the provinces without our full participation on how the resources are to be used. It's the same with the wildfire response agreement. Something in the neighbourhood of $2 million was transferred to the province on this.

What has happened is that, on the operational side, it has fallen apart, and we saw that in spades. The relationship between Emergency Management B.C., for example, or Wildfire B.C.... When we travelled to Williams Lake, we had a briefing for maybe an hour or an hour and a half with EMBC and Wildfire B.C. officials, and other officials responsible for this matter.

● (1210)

I asked what steps they take when they advise and provide recommendations to the regional district chair or the mayor from Williams Lake, and they went through the steps as to how they provide the recommendation for an evacuation alert and an evacuation order. Then I asked when they talked to the chiefs, what steps they took? The answer was a blank stare, because they didn't know. They figured it was sufficient for the regional district to make evacuation alert orders, as well as evacuation orders, that would apply to the on-reserve first nations communities. Of course, neither the regional district nor the mayor have any authority on reserve, so there's a vacuum there.

One of the big issues we have is that a state of emergency was declared, but that does not suspend civil or political rights. Individuals who are ordered to evacuate do not have to evacuate. People who were evacuated were told that their houses would be protected. Once they left, their houses were not protected and the non-aboriginal people's homes burned down. We have seen examples of that in the province.

One of the recommendations I would make for this committee, because you have access to the resources to do this, is to do a legal review of the situation and a legal analysis. We have our own legal analysis on this, but I think it's really important that one of the outcomes of this work that you do is to provide instructions to the research department of your Parliament here to help provide some of the background work.

This document, which I'm not sure you have, is a “Proposal for a BC First Nations Emergency Management Fund to Prepare For, Prevent, Respond to and Recover from Emergencies (2017)”, not just fires but other risks. Flooding is an annual occurrence in British Columbia. We're in an earthquake zone in the Lower Mainland and on the west coast of British Columbia.

Here's the point. The timber that's burning there in the picture is dead from the mountain pine beetle. About 90% of the timber in that territory is pine. At the beginning of the 1990s, we had a massive mountain pine beetle attack that destroyed millions of hectares of timber, and that is now the fuel for these fires. The fire seasons are not over. Expect them next year and the following year. This was a massive fire, but it could get worse.

We provided some recommendations to the government. Minister Goodale, the Minister of Public Safety, met with us. We have $33 billion over the next 10 years for green opportunities funding, and he suggested that some of these funds could be used for the purposes that we've outlined, at least that was our understanding.

We made some recommendations. There are seven of them.

First is to review and, as necessary, revise the status and adequacy of all 203 first nations' emergency preparedness, evacuation, and response plans and their full and effective operational implementation. This is where we went to Ralph Goodale.

Second is support for the development of comprehensive strategic and operational level engagement and implementation plans of all B. C. first nations with provincial, federal, regional districts and municipalities, for effective and coordinated response capacities.

Third is support all first nations' acquisition and ongoing maintenance of necessary assets including infrastructures, equipment, and supplies to respond fully and effectively to emergency situations such as floods and forest fires.

Fourth is support for capacity development—which is Joe's point about bringing in firefighters from Australia and Mexico—including training and accreditation of first nations peoples who are responsible to manage and respond to emergency situations. Where trained, these response teams should be brought into situations where their skill and expertise are required.

Fifth is support for those evacuated or relocated and for recovery, restoration, and/or rebuilding of lands, homes, and infrastructure in first nations communities, as well as support for those evacuees returning, bearing in mind their dignity, health, and well-being.

● (1215)

Six is support for this community, Tl'etinqox village, as a central gathering point for those on Highway 24 to Chilcotin Highway. As he said, his community, they remained and they became a place of refuge. It's an important place that should be supported.

Seven is that there will continue to be broader impacts, such as loss of traditional food security due to the inaccessibility of traditional food sources including fish, loss of hay and grazing land for livestock, and loss of cultural heritage, among many other items.

We've outlined five steps that we think were necessary, including a session between Canada, British Columbia, and us to review what happened.

I take this opportunity to make those comments to you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Your presentations have been received by the clerk and are sent off for translation. They'll be posted shortly, and you'll have access to all of the documents.

Questioning begins with MP Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Grand Chief.

It seems like we just met you, as you spoke very recently with us. Welcome back.

I have a couple of questions.

With respect to traditional knowledge, can you share with us how traditional knowledge will allow first nations firefighters and communities to be a better support during fires and evacuations?

Grand Chief Edward John: The most essential of the knowledge is the knowledge of the land itself.

When you bring in Mexican firefighters or Australian firefighters, they have no clue where they're going, or what the country looks like or even the roads and trails in our territories, which we know about. That, in itself, is one of the most valuable pieces of knowledge and information to have when you're dealing with a situation like this. These fires are massive, and sometimes it's best to stay out of the way because they are very dangerous in a dangerous situation.

On the perimeters, on the outside, how, and what steps need to be taken, that knowledge would be within. As Chief Joe Alphonse mentioned, this is the information that they have that would be vital to dealing with fires as we have here.

● (1220)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: We've heard quite a bit about a need for a first nations fire marshal. What are your thoughts on that, and how would you envision that helping in situations such as this?

Grand Chief Edward John: I think we agree with that. I know just about every community has a volunteer fire department. I know my community does. I know that Chief Alphonse's community does.

We have also established a First Nations' Emergency Services Society to deal with preparing and helping our communities address these. In British Columbia we have been proactive on many fronts. We take people who have expertise in certain areas and assign them to the First Nations Health Authority, for example, the first nations education, the first nations child welfare, across the board. Those who have expertise are assigned by the leadership in British Columbia to take the lead on many areas and develop action plans to move forward.

One of these areas is safety in our communities, which is absolutely essential. In our communities I'm aware that the training is sporadic, but it's desperately needed. This is part of the recommendations we make. We called for the government to set aside over a four- or five-year period $200 million to help first nations to have a thorough review. Minister Goodale's response was that they'll do an inventory. Do it, but there's still action that needs to be taken: up-to-date, decent firefighting equipment and skills, and the training necessary to fight domestic fires in the communities or other kinds of emergencies that may arise, including wildfires.

When I flew over one of these communities adjacent to Chief Alphonse's community, there was fire on three sides of the village. In the middle of the village as we flew over, what they were doing was protecting the houses. It's the grass fires, as you will see in the pictures here, that will burn the houses down.

What they had was two skidders, I think one water tank, and they had these little tanks called piss cans. Firefighters call them that. I'm not saying bad words here. Everybody uses those words out there. They are just small tanks that the firefighters use to fight little grass fires here and there.

That's all they had there to protect that community, and they managed to do an amazing job of that. Similar to what Chief Alphonse was saying, if they had evacuated as they were requested to, they would have lost many of their houses in the community including a brand new health centre, the school they have, and the infrastructure for water and sewer. They would have been all gone.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: What are the three top learning takeaways from this year's fire for us?

Grand Chief Edward John: I think one of those would be to review the B.C. wildfire agreement as well as the B.C. first nations emergency management services agreement with Indian Affairs, and to figure out in some detail on the operational side how to make it work, from the good ideas here in the MOU to the operational side of it, which means you must engage the communities.

The communities must be supported to ensure they have full and effective plans as well as the capability, capacity, and training to respond.

I think those are essentially the most important things we learned from this summer's catastrophe. There were a lot of discussions at the high level. All of the high-level decision-makers had no knowledge of the communities. They didn't realize they should talk to the chief and council, who have emergency plans and decision-making authority, and they can issue evacuation alerts and evacuation orders, which as a government they have every right to do.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to capacity building, are we talking about strictly training within the communities or making sure we have members from the indigenous communities in fire services across the country who are employed, who are staff, and then have them deploy perhaps in certain situations?

● (1225)

Grand Chief Edward John: I don't know about the rest of the country, but in British Columbia, where I'm from, what we want to see is the capability, capacity, and training in each and every one of the 203 communities. That's one capacity. The other capacity is the infrastructure necessary, the equipment and supplies, to be able to respond to the fires effectively.

If this summer is any example of what to expect next year and the year after, we'd better get our ducks in a row, get things up and running now, and not wait until the fire season is upon us. It is urgent that this be done during this winter, when there is no problem with fires in the province. It's the same situation we saw in Alberta, and in the Prairies as well, extensive fires and the impact. We saw evacuations of people from first nations communities in the prairie provinces, and they've run into exactly the same situation.

In one community, the community of Esk'etemc, we had two elders who were evacuated and died away from their own community. There was no way to bring those elders back into the community until the evacuation order was down.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue the conversation with questions from MP Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our guests for being here today.

One of the interesting things that a former guest talked about was the mismanagement of the forests. It's probably a bit of the upstream scenario that happens. People like to talk a lot about a whole-of-government approach to these kinds of things. We're talking a lot about the response to a big event such as this, but sometimes there's a bit more in looking at ways that we do other things. He talked a little about all the deciduous trees taken out of the forest. Were there any other things you'd like to add to that?

I'm inferring that you agree with that statement. Do you agree with that statement?

Grand Chief Edward John: One of the very important things that must be considered is at a very strategic level, at the high level. For example, in the Haida decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, dealing with Haida lands, the court said that if the government is even thinking about doing something in the territory of the Haida people, it had better talk to the Haida people.

Similarly here, the Tsilhqot'in people won a major court case in the Supreme Court of Canada. It's an important foundation for the recognition of their rights to their territories, the existence of aboriginal title in the Tsilhqot'in territory. In fact, in all of British Columbia, we have governments moving at that level. At a very strategic level, as an important development, the court said you do not want to be talking to the aboriginal people at the operational level when you've already made the decisions; do so upstream, as you put it.

One of the tools that's so essential both for first nations and for governments to engage with them is the strategic-level land use plans by the first nations in their territory. We're not just talking about the Tsilhqot'in Anaham reserve. We're talking about the Tsilhqot'in territory, their entire traditional title territory that extends way beyond the boundaries of existing reserve lands. Those strategic-level land use plans for first nations are essential, because now with that tool you're able to do many things, including what's to be developed.

In this territory, the major industry, of course, is forestry. These fires have had dramatic impacts on the forestry industry. There's the allowable annual cut determined by the Province of British Columbia. When you have massive devastation by fire, it limits the amount of timber available for harvesting. With the timber that's burnt here, you have to go in and take it down as quickly as you can, but I think it's already dead if it's mountain pine beetle infested. It's going to take generations to repair this.

● (1230)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: One of his other comments was that they're all afraid of being sued. That's an interesting comment. You talked about a couple of court cases on maybe the other side of that scenario.

I'd just like maybe some comments on when disastrous things do happen. In this case, upwards of 40,000 people were evacuated, without loss of life. Had there been loss of life, we would have seen an entirely different set of stories coming out of this. We would have seen a lot finger pointing and a lot of things going on with that. How do we balance that?

Grand Chief Edward John: In this situation, and I will use Chief Joe's community again, there were concerns about that.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes.

Grand Chief Edward John: But they had their own emergency plan, a very extensive plan. They were operating that plan in accordance with the resources they had. They had evacuation routes for their people, so they were never in any danger. As you can see, the community is an open grasslands area surrounded by timber. The major threat would be from the grass fires and those can move very quickly. In the Napa Valley we have seen how quickly those fires can move when the winds are high.

There was negligence. People would call it an act of nature that no one can anticipate. We can anticipate there will be fires. We don't know how the fires will act, but we can be prepared to act in response and contain those fires. But if there is some degree of negligence, it's a legal question. Families—I can't remember the name of the small community—in non-aboriginal homes, retirement homes around the edge of the lake, were told to evacuate and they were told their homes would be protected. The stories in the press were that no sooner had the community members left than those who were left there to protect the community left, so those houses burned down. Who is going to rebuild those houses? Where are they going to get the resources? Somebody should be responsible in that situation.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: How am I doing there for time?

The Chair: You have seven seconds.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

The Chair: No, you have one minute and seven seconds. I didn't want to cheat you out of any time.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I will cede my time.

The Chair: We're going to MP Rachel Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you very much.

Thank you so much for being here and spending your time with us today. One of the things that I feel is fundamental is really understanding what “nation to nation” means, and I think a lot of the communities I represent are still a bit confused about what that's going to look like in action. One of the things that I took away from the last testimony, and yours now, is that “nation to nation” also means learning from indigenous communities, and for the Government of Canada to stop having that attitude that they're always helping, and rather, that they're also learning. I look forward to that.

In this committee we talk a lot about the right to free, prior, and informed consent regarding issues that impact indigenous communities. Could you tell us a bit about the engagement process between the different levels of government and indigenous peoples in terms of creating management, prevention, and recovery plans? You gave us a very good example earlier, so perhaps you could talk a bit more about what that might look like.

Grand Chief Edward John: The issue of consent is raised in the Haida decision by the Supreme Court of Canada. It's also raised in the Tsilhqot'in decision. The chair of the Tsilhqot'in Nation or the national government is Chief Joe. It's about the ability to make decisions.

The specific wording of free, prior, and informed consent is in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but it doesn't have its origin there. It has its origin in other international conventions that have taken those words. In the context of the UN declaration, it's threaded throughout the 46 articles. For example, it says that if the state must consult and co-operate with indigenous peoples. If it is considering legislative or administrative measures that may affect indigenous peoples, then it requires their free, prior, and informed consent when it is considering that.

For example, we heard Minister of Justice Jody Wilson-Raybould the other day speaking in support of NDP MP Romeo Saganash's bill on the UN declaration. Free, prior, and informed consent is an important concept. The bad thing about the media and those who don't support the declaration is, “How could those Indians have a veto?”

I think there's a misconstruction of the concept of free, prior, and informed consent. The better interpretation of free, prior, and informed consent.... Consent at the end of the day is a decision that's made after a process, so governments go through a process to come to some decision. First nations' governments are in that same place. First nations' governments will look at information ahead of time. They should be free from any coercion. It should be prior to decisions being made. There should be extensive consideration. It may require an environmental assessment process or some other process that would help inform the decision-making process.

Free, prior, and informed consent essentially, at its core, is about governments making decisions. When the Province of British Columbia, the provinces, the national government, the territorial governments, or municipal governments are making decisions, that's what they're doing. A good example is if you have a specific claims agreement or maybe even a land claims agreement with the Government of Canada, you insist that you bring it to your community. The community looks at it. There will be people who support it, and there will be people who don't support it. You should have all of the best information in front of the community. When the moment comes for voting, what do you think is being done? It's called free, prior, and informed consent, the decision-making process. The result is the consent. The consent that says “no” or the consent that says “yes”.

● (1235)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

One of the things we heard very clearly from Chief Alphonse was the impact of having a complete lack of respect in the way that other people—the RCMP and the service providers—were asking after they made their decision as a government to stay where they were. I guess what I'm trying to pull out from this is how we create this change because so much of the onus feels like it's left in the indigenous communities' hands. You're supposed to let everybody know. What about the respectful relationship and how can we fix some of these issues?

Grand Chief Edward John: It has been endemic in our systems for the last 150 years. The Government of Canada, in exercising its jurisdictional head of power under 91(24), could have embarked on a trajectory that's completely different from where we are now. Instead, where we are now is what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded as its truth: cultural genocide. It was a perception that the knowledge of indigenous peoples was irrelevant to these things, that they weren't smart enough, that they didn't understand or have a philosophical or cultural base of who they are or where they come from.

When former prime minister Stephen Harper rose in the House and apologized, he said that they thought our ways were inferior and that they were wrong, and he apologized for that. I really think it's a perception. It's still out there in space. People think we don't have the wherewithal to make good decisions. The people think we're just drunks and people looking for handouts. There's an element in our society that thinks like that.

Thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process over these six years, together with the report and discussions in the House, there is a greater awareness of what is required to have greater successes, a reconciled relationship where we respect each other as equals.

The very best we can say about the 150 years is maybe that indifference was the best policy. Other than that, it was worse than that, right? Indifference leads to other difficult situations if left as it is. This Prime Minister has given us a very good example of what the tone should be, and he said that the most important relationship for him, as Prime Minister, and for this country, is the one with indigenous peoples. That's a very good tone that he has set.

Now we need to start taking those commitments made by this government and begin acting on them. With some of these, the review of the National Energy Board, for example, and the recommendations from CEAA, and Fisheries and Oceans, all of these, when we are involved in a process, the message we get on our side is that our reviews and thoughts are important and valid.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're moving to questioning from MP Harvey.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank you for being here with us today, Grand Chief John. Certainly, the testimony from Chief Alphonse and you today speaks for itself and is arguably some of the best testimony we've heard since we started this study, so thank you very much for making the journey to be here.

I want to start by touching on one of the beginning parts of your testimony. You talked about the challenges with the MOU as it stands, and you said that there were two or three sticking points you were concerned about, which was why the choice had been made not to sign at this time. Can you elaborate on what those concerns were?

Grand Chief Edward John: It was really about decision-making authorities and responses. For example, in this case, if you need support from the Government of Canada from Indigenous and Northern Affairs, this community is required to get some sort of authorization from Emergency Management B.C. We're asking why they don't just listen to the chief and the community council who say that they need their support. Why is it that you have to get Emergency Management B.C. to certify that there's a need here, and therefore, you're able to come into the community and provide the resources to it?

I'm really grateful for the regional director of INAC in Vancouver, Catherine Lappe. When she came to the community and saw what was happening, she said that they were going to help, that they were not going to ask for permission from Emergency Management or someone else, because they could see what was going on, and they were going to step in. If we needed a Caterpillar D8 to be brought in, they were going to do it, or if we needed tankers or some other equipment to help us deal with the fire, they would do it. They were not going to wait. They said that they would reimburse the community, and that if there were houses that burned down, they would help us rebuild.

The practical side of the MOU is what we were concerned about. We had met with the province as well, the lead for Emergency Management B.C., on this matter and expressed our concern. What we said to that individual was that Emergency Management and their respective offices in the province ought to be going into our communities and know who those community leaders are, who the chiefs are, and who the councillors are. They should make sure that they're operationally prepared. That didn't happen, so again we're making that recommendation.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Further to that, I want to touch on one of the points, the recommendations, that you had offered, I think you said, about support for evacuation resettlement, ensuring that people come back into the community. I was particularly interested when you talked about taking into account their dignity, health, and well-being.

Grand Chief Edward John: Yes.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Could you quickly elaborate on that point, first of all on the fact that, obviously, communities have dealt with this before? They have managed to pick up and move on after the incidents are over, so obviously the capacity is there to do that. Could you also elaborate on the importance of recognizing the capacity within the indigenous communities, given the proper resources, to not only look after the fire while it's ongoing, but also the recuperation process after?

The fact that you had to actually single out those three points, I think, is very reflective of how much work is left to be done.

Grand Chief Edward John: You know, here you have a situation, a wildfire. It's adjacent to your communities and you fear for your own safety. When there's a response to that concern.... As Chief Joe explained earlier, they came in and said that if we didn't move those children, they were going to come in through the ministry of children and families, and they were going to apprehend those kids and move them. That's the worst thing you could say to anyone.

A chief from Williams Lake Indian Band, Chief Ann Louie, said that in her community they saw the fires on the hill, just adjacent to their community. They were being told to evacuate, so they drove down the highway to get out of the way of the fire. They were stopped on the highway by a police officer and were told to turn back. Where were they going to go, you know?

I think there were a lot of shortcomings. I don't think they were ill-intentioned by any stretch, but sometimes, you know, when people in authority are not properly trained, they're going to make judgment calls on the spur of the moment that may not be very good ones.

● (1245)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: It's always important that we learn from our mistakes and we pick up those pieces and move on.

One thing I want to touch on—because I know I'm going to run out of time—is the conversation around capacity and bricks and mortar, the idea that indigenous communities need to have the ability within their communities to fight these fires, not only forest fires but also municipal fires within their communities, structure fires.

Grand Chief Edward John: I would like to see a paragraph put in the report that says that.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: What I want to say is that if you look at different levels of government—traditional municipal, federal, and provincial governments—it's always said that municipal government is by far the most efficient level of government because the decision-makers are also the people who are hands-on on the ground. They recognize when a decision needs to be made at the appropriate time. I think that's something that we need to take into consideration, that the chief and councils are there. They're living it on the ground every day, and we need to recognize the capacity that's there and move forward from that spot.

Grand Chief Edward John: Thank you for that. That's really, I think, an essential point, that municipal leaders, councillors, and mayors are treated with some respect, being as close as they are to the ground, as you put it. I think that is important. It's no disrespect to provincial members of the legislature or federal members of Parliament. It's just that there are different levels of government in this country.

Of course, in our case, we are there in our communities, as councillors, as chiefs. We are worried about the individuals and their safety and well-being. We're never going to put people in harm's way, and people think that we're going to make no decisions or foolish decisions that will impact our communities. We will never ever do that.

That's why the issue of dignity and well-being is important, because people are elders.... I mentioned two elders who were away from their own community, under evacuation orders, fully expecting that they would be back. Two of them died, one to the south of their community, and one, who was a good friend of mine, in Prince George. Their people are wondering what they are going to do now. They have to bring them home so that they can put them away in accordance with the tradition of the Secwepemc people, in this instance, from Esk'etemc.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning now goes to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, also.

Again, I keep watching these pictures and having a bit of déjà vu.

The piece that I'm struggling with a little is the whole memorandum partnership piece. I had the opportunity to visit in Manitoba when they were in the midst of some evacuations, where they didn't have that sort of relationship with the province. It was a Red Cross response.

I think I'm hearing you say that it's not perfect and we need to do some work in terms of what those agreements look like. I think a coordinated response with federal government, provincial government, first nations, and local government is the better option than some more isolated activity.

Is it just that the agreement needs a little massaging? As I say, I looked at what was happening in Manitoba, and I think things were a lot smoother when we had EMBC as part of the process.

● (1250)

Grand Chief Edward John: I know that your communities were impacted in a big way as well.

Let me put it this way. When I talked to the deputy minister for Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation British Columbia during the height of this and following, I said that we needed support in these communities. They were able to do what they could, but the province's authority stops right here at the reserve boundary, and in a lot of places and with all kinds of services.

What he told me that really struck me was that the non-aboriginal communities are provided with the resources to prepare emergency plans to provide them with the wherewithal to to respond to fires and disasters, but there's no support for first nation communities. How stark can that be? That's why we put this $200-million proposal together.

We need resources in our communities. We come as an afterthought in all of this. We will review that MOU with B.C., and B.C. has committed to doing it. INAC has committed to reviewing it, and we will work to attempt to find a better way to ensure that our communities are not left out of the picture. When the deputy minister confirmed that one point with me, I didn't realize how extensive the Government of British Columbia, and maybe even the national government....

I saw in the news a few days ago, a huge national commitment to infrastructure and funding for that. These are infrastructure issues that we have to deal with. We should ensure that all of our first nation communities, not just in British Columbia but right across the country, such as Manitoba with the flooding, or the Prairies with the fires—633 first nation communities—are in a place to be able to fend for themselves.

Yes, a coordinated approach is absolutely essential, working with your neighbouring communities, whether it's Kamloops or Williams Lake. They are essential. There are regional districts and regional councils as well. It's in our interest to work together in the face of disasters like this, because that fire shows no distinction to anybody.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Would it be fair to say that the ideal world would have the MOUs with tripartite signatures?

Grand Chief Edward John: It should be, yes, with the federal and provincial governments and first nations. We didn't have that in the case of the emergency management MOU.

I just found out yesterday that there was another agreement, the B. C. wildfire response agreement, with $2 million attached to it. I had never heard of it. That was the first time I heard of it, and I'm involved as deeply and widely across the province as anyone else on these issues. It came as a surprise to me that there was this agreement with a $2-million attachment to B.C. Wildfire, which generally has management for wildfire responses in the province.

The Chair: Thank you. We've run out of time.

We're moving our final questioning to MP Will Amos.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Grand Chief John, thank you, and I concur with my colleague that this has been fabulous testimony. The whole MOU aspect is a bit of an eye-opener.

You said earlier that the 203 communities would be looking for training, and I can see where that comes from. It comes from a desire to see a true nation-to-nation relationship established.

I'm not a civil servant, so I'm not sitting in that seat, but it seems to me that individualized community-by-community training is going to be very expensive. I wonder what you think is the most reasonable approach to achieving individualized, nation-to-nation-respecting training in the context of limited resources. Are there opportunities for centralized or subregional training? What would you recommend in that regard?

● (1255)

Grand Chief Edward John: Thank you. That's a very good question, Mr. Amos.

It's not just wildfire. Take my wife's community, for example, which is Musqueam. The City of Vancouver has developed around the territory of the peoples there. They have an agreement with the City of Vancouver for dealing with fires and other emergencies that may impact them, but say there's an earthquake—which is something that people say is imminent—and you have a tsunami, how are they going to respond? What preparedness plans do they have to deal with the peoples in that particular community? Is it the City of Vancouver's emergency plan that's going to kick in? Has anyone talked to the Musqueam people about what that plan looks like?

In a situation of wildfires, I don't think Musqueam's going to need any training with respect to wildfire management or response, but in my community in the central interior, the north, west and north of Prince George, the nearest town is 50 or 60 kilometres away. We have to do our own work. We can't expect, when there's a fire.... When you drive from my community or from the town to my community, just a small ways out of town is a sign saying, “This is the end of the fire protection zone.” That's it. Everybody over there, you're on your own, right?

We need to have the wherewithal to be able to respond with training, and I have to say that in my community we have a number of people who've stepped up, volunteered, and been trained. They've done a marvellous job. It's just that the supplies and equipment to respond—even to community emergency situations—need to be improved. It's old, decrepit equipment that could be upgraded. That's why I'm talking about the necessary infrastructure.

The call for $200 million over a period of four or five years is $50 million a year. That's for 203 first nations, so if you break it down, it might be $200,000 that could be used to help the communities be prepared, organized, and mindful.

As Ralph Goodale, Minister of Public Safety said, the first priority of every community is public safety. I completely agree with him. If you don't have public safety, there are many other things that will fall by the wayside.

Mr. William Amos: Very quickly, then, I would think there are opportunities for non-indigenous emergency preparedness and firefighting crews to learn from traditional knowledge. How do you think that kind of learning opportunity could be presented to non-indigenous communities in the context of a 203-community process of training?

Grand Chief Edward John: I'll give you an answer by way of a story from Chief Ron Ignace from Skeetchestn, just outside of Kamloops. He said he was surprised to find Australian firefighters coming into his territory to respond to a crisis situation. He said they were in the midst of preparing their own firefighters and were doing their ceremonies and prayers about their lands and the protection of their people. Our people were in prayer and smudging, he said, and to his surprise all those Australian firemen lined up and they were smudging too, just to show respect to the land.

I think we have to work together. We do. I think it's essential in the face of.... As I said, that fire doesn't know any colour. It doesn't know any boundaries. It's going to go where it's going to go. We can take measures to create safeguards, fireguards around the communities. We can take down the timber around the communities that could be fuel for the fire. Chief Joe, I flew into his community. They had created a wide fireguard around the entire perimeter of their village. Over to the front of their village was the Chilcotin River, which is a huge fireguard, but even that wasn't preventing the fire from jumping into the village area.

I want to thank this committee for undertaking this study, because I think it's really crucial that our national government take all necessary steps to ensure that the public safety that is so important to our community is respected and regarded, and that our communities are supported to ensure that we're able to take care of ourselves. I really call on the federal government, perhaps through this committee, to support this call for funding to come to our communities, because we do need it.

I did receive a letter from Minister Goodale. I wasn't discouraged by it, but I wasn't completely encouraged by it either, so maybe you can help.

● (1300)

The Chair: We'll try. We're going to produce a report that will go to all MPs and the government and we'll be expecting a response. Our hope is that this will move things forward.

Thank you very much for taking the time. I know it's quite a trip to come here from B.C., especially if you're in the northwest.

Meegwetch. Thank you for coming to speak to us.

Grand Chief Edward John: It's not only that. It's cold over here.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.