

# PREPARING OUR HOME FOR CLIMATE CHANGE CRISES



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Submission to the  
National Adaptation Strategy  
Public Consultation

## Background

“Preparing our Home” is a community-based resilience planning program. The program empowers Indigenous youth as emergency preparedness leaders in their communities. Founded in 2014, this global and national award-winning program has brought together participants from over 70 communities and delivered in-person programs to over 870 Indigenous youth in First Nations communities. For the past two pandemic years, over 1000 participants have joined virtual events through sharing circles and peer-led training.

In July 2022, program leaders, youth and Elders met through two online workshops to share their professional and community experiences for informing the National Adaptation Strategy (the Strategy). These conversations are summarized below, organized by the Strategy objectives.

As a collective, we are open to further conversations. Please be in touch for any questions or additional information.

Cover photo:

**“This is a painting of the sun and the moon. I was inspired by a solar eclipse while on one of my class trips. In the Nuu-chah-nulth language, the word Ahousaht means ‘people living with their backs to the land and mountains.’ The painting speaks to the importance of cycles, seasons and paying attention. Our people rely on the moon so we can keep an eye on the tides when it is best to harvest our seafood.”**

*- Ashiele Thomas, Ahousaht First Nation*

Prepared by Lilia Yumagulova, PhD, Program Director  
Preparing Our Home Program: <http://preparingourhome.ca/>  
Program email: [preparingourhome@gmail.com](mailto:preparingourhome@gmail.com)

# Introduction

The current Canadian disaster management system is designed for the needs of property owning, insured, middle class citizens. This is not the reality for many Canadians. The National Adaptation Strategy must account for deep inequities when it comes to capacity to adapt.

Indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted by disasters and climate change. These inequities are well-documented and are rooted in racist policies like the Indian Act that displaced Indigenous Peoples onto marginalized lands. These gaps are summarized in one of our earlier publications [Building Climate Resilience in First Nations Communities](#):

- First Nation communities on reserve are 33 times more likely to be evacuated due to wildfires and 18 times more likely to be evacuated due to any disaster than people living off-reserve, while fire-related fatalities are more than 10 times higher.
- The impacts of disaster displacement are further compounded by gaps in Indigenous communities' emergency management practices and lack of emergency hazard evacuation preparedness.
- Externally imposed emergency management practices can further deepen marginalization, trauma, and conflict within communities, exacerbating disaster impacts and pre-existing vulnerabilities while reinforcing the inequitable status quo of power relations that remove Indigenous participation and self-determination in disaster response and recovery.

Lack of capacity is one of the biggest issues faced by on-reserve communities. Currently, the capacity is not where the events happen at disproportionate rates in communities. Paid capacity lies outside of these spaces in the broader system such as federal and provincial agencies and industry, such as NGOs and consultants.

The current emergency management system by design is deeply colonial; it is designed based on command-and-control. It is not designed on reserves with capacities and communities in mind. Many communities have been in some ways forced to either subscribe to that methodology, or not be part of that broader space of connection.

**Action: The Strategy needs to address the new landscape of risk: overlapping, cascading and complex and marathon emergencies faced by communities due to climate change and other amplifying factors. Building place-based capacity in communities and preparing and uplifting youth for the challenging future ahead of us are key.**



*Preparing Our Home Photography workshop.  
Photo by Tressa Peters (Lil'wat Nation)*

## **Objective 1:**

### **Collecting and Using Information to Make Better Emergency Management Decisions**

#### **Priority action 1: Invest in relationship building prior to disasters.**

Every emergency in our communities highlights the acute need for better, more timely communication and information sharing. This is best accomplished if relationships are built between Rights Holders and stakeholders (e.g., local, regional, and provincial governments) prior to disaster. Disaster mitigation programs need to fund these relationships building processes which take time, resources, and capacity.

#### **Priority action 2: Centre on Indigenous Values to ensure Indigenous Data Sovereignty**

Indigenous Data sovereignty is critical when collecting data and information on climate change impacts in Indigenous communities. A data collection process that is based on Indigenous Values of respect and reciprocity is needed.

## **Objective 2:**

### **Communicating Climate-Related Disaster Risks and Strategies to Mitigate Them**

#### **Priority action 1: When communicating risks, the Strategy needs to invest in communications that work at the local level.**

**“Technology can help;  
technology can harm”**

*- Mary Maytwayashing, Zoongi Gabawi Ozawa Kinew Ikwe, Strong Standing Golden Eagle Woman, Lake Manitoba First Nation, Animosibeeng, Dog Creek.*

More technology is not a silver bullet when it comes to communications. In fact, there is an overreliance and addiction to technology that has been separating Indigenous youth from the land and Indigenous ways of life.

During evacuations, there is an overreliance on communicating through social media channels. This is not a medium that is accessible for many, such as Elders and younger generations that are not on certain social media platforms. Indigenous community media (such as Cree and English language radio stations in Stanley Mission, SK) are critical sources for community information. These outlets need to be funded and supported.

#### **Priority action 2:**

**The Strategy must centre the expertise of the community. Issues that are driving negative changes (such as resource extraction or deforestation) need to be fully accounted for when considering climate impacts. Much of climate planning is focused on climate science which lags behind changes observed at the local level.**

For example, in Montreal Lake Cree Nation, berries and medicines are essential for survival. Used in sweats and ceremonies, they are an offering to the Indigenous way of life. Saskatoon berries, cranberries, wild berries, as well as wild mint, rat root, etc. are used throughout the winter. Summer 2021 came as a big surprise as the peat moss that surrounds berry patches and promotes growth and nutrients was so brittle and dry that it could not do what it was intended to. Berry picking in the area was very scarce, there was no rain in the area all summer. Many people said berry season and berry picking was over long before it even started; those who went berry picking last year came back with next to nothing. As Rachel Steward shared, “2021 made our community realize the effects climate change is having on our way of life.” This loss is caused not only by climate change which fuels intense fires but excessive logging in the area.

**“Loggers north of us are becoming greedy and taking more than needed, what was once a beautiful road to travel is now like an open desert of nothingness, taking from the beauty of the land, but also stripping the nutrients from the ground around them after they leave.”**

### Objective 3:

## Coordinating Emergency Management and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Investments among Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations

### Priority action:

The Strategy needs to close the deep equity gaps in DRR investments in Indigenous communities by providing long-term funding to ensure their human, Inherent, and constitutional rights to safety.

Current funding models are insufficient to close the deep equity gaps in public safety, emergency management and disaster risk reduction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. A strategic sustained long-term investment is required to close these gaps based on community priorities in EM/DRR instead of those dictated in the funding application streams and programs.

Regarding disaster mitigation funding, Indigenous emergency management practitioner Dr. Emily Dicken, Director, North Shore Emergency Management, shared a specific example of how the Squamish Nation, whose territory spans different regional districts, can only apply for the Community Emergency Preparedness Fund (CEPF) in partnership with one of its neighbouring local authorities – even though the Nation’s territories border multiple jurisdictions. Due to the large geographic extent of the Squamish Nation territories, the multiple reserve lands experience unique and diverse hazards, with some of the reserve lands located in dense urban settings and others in remote rural areas. The policies established by the Union of BC Municipalities for the CEPF grants are a barrier to hazard mitigation and partnership building for communities like the Squamish Nation and provisions should be made for Indigenous communities whose territories and reserve lands cover large geographical spaces.



2022 berry picking season,  
Montreal Lake First Nation territories.  
Photo by Rachel Stewart

**Objective 4:**

**Improving  
Individuals’  
Capacity  
to Respond to  
Climate-Related  
Threats**

**Priority action 1:**

**The Strategy must have a strong focus on youth when developing the capacities of individuals, families and communities to respond to climate-related threats.**

Youth have inherited a dangerous present and potentially uninhabitable hostile future due to the greed and inaction of previous generations. The mental health impacts of this need to be considered seriously, not as an afterthought to programming.

Nearly every participant of the sharing circle stressed the drug overdose epidemic that is happening in their communities, especially among Indigenous youth. Disaster evacuations to unsafe places, warehousing people in gyms and motels, and separating families, open spaces for drug and substance use and violence that stays in communities long after evacuations are over. Having age-appropriate activities and youth- and child-friendly spaces as well as mental health workers available at evacuation sites is very important. There is evidence in communities that youth who did not feel safe inside emergency shelters, unable to sleep, started using crystal meth just to calm themselves down. Psychosis went up, and severe drug use stayed in the community.

**Priority action 2:**

**Keep families together throughout evacuations and displacement**

Emergency management practices that lead to family separation in disaster evacuation are especially harmful in Indigenous communities, amplifying the ongoing trauma of residential schools and the 60s scoop.

Within standard operating practices, Phase 1 evacuees include priority groups such as the elderly and people with health issues. This means that these people are evacuated first, and can result in grandparents being separated hundreds of kilometres apart from grandchildren in their care. This can create very unsafe spaces for youth on their own in big cities. There is recorded evidence of increased child apprehensions during/after evacuations. Donovan Parenteau, a youth from Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation, spoke of the need to adjust standard operating procedures in emergencies to accommodate family needs:

“We had 3 evacuations nearly simultaneously. All of them happened in phases: Phase 1 (pregnant women, women with really young children, people with health concerns for fires); while phases 2 or phase 3 are the larger numbers that tend to be the lowest risk. In 2021, 2 evacuations happened at the same time, and both went to the identified host site, which was the city of Thunder Bay. Thunder Bay filled up. They basically said that after phase one, our host sites are full. Our resources are tapped out. So subsequent evacuations have to go somewhere else.



“Subsequent host sites were identified, but that meant that essentially Phase 1 evacuees (Elders and high-risk patients from 2 different communities) were both evacuated to Thunder Bay, and then lower risk people from both of those communities were separated. So, there were cases where maybe you know grandma and grandpa and Mom, and the toddler were in Thunder Bay and then dad and the older children went to a different host site. These grandparents or parents could be residential school survivors, and they’re all affected by historical trauma, such as a separation of families, the 60s scoop, etc.

“Family separation put an additional mental stress on those people who were separated. Phase 3 evacuees were separated from everybody else (the young, healthy people). But they also were separated from care and supports and so having mental stresses of 1) not knowing if your home is safe, or if it’s burned down, or if somebody has broken into it, while you’re gone, because you’re gone for 6 weeks, and 2) mental stresses of being in a host city that’s not like where you’re from. All of those different contributing factors led to widespread alcohol consumption in the host city, and increased child apprehensions.

**“The separation of families is something that really should not happen in this case. Instead of having strict evacuations by risk phase, maybe it should be like a self-identified family units.”**

**Priority action 3:  
Ensure self-determination in  
evacuations**

Community leaders know the risks and needs faced by communities. This knowledge is often disrespected in disaster response and evacuations. Community-led evacuation plans can best support the needs of all community members.

The benefits of Indigenous-led self-determination in evacuation in communities was felt in Stanley Mission during the recent general evacuation compared to the chaos and traumatic experience of the 2015 evacuation. There were chartered buses, hotels, and meals organized through Saskatchewan First Nations Emergency Management in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross. Some improvements could include more training for front-line workers on working with evacuees.



*2022 Stanley Mission fires and evacuation.  
Photo by Sheena Charles*

## Objective 5:

### Integrated and Inclusive Emergency Management Planning

#### Priority action:

The Strategy needs to invest in trauma-informed approaches to emergency management planning

There is an acute need for a trauma-informed approach in emergency management. It must be recognized that present day disaster experiences for Indigenous Peoples are compounded by inter-generational and historical trauma. Most emergency management planning is driven from a hazards-based approach and framed through the use of hazard, risk and vulnerability assessments (HRVA), which tend to focus only on physical hazards. To fully understand the hazard and risk landscape in Indigenous communities, planning approaches must be framed within a trauma-informed lens and recognize colonialism as a historic and contemporary disaster.

As a result of positioning physical hazards within the compounding disaster landscape of colonialism, it more accurately reflects the deeply complex HRVA profile experienced within Indigenous communities. Positioning colonialism as an enduring disaster at the outset of community-based emergency management planning processes allows for planning to be grounded in a trauma-informed approach.



*Medicine in Grandfather's hands - Photo by Devin Naveau, Mattagami First Nation*

**“I feel like we’re always drowning in the river of events. We all know that to lighten the load or address the challenges, we need to swim upstream of these events.”**

**Priority action:  
The Strategy must work across federal agencies to create a streamlined funding application process that responds to the needs of communities.**

There are many barriers faced by communities in accessing disaster mitigation funding which is ad-hoc, competitive, short-term, and administratively burdensome. Over the years, there have been efforts made to improve this by creating specific streams, offering multi-year funding agreements, increasing stacking ratios, providing advance payments, and creating liaison positions, but many challenges remain.

Some communities simply do not have staff or time to apply for mitigation programs as they are constantly fighting a crisis. Expanding emergency mitigation and prevention programming is acutely needed, yet it is a luxury that is not available to many communities.

Climate change is affecting Indigenous communities’ ability to be prepared for daily emergencies and catastrophic events. For example, as Sheri Lysons, Fire Chief, Adams Lake Indian Band, shared, normally there was a spot by the lake where the department could drive their fire truck to and draft out of the lake. Due to high water this year, that’s one of the practices they are not able to do.

There needs to be flexibility in the funding process because changes are happening on the ground that cannot be foreseen or accounted for prior to their occurrence. Communities need to have the ability to respond quickly with solutions to unforeseen changes, which is not possible under funding structures that are project specific with narrowly defined outcomes.

## **Objective 6:**

### **Expanding Emergency Mitigation and Prevention Programming**



*Darlene Munro, a Preparing Our Home Advisory Circle member and past director of the Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre shared these photos of flooded homes in 2013 (top) and her mother’s house (bottom) in Siksika Nation, Alberta, in 2018.*

*The Nation declared a State of Local Emergency of April 16th 2018, due to overland flooding.*



## Objective 7:

### Reducing the Number of Canadians Exposed to Climate Related Hazards

#### Priority action:

The Strategy must invest in bringing back a culture of preparedness in Indigenous communities, a culture that was taken away through colonization.

**“We need to have more activities for our kids. I want to start a junior fire department, for kids between 12 to 16 years old. They get to learn that kind of brotherhood that the fire department has. They get to learn some health things; they get to take part in the activities that we do. It also gives them that sense of camaraderie and the somebody that holds them accountable, if these kids start using.”**

*- Sheri Lysons, Fire Chief, Adams Lake Indian Band*



*Sheri Lysons, Fire Chief, Adams Lake Indian Band with her daughter and grandson*

For reducing the numbers of Canadians exposed to climate change-related hazards and building personal resilience, building the culture of preparedness needs to start early through K-12.

Examples such as culture camps, Canoe families and Tribal Canoe Journeys offer culturally safe places for youth. These activities need sustained funding as reclaiming and re-building a culture of preparedness, a value that has been traditionally held in Indigenous communities prior to colonization, will take time. The importance of volunteering, helping out and assisting the community needs to be reclaimed.



*Indigenous youth connect through land-based learning at the Preparing Our Home gathering.  
Photo by Lilia Yumagulova*





Emergency Preparedness at Xetóclacw Community School, Lil'wat Nation  
 Photo by Lilia Yumagulova - Preparing Our Home

Casey Gabriel, a member of the Lil'wat Nation, a member of the Volunteer Fire Department, a member of the Nation's Emergency Response Team and a volunteer at large in his community, shared an example of an Indigenous Community Resilience Curriculum at the Xetóclacw Community School, Lil'wat Nation.

Drawing on Traditional Knowledge, this global award-winning program combines youth-led hazard mapping, asset mapping, photography, firefighting, and lifesaving skills to enable preparedness at the individual, household and community levels. Learn more about this program here: <http://preparingourhome.ca/event/casey-gabriel-lilwat-nation/>

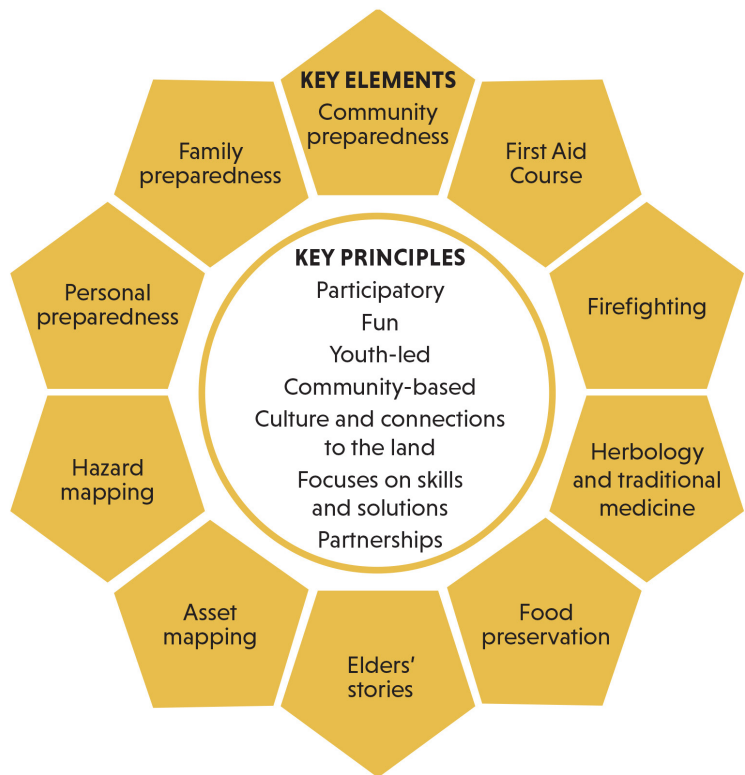


Figure 1  
 Key elements of the Community Resilience Curriculum at the Xetóclacw Community School, Lil'wat Nation

## Objective 8:

### Rebuilding and Restoring Livelihoods After a Disaster

#### Priority action:

**The Strategy must acknowledge and reduce the disproportionate long-term displacement that Indigenous communities have been facing due to colonization and disasters, a displacement that is exacerbated by climate change.**

Indigenous communities are faced with centuries of displacement due to forced removal onto hazardous lands under the Indian Act. This results in disproportionate levels of disaster evacuations and long-term displacement.

Experiences in our communities show that not all people will recover from disasters. Examples in Manitoba communities show that people can be displaced for over 10 years. Babies have been born in hotels without access to an Indigenous way of life. It's been a long 9 years for some people in Siksika Nation that are still unable to return home. Entire ways of life can be lost in disaster. Elders have passed away, waiting to return. This means that investing in disaster mitigation is central for keeping people safe and for cultural continuity.

When led by Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous Peoples, the very difficult, traumatic, and long recovery process can be eased. We leave you with this best practice case study written by Waylon Black of Siksika Nation.

*2013 floods in Siksika*

*Photo provided by Darlene Yellow Old Woman-Munro*



In June 2013, a massive flood displaced hundreds of Siksika Nation members and left them homeless in a matter of hours. People of all age ranges from Elders down to children were left with no place to go. Many lived in tents for months at a time, or in RV's or with family. As the days and weeks progressed, one dedicated volunteer, and a flood evacuee herself, Darlene Munro, met with the senior leadership of the Siksika Family Services Corp. to lay the foundation of a specialized multi-disciplinary team consisting of nurses, social workers, youth workers, therapists, managers, addictions counsellors etc. to form the first of its kind Psycho-Social Disaster Response Team.



*ATCO trailers for evacuees.  
Photo by DDDRC*

This unique and dynamic team set to work immediately, driving out in pairs to personally visit and conduct needs assessments and assess the mental and physical health of the flood evacuees. It was quickly determined that the flood evacuees were in a state of mental health crisis. In the following weeks, the team proved to be successful as the flood evacuees began to rely on them for effective communication, advocacy, and prompt responses of the team members in responding to concerns, requests for aid and general support. The Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre was officially named, and the psycho-social model remains unparalleled to this day. As summer turned to fall, with winter fast approaching, it was no longer feasible for flood evacuees to remain housed in tents and RV's. Mrs. Munro, the team's Manager, commenced negotiations with the Province of Alberta and Alberta Health Services for funding to continue the Dancing



Deer Disaster Recovery Centre programs as well as provide interim housing for the displaced families. Soon afterwards, two communities of ATCO trailers were provided as living accommodations to families, with breakfasts, lunches and suppers provided for the flood evacuees. Elders and persons with disabilities were moved into hotel sites in the neighbouring communities of Strathmore and Calgary.

Over the course of the following months, Dancing Deer team members continued to visit and talk with flood evacuees on a weekly basis. During these times, the centre was operating 7 days a week with on-call staff after hours and Mrs. Munro and her Assistant Manager Waylon Black answering calls, 24 hours a day, including many late-night calls. It was the policy of this team that every call was answered no matter the time of day and that all requests were responded to and resolved in a one-hour period.

The following spring, families were still displaced and although Dancing Deer had begun weekly activities for children and youth at each ATCO site, as well as Elder Activities at Hotel sites, it was clear that more needed to be done. Once again, Mrs. Munro was at the negotiating table with the Province of Alberta and Alberta Health Services. This time, she obtained funding to create a larger team, spearheaded by Dancing Deer, but including Siksika Health Services, Siksika Parks and Recreation and Siksika Board of Education, inserting additional staff and funding into these areas.

*Creating safe spaces - Displaced Siksika children play at temporary housing ATCO trailers.  
Photo supplied by DDDRC*



Due to the early intervention and responsiveness of the Dancing Deer Psychosocial programs, it was noted in a letter of support from the Manager of Siksika Children's Services that apprehensions and the need for their intervention into homes was at an all-time low, thanks to the hard work of the Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre.

Nine years later, post-traumatic stress still lingers in those affected by the flood. There is always an abject fear in many when the rains begin to fall in June. Many of our Elders died in the long years waiting for their homes to be rebuilt. In the years following the cessation of funding and ultimate closure of the Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre, many of the traumatised flood evacuees, no longer having the psychosocial support that they needed, turned to addictions to cope with the pain of their PTSD and ultimately succumbed to their addictions.

**Lessons learned from the Flood of 2013 indicate a strong need for the continuance of psychosocial programs and teams such as the Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre. It is not conducive to the mental health and physical health of traumatized people to develop a support system such as this and then have it abruptly removed from their lives.**



*Dancing Deer Disaster Recovery Centre staff.  
Photo supplied by Darlene Yellow Old Woman-Munro.*



*Land Based Learning at the national gathering, Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, Osoyoos Indian Band  
Photo by Melody Charlie for Preparing Our Home 2019*