



Dene National / Assembly of First Nations Office (NWT)

5120- 49th Street
P.O. Box 2338
Yellowknife, NT, X1A 2P7

Phone: (867) 873-4081
Fax: (867) 920-2254
Toll Free: 1-866-511-4081

Website: www.denenation.ca



February 13th, 2024

Via Email - Margaret_Thom@gov.nt.ca

Office of the Commissioner of the NWT
P.O. Box 1320
803 Northwest Tower
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Madam Commissioner,

The Dene Nation requests you to initiate a full independent inquiry into the 2023 emergency management and response to the wildfires in the NWT subject to the *Public Inquiries Act R.S NWT 1988, c.P-14*.

The NWT has experienced an unprecedented year, with approximately 70% of the population evacuating to northern communities or western Canadian destinations as far as 2,700 kilometres away. A declared state of emergency affected 14 communities evacuated throughout the summer, including Wekweètì, Behchoko, Smith's Landing First Nation, Salt River First Nation, Fort Smith, K'atl'odeeche First Nation, West Point First Nation, Hay River, Kakisa, Jean Marie River, Enterprise, Ndilq, Dettah and Yellowknife.

Most evacuees were relocated and displaced to unknown locations with unfamiliar surroundings for several weeks. The community of Enterprise was almost completely destroyed, with only a few buildings left standing and residents now trying to cope with winter accommodations and living. The communities of West Point First Nation, K'atl'odeeche First Nation and Hay River were evacuated twice in three months.

A communications blackout because of the wildfires and the evacuation of Yellowknife and other communities prevented the Government of the Northwest Territories from properly informing the Kakisa community to evacuate. Chief Lloyd Chicot and his community members learned about the evacuation order days later when they read the GNWT post on social media (Facebook).

All communities in the NWT were affected in different ways. While Inuvik was under an evacuation notice, they hosted the community evacuees from Old Crow (Yukon) until they flew to Whitehorse. Fort Simpson welcomed approximately 200 evacuees from surrounding communities. The demand for basic needs strained local resources and food supplies as travel in and out of Fort Simpson was limited. Fort Providence also had approximately 150 evacuees who waited out the fires. The community provided care and support with the available resources that they had. After being evacuated, Behchoko also embraced many evacuees fleeing to the south. They voiced their concerns about the limitations this posed on their community.

The community of Tulita flew three planeloads of elders, those with medical conditions, children, and babies to Délı̄ne, while others travelled by boat. They remained in Délı̄ne for three weeks to flee the intense smoke conditions at the expense of those Sahtu communities—the community of Tulita, surrounded by fires that no one was fighting.

Łutsel K'e, Gameti, Whatì and Wekweètì' had to order food and other necessities on chartered planes from Edmonton at an enormous cost due to Yellowknife's evacuation order. Fort Resolution residents refused to evacuate because, according to their monitoring and vigilance, they were safe to remain there. They also knew evacuation centres were already at capacity, and staying in their home community was best.

Yellowknife had continuous heavy smoke from the wildfires for approximately 900 hours, affecting everyone, especially elders, people with asthma, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), pregnant women and children over a month of constantly breathing air with sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and other toxic chemicals. Hunters and trappers from our communities tell us that their cabins burned down. They feel that the government viewed their traplines as not a priority and did not do enough to fight the wildfires to protect the sites.

When an emergency is in place, multiple jurisdictions overlap and have to coordinate their efforts to prepare, manage and respond accordingly; this includes the Dene National office, First Nations, the Federal Government, GNWT, municipalities, and National Parks. The process means Chiefs, the Premier, Ministers, Mayors, and Park Wardens must communicate and be on the same page. They work in collaboration with some of the following: RCMP, the Emergency Management Office, the Canadian Rangers, Joint Task Force North (JTFN), the Canadian Military, the Canadian Coast Guard, Parks Canada, and the Canadian Red Cross.

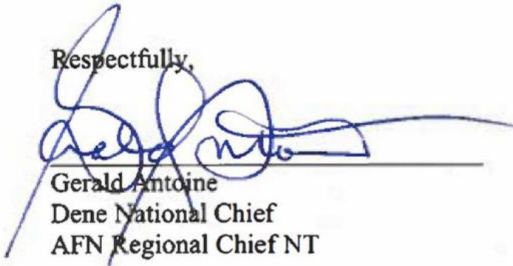
There is an obligation to provide a forum for the affected Treaty 11 and Treaty 8 members of the NWT to share and provide the impacts of the 2023 Wildfire catastrophe to the current governing bodies. Dene Nation is obliged to advocate for these engagements and facilitate furthering the discussions as per our mandate.

The current NWT legislation, “The Emergency Management Act,” that guides emergency management and response is largely silent on the role and authority of First Nations in an emergency except for a brief mention of “on reserve” communities. The current legislation must reflect that in a crisis, First Nations citizens go to their Chiefs and Council for leadership rather than the Mayor and Council, who are technically in charge and responsible for their safety and well-being. We insist that the Commissioner’s office uphold the Crown’s obligation to the Dene and support the request from leaders to have a full independent inquiry.

Residents of the NWT need the opportunity to express their views. To talk about their experiences from this summer and hear from others to prepare for the coming years. The climate catastrophe is upon us and will only get worse. We must prepare to respond to ensure our communities have the maximum participation, protection, and care.

We included letters of support, correspondence, press releases and news articles relevant to the request for the full independent inquiry into the 2023 emergency management and response to the wildfires in the NWT.

Respectfully,



Gerald Antoine
Dene National Chief
AFN Regional Chief NT

CC's

Dene Leadership
Governor General Mary Simon
The Right Honorable Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau
The Honorable Harjit S. Sajjan - Minister of Emergency Preparedness
Honorable Premier of the Northwest Territories RJ Simpson
Leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) Jagmeet Singh
Michael V. McLeod, M.P. Northwest Territories

“Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation”



CITY OF YELLOWKNIFE
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

November 1, 2023

Chief Gerald Antoine
Dene Nation
5120-49th St
Yellowknife, NT

Dear Chief Antoine,

On behalf of the City of Yellowknife, this letter is confirming our support that the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) complete a public review of the 2023 wildfire season by a third party.

As per the GNWT's Emergency Plan: *"It is critical that when evacuation operations are completed, there is a full accounting of the operation. This requires an after-action review and financial reporting."*¹

An after-action review is a structured review process for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better by those involved in an emergency exercise or event in the future. As the GNWT notes in their Emergency Plan, this is a critical step to complete now, and the public needs to be part of the process.

Whether this is completed through a public inquiry or by an experienced third-party consultant, it's important that the public is engaged; that it's completed by a third-party; and that recommendations for improvements are included in the final report and made public.

Should you have any questions or comments regarding this letter, please feel free to contact me by email: mayor@yellowknife.ca or by phone: (867) 920-5693.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Alty
Mayor

DM#721418v43

¹ Page 20: https://www.maca.gov.nt.ca/sites/maca/files/resources/nwt_emergency_plan.pdf



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Yellowknife, NT, X1A 2P7 Toll Free: 1-866-511-4081 Website: www.denenation.ca

November 3rd, 2023

Letter of Support – Public Inquiry

We support an independent public inquiry into the 2023 wildfires in the NWT. Our community of Tulita and surrounding area experienced many fires this summer which impacted our People. Cabins and traplines burned down which we depend on.

We had to send elders, children, babies and those with medical conditions to Deline for almost 3 weeks to avoid the heavy smoke situation. The community of Tulita covered those expenses to protect the safety of its residents. The community of Deline welcomed our People to their community and provided housing, food and care at their own expense. There was no State of Emergency called in our area so we are not being assisted to cover costs.

It is important that we talk about this and have input in a full discussion on fires into the future. We believe this summer's events will repeat itself and we must be prepared. We also want to talk about the priority zones for fires.

Our cabins and traplines must be protected and the fires need to be fought and put out.

We look forward to participating in a full independent public inquiry.

Sincerely,

Chief David Etchinelle
Begade Shotagotine First Nation



Łíídlíí Kúé First Nation

P.O. Box 469, Fort Simpson, NT X0E 0N0

Phone: 867-695-3131

Fax: 867-695-2665

November 23, 2023

Dene Nation
P.O. Box 2338
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P7

Subject: Support for Independent Public Inquiry into 2023 Wildfire Response and Management

Dear Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine,

I trust this letter finds you well. On behalf of the Łíídlíí Kúé First Nation, I am writing to express our full support for the call for an independent public inquiry into the response and management of the wildfires that occurred in the Northwest Territories in 2023. The impacts of these wildfires have been significant, affecting numerous communities, and it is crucial that we thoroughly examine the actions taken to manage and respond to this crisis.

Our community, Łíídlíí Kúé/Fort Simpson, was fortunate enough to avoid the direct devastation of the forest fires. However, we experienced the challenges of hosting evacuees and endured severe smoke issues that impacted the health and well-being of our residents. Furthermore, the disruption caused by the wildfires affected our services, which are currently headquartered in Yellowknife and Hay River.

The need for serious intervention and comprehensive planning for communities like ours is evident. While we were spared the immediate threat of the fires, the secondary effects on air quality, community infrastructure, and service provision were profound. The influx of evacuees placed strains on our resources, and the prolonged smoke exposure posed health risks to our community members.

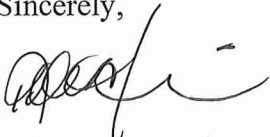
We believe that a comprehensive and independent public inquiry will shed light on the shortcomings and successes of the wildfire response in 2023. It is essential to identify areas where improvements can be made, ensuring that communities are better equipped to handle similar crises in the future.

Moreover, we urge the Dene Nation to advocate for specific considerations and planning for communities that, like Łíídlíí Kúé/Fort Simpson, may not be directly impacted by the fires but face substantial challenges due to their role as host communities and the adverse effects of smoke pollution.

We appreciate the Dene Nation's commitment to the well-being of our communities and trust that your influence will be instrumental in advocating for the necessary resources, policies, and interventions to mitigate the impact of wildfires on all Dene communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your continued leadership in addressing the aftermath of the 2023 wildfires.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kele Antoine', written over a horizontal line.

Chief Kele Antoine
Łíídlíí Kúé First Nation
Box 469, Fort Simpson, NT
X0E 0N0
Tel : (867) 695-3131
Fax : (867) 695-2665
Email : chief@liidliikue.com



Yellowknives Dene First Nation

P.O. Box 2514

Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P8

Dettah

Telephone: (867) 873-4307

Facsimile: (867) 873-5969

Ndilo

Telephone: (867) 873-8951

Facsimile: (867) 873-8545

November 23, 2023

To Whom It May Concern,

We the Yellowknives Dene First Nation fully support the Dene Nation request for an independent public inquiry into the response and management of the 2023 wildfires in the NWT.

Yellowknives Dene First Nation communities of Ndilo and Dettah were ordered to evacuate after the state of emergency was called. Approximately 1,000 of our citizens including women, children and elders had to relocate and stay in other communities including, Behchoko, Ft Providence, High Level, Grande Prairie, Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg. Some of our People travelled by vehicles while others flew to distant locations.

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation paid at their own expense for gasoline, hotel rooms, meals and other costs to assist those who had to evacuate.

We welcome a full independent public inquiry to discuss all aspects of the experience we went through. We also know that we can learn from hearing the concerns and experiences of others regarding emergency preparedness and responding to the wildfires this summer.

Sincerely

Chief Ernest Betsina
Yellowknives Dene First Nation, Dettah

Chief Fred Sangris
Yellowknives Dene First Nation, Ndilo

From: [Richard Edjericon](#)
To: [Robert Hawkins](#); [Kieron Testart](#); [Zabey Nevitt](#); [Sheryl Yakeleya](#); [Julian Morse](#); [Kate Reid](#); [RJ Simpson MLA](#); [Vince McKay](#); [Denny Rodgers](#); [Lesa Semmler](#); [Caitlin Cleveland](#); [George Nerysoo](#); [Jane Weyallon Armstrong](#); [Shane Thompson MLA](#); [Lucy Kuptana MLA](#); [Daniel McNeely](#); [Jay Macdonald](#); [Shauna Morgan](#); [Caroline Wawzonek](#)
Cc: [Joe Dragon](#); [Itoah Scott-Enns](#); [Shawn McCann](#); [Bertha Rabesca Zoe](#); [John MacDonald](#)
Subject: RE: Tlicho Government Support for Public Inquiry
Date: February 9, 2024 7:51:00 AM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)

Mr. Nevitt

Thank you for your correspondence to call for a independent public inquiry into the 2023 fire season.

All the best.

Richard Edjericon

From: Robert Hawkins <Robert_Hawkins@ntassembly.ca>
Sent: Thursday, February 8, 2024 7:39 PM
To: Kieron Testart <Kieron_Testart@ntassembly.ca>; Zabey Nevitt <Zabey.Nevitt@tlicho.ca>; Sheryl Yakeleya <Sheryl_Yakeleya@ntassembly.ca>; Julian Morse <Julian_Morse@ntassembly.ca>; Kate Reid <Kate_Reid@ntassembly.ca>; RJ Simpson MLA <RJ_Simpson@ntassembly.ca>; Vince McKay <Vince_McKay@gov.nt.ca>; Denny Rodgers <Denny_Rodgers@ntassembly.ca>; Lesa Semmler <Lesa_Semmler@gov.nt.ca>; Caitlin Cleveland <Caitlin_Cleveland@gov.nt.ca>; George Nerysoo <George_Nerysoo@ntassembly.ca>; Jane Weyallon Armstrong <Jane_WeyallonArmstrong@ntassembly.ca>; Shane Thompson MLA <Shane_Thompson@ntassembly.ca>; Lucy Kuptana MLA <Lucy_Kuptana@ntassembly.ca>; Daniel McNeely <Daniel_McNeely@ntassembly.ca>; Jay Macdonald <Jay_Macdonald@gov.nt.ca>; Richard Edjericon <Richard_Edjericon@ntassembly.ca>; Shauna Morgan <Shauna_Morgan@ntassembly.ca>; Caroline Wawzonek <Caroline_Wawzonek@gov.nt.ca>
Cc: Joe Dragon <Joe_Dragon@gov.nt.ca>; Itoah Scott-Enns <itoah.scottenns@tlicho.ca>; Shawn McCann <Shawn_McCann@gov.nt.ca>; Bertha Rabesca Zoe <bertha.rabescazoe@tlicho.ca>; John MacDonald <John_MacDonald@gov.nt.ca>
Subject: RE: Tlicho Government Support for Public Inquiry

Thank you Zabey, by way of a quick follow up as well.

From what I understand and hear, I believe Primer Simpson will be a great partner on this initiative, which we all really appreciate.

Robert.

From: Kieron Testart <Kieron_Testart@ntassembly.ca>
Sent: Thursday, February 8, 2024 7:28 PM

To: Zabey Nevitt <Zabey.Nevitt@tlicho.ca>; Sheryl Yakeleya <Sheryl_Yakeleya@ntassembly.ca>; Julian Morse <Julian_Morse@ntassembly.ca>; Kate Reid <Kate_Reid@ntassembly.ca>; RJ Simpson MLA <RJ_Simpson@ntassembly.ca>; Vince McKay <Vince_McKay@gov.nt.ca>; Denny Rodgers <Denny_Rodgers@ntassembly.ca>; Lesa Semmler <Lesa_Semmler@gov.nt.ca>; Caitlin Cleveland <Caitlin_Cleveland@gov.nt.ca>; George Nerysoo <George_Nerysoo@ntassembly.ca>; Jane Weyallon Armstrong <Jane_WeyallonArmstrong@ntassembly.ca>; Shane Thompson MLA <Shane_Thompson@ntassembly.ca>; Lucy Kuptana MLA <Lucy_Kuptana@ntassembly.ca>; Daniel McNeely <Daniel_McNeely@ntassembly.ca>; Jay Macdonald <Jay_Macdonald@gov.nt.ca>; Richard Edjericon <Richard_Edjericon@ntassembly.ca>; Robert Hawkins <Robert_Hawkins@ntassembly.ca>; Shauna Morgan <Shauna_Morgan@ntassembly.ca>; Caroline Wawzonek <Caroline_Wawzonek@gov.nt.ca>

Cc: Joe Dragon <Joe_Dragon@gov.nt.ca>; Itoah Scott-Enns <itoah.scottenns@tlicho.ca>; Shawn McCann <Shawn_McCann@gov.nt.ca>; Bertha Rabesca Zoe <bertha.rabescazoe@tlicho.ca>; John MacDonald <John_MacDonald@gov.nt.ca>

Subject: RE: Tlicho Government Support for Public Inquiry

Importance: High

Dear Mr. Nevitt,

Thank you for correspondence with respect to the public inquiry. I have spoken to Grand Chief Lafferty and understand the concerns of the Tłı̨ch̓ Government, in addition to those shared by others among the Council of Leaders.

I can assure you that I, and my colleague Ms. Yakeleya, are attuned to the importance of reconciliation and inclusion of Indigenous Nations in our parliamentary processes. The failure to include the Indigenous partners was an oversight on my part as the drafter of the motion, one that will be corrected during our proceedings tomorrow.

Motions to amend the motion will be moved that will:

- a. Reduce the total number of persons appointed to the Board of Inquiry from four to three; AOC and the Executive Council will only appoint one person to the board, respectively;
- b. Provide for the Council of Leaders to make recommendations to the Commissioner for the appointment of one person to be appointed to the board;
and,
- c. Require that the Inquiry Establishment Order be collaboratively developed between the Executive Council, AOC and Council of Leaders.

Any specific terms for information sharing and reporting can be determined through the collaborative process between the parties that will develop the Inquiry Establishment Order.

As my Cabinet colleagues are copied on this correspondence, I will consider this response to you notice to the Executive Council on these proposed changes.

I hope that these proposed amendments alleviate the concerns of the Tłı̨chǫ Government and allow us to move forward with Tłı̨chǫ support. I also wish to express my sincere apologies to Grand Chief Lafferty and the Tłı̨chǫ people for this oversight. I further offer my personal assurance that this will not happen again with respect to legislative initiatives that I bring forward to the House.

Sincerely,

Mársı | Kinanāskomitin | Thank you | Merci | Hą́' | Quana | Qujannamiik | Quyanainni | Máhsı | Máhsı | Mahsi

Kieron Testart

Member / Député, Range Lake

Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Assemblée législative des Territoires du Nord-Ouest

Pronouns / pronoms: He | Il

Phone / Tél. : (867) 767-9143, ext. 12150

Fax / Téléc. : (867) 873-0276

Mobile / cellu. : (867) 444-8716

PO Box 1320 / C.P. 1320 | Yellowknife NT | X1A 2L9

NTASSEMBLY.CA

From: Zabey Nevitt <Zabey.Nevitt@tlicho.ca>

Sent: Thursday, February 8, 2024 3:21 PM

To: Sheryl Yakeleya <Sheryl_Yakeleya@ntassembly.ca>; Julian Morse

<Julian_Morse@ntassembly.ca>; Kate Reid <Kate_Reid@ntassembly.ca>; RJ Simpson MLA

<RJ_Simpson@ntassembly.ca>; Vince McKay <Vince_McKay@gov.nt.ca>; Denny Rodgers

<Denny_Rodgers@ntassembly.ca>; Lesa Semmler <Lesa_Semmler@gov.nt.ca>; Caitlin Cleveland

<Caitlin_Cleveland@gov.nt.ca>; George Nerysoo <George_Nerysoo@ntassembly.ca>; Jane Weyallon

Armstrong <Jane_WeyallonArmstrong@ntassembly.ca>; Shane Thompson MLA

<Shane_Thompson@ntassembly.ca>; Lucy Kuptana MLA <Lucy_Kuptana@ntassembly.ca>; Kieron

Testart <Kieron_Testart@ntassembly.ca>; Daniel McNeely <Daniel_McNeely@ntassembly.ca>; Jay

Macdonald <Jay_Macdonald@gov.nt.ca>; Richard Edjericon <Richard_Edjericon@ntassembly.ca>;

Robert Hawkins <Robert_Hawkins@ntassembly.ca>; Shauna Morgan

<Shauna_Morgan@ntassembly.ca>; Caroline_wazonek@ntassembly.ca

Cc: Joe Dragon <Joe_Dragon@gov.nt.ca>; Itoah Scott-Enns <itoah.scottenns@tlicho.ca>; Shawn

McCann <Shawn_McCann@gov.nt.ca>; Bertha Rabesca Zoe <bertha.rabescazoe@tlicho.ca>; John

MacDonald <John_MacDonald@gov.nt.ca>

Subject: Tlicho Government Support for Public Inquiry

EXTERNAL: This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender's name and email address and know the content is safe.

Please see attached – sent on behalf of Tłı̨chǫ Government Chiefs Executive Council.

Tłıchq Government supports a public inquiry into the 2023 wildfire season.

This review must be fully collaborative and include Indigenous Government participation in all elements of the process including the selection of panel members, development of the terms of reference, sharing of information and reporting back to Indigenous Governments.

The 2023 wildfire season created a huge crisis for Tłıchq Citizens in all four Tłıchq communities and in Yellowknife. The crisis was magnified by a lack of coordination between the GNWT and Indigenous Governments.

Tłıchq Government has previously shared this position with the NWT Council of Leaders and the members of the 20th Legislative Assembly that there is a need for a full independent review of the wildfire response, evacuation process and operations of the Emergency Management Organization. We believe that only a fully independent, inclusive and transparent process can identify all the necessary issues and make recommendations for change.

Tłıchq Government supports the motion of MLA Testart, seconded by MLA Yakeleya with the amendment to include Indigenous Government representation as full partners in the review process.



Zabey Nevitt

Sr, Advisor

p: [867-445-9959](tel:867-445-9959)

f: 867-766-3441

e: Zabey.Nevitt@tliche.ca

4308 50th Ave, Yellowknife, NT, X1A 1B5

www.tliche.ca

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NORTHWEST TERRITORY MÉTIS NATION

Annual General Assembly
Hay River, NT
November 21 - 24, 2023

Resolution #2

Government of the Northwest Territories Wildfire Inquiry

WHEREAS:

- A. This summer was an unprecedented year for wildfires and evacuations in the NWT with more than four million hectares of NWT forest burned;
- B. Residents of the NWT have expressed concern about the manner in which the evacuations were carried out;
- C. Leaders and residents are calling for a public inquiry into the NWT wildfire response that will identify the lessons learned and how to prepare for next spring and into the future;
- D. With respect to the response to the wildfires, leading to evacuations, a comprehensive *After Action Review* (“AAR”) should be completed by an independent, third party;
- E. An independent AAR would include the confidential gathering of information through document reviews and interviews;
- F. The purpose of an independent AAR is not to assign blame or faults but to identify “lessons learnt” so as to be better prepared for future events;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

1. The NWTMN calls upon the Government of the Northwest Territories to conduct an *After Action Review* and include a representative of the Northwest Territory Métis Nation to conduct an investigation; and
2. The objective of the *After Action Review* will be to document the event, analyze outcomes and recommend changes and updates to existing plans and processes to improve and ensure appropriate preparedness, response and recovery strategies. GNWT requires quality information to guide future decisions on emergency management policies and programs.

BOX 720 • FORT SMITH, NT CANADA • X0E 0P0
PHONE: (867) 872-2770 • FAX: (867) 872-2772

MOVED BY: Trevor Beck

SECONDED BY: Dwayne Klause

DISPOSITION: Carried



Dene National / Assembly of First Nations Office (NWT)

5120- 49th Street
P.O. Box 2338
Yellowknife, NT, X1A 2P7

Phone: (867) 873-4081
Fax: (867) 920-2254

Toll-Free: 1-866-511-4081
Website: www.denenation.ca
Email: admin@denenation.com



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 25th, 2023 – Yellowknife, Denendeh

The Legislative Assembly must only deal with the evacuation of wildfires and delaying the upcoming Territorial election

It has come to the attention of the Dene Nation through the media that the legislative Assembly will be convening in Inuvik, NT on August 28th, 2023 (next Monday).

It is expected that they will pass legislation to delay the upcoming Territorial election as recommended by the Chief electoral officer and authorize emergency spending for the wildfires. There is also speculation that the 19th Assembly will be recalled to meet in late September to conclude other outstanding business. They were scheduled to meet earlier this month but were postponed due to the many evacuations.

The Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine stated that “the safety, protection and well-being of our people is the greatest priority, therefore we can see that it is necessary to convene the Legislative Assembly to deal with emergency funding related to the cause of the wildfire. In addition the discussion on delaying the territorial election should also take place. However, approving the Legislative Assembly to sit and deal with other issues so late in their terms is not essential.”

He went on to say “as leaders we need to focus on the safety and care of the 11 evacuated communities including, Ft. Smith, Salt River First Nation, Smiths Landing First Nation, Hay River, West Point First Nation, K'at'l'odeeche Dene Reserve, Kakisa, Enterprise, Ndilo, Dettah and Yellowknife. We also have Behchoko and Jean Marie River who are still returning to their communities.”

“We have thousands of evacuees totalling more than 60% of our population scattered across the Northwest Territories, Alberta, British Columbia and Manitoba centres. There is great anxiety and concern in the minds of our people and their families who have been impacted. The safety and care of these people has to be our top priority. If proposed legislation has to die on the order papers, then so be it.”

Over the years, legislation has not passed for many reasons and the next legislative Assembly deals with these issues. “The Dene Nation strongly recommends that there not be a session held in late September” added the Dene National Chief.

The National Chief also said “Additional financial resources are required for fire related issues. The Dene call upon the Crown in Right of Canada to honour its legal obligation under Treaty #8 and #11, and provide sufficient funds to the Dene First Nations, and not through a third party such as the GNWT. The Chiefs are responsible for their territories and peoples, and know best how to allocate funding. The Crown is legally obligated to the Dene, and responsible to provide this financing.”

“It is clear from our Covid-19 experiences and the climate catastrophe, that the Dene require clear protocols spelled out with Federal, Territorial and municipal governments. The roles and responsibilities have to be understood and implemented for the safety and protection of our citizens. The Dene go to their Chiefs for leadership in times of emergency not the mayors or the Premier” concluded the Dene National Chief.

-30-

For More Information:

Leanne Goose, Communications
communications@denenation.com
587-986-6215



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5120- 49th Street
P.O. Box 2338
Yellowknife, NT, X1A 2P7
Website: www.denenation.ca

Phone: (867) 873-4081
Fax: (867) 920-2254
Toll-Free: 1-866-511-4081



The Honorable Caroline Cochrane
Premier of the Northwest Territories
PO Box 1320 Yellowknife NT X1A 2L9
caroline.cochrane@gov.nt.ca

September 5th, 2023 - Via Email

Please find attached two recent press releases from the Dene Nation entitled “the Legislative Assembly must only deal with the evacuation of wildfires and delaying the upcoming Territorial election” and “Dene National Chief calls for coordinated resources for the safe return of evacuees”. The press releases stress the need to focus on the threat of danger and return of almost 70% of the NWT population who have had to leave the comfort of their homes to unknown destinations. The Dene Nation is insisting that the protection and security of our people must be the top priority of all northern leaders.


We are pleased that the Legislative Assembly met earlier this week to allocate additional financial resources to the worst wildfire season ever and have delayed the upcoming territorial election as recommended by the chief electoral officer. However, we don’t feel it is necessary or essential to convene another session to deal with any other outstanding business that has not been addressed. It is very late in the term of the 19th Assembly and any outstanding business must be addressed by the incoming new assembly which is the normal practice.

As Dene leaders we are very concerned with the lack of meaningful involvement of our Chiefs in the evacuation process. We are calling on your government to recognize Dene inherent and Treaty rights to make decisions for our own People. There needs to be a coordinated effort that fully includes all the Chiefs of the effected communities. We work with our People daily and know how to deal with their needs and concerns.

“Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation”

We will contact your office to set up a virtual meeting with you to further discuss and address this ongoing concern.

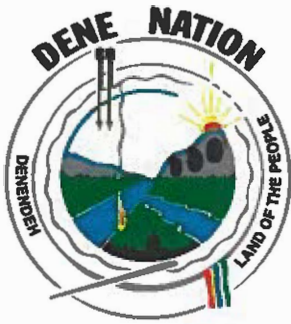
Sincerely,



Gerald Antoine, Dene National Chief

CC Distribution List

Hon. Dan Vandal (Northern Affairs)
Hon. Gary Anandasangaree (Crown-Indigenous Relations)
Hon. Patty Hajdu (Indigenous Services)
AFN National Chief
Dene leadership
Northwest Territories Members of Legislative Assembly



**Dene National / Assembly of First Nations
Office (NWT)**

5120-49th Street
P.O. Box 2338
Yellowknife, NT, X1A 2P7
Website: www.denenation.ca

Phone: (867) 873-4081
Fax: (867) 920-2254
Toll-Free: 1-866-511-4081



September 28th, 2023 – Via Email

Frederick Blake, Jr
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
P.O. Box 1320 Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9
Phone number: 867-767-9133 ext. 12005
Frederick_blake@ntassembly.ca

RE: Email Letter Dated September 15th, 2023

Thank you for your email letter dated September 15th, 2023, in which you shared updated information of the recent August 28th, 2023, sitting outcome.

This is the first official letter that the Dene National Office has ever received from the Legislative Assembly, during my term. It is also the first official letter of correspondence that the Dene National Office has ever received on the outcome of any Legislative Assembly sittings.

In respect to this August 28th, 2023, sitting outcome, we welcome the Members' direction to delay the Territorial General Election as it provides the Families and their communities, the time to return home and restore the needs of their respective Families to support and assist in moving forward.

We also welcome the Members' general initiative for additional funding to fight wildfires however, we recommend the focus be mindful and reflective of the needs of the Families and their communities.

The Chief Electoral Officer recommended the Territorial election be delayed due to the wildfires, however, did not recommend that the Legislative Assembly meet again. You will be in session October 3rd, 2023 - the same day you were originally scheduled to have the election.

"Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation"

The impacts of the recent evacuations and ongoing wildfires, have been traumatic and life threatening as Families and communities were uprooted, displaced, and relocated. Nearly 70% of the NWT population was evacuated for weeks and in some instances over a month, without having any advanced notice or opportunity to make essential plans.

This is also triggering for the many Original Nation of Families who have experienced Canada's shameful history of Indian Residential Schools and their impacts. In addition, other people who have moved here from different countries have also been traumatized by the situations that have evolved.

We strongly encourage that we open our hearts to learning, growing, and making our world more inclusive. Therefore, we further advocate for coordinated efforts moving forward for the realignment of assistances so that the Families and their communities are supported in meeting their needs.

Further to this point of the importance of inclusion, September 30th – The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, is a step in the right direction, as it allows all of us to embark on an important journey to increase our knowledge and understanding of the significance of “Orange Shirt Day” and Canada's shameful history of Indian Residential Schools.

It is everyone's responsibility to understand the continuing impacts connected to this National trauma and how we all as people of varying backgrounds, ancestry, and age, can ensure that this never happens again.

In order to embrace reconciliation and change, all of us, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous must come together to promote acknowledgement of this tragic time in Canadian history.

Everyone must work together for a better and more inclusive future in which every child matters.

In your September 15th email correspondence, you made mention of the Government, Members of the Assembly, and Indigenous Governments and Organizations (IGO's) who have worked hard for 4 years to advance their shared priorities. I commend these efforts, however, would like to point out that Dene Nation were not part of this process.

“Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation”

As Dene Leaders, we are very concerned with the lack of coordinated communication and meaningful engagement with our Chiefs in the current process which you highlighted.

There needs to be full inclusion of the Dene which requires a coordinated effort that fully reflects the priorities and needs of all chiefs in the affected communities.

I see the 20th Legislative Assembly, as an opportunity, to finally have them work with the Dene Nation.

Sincerely,

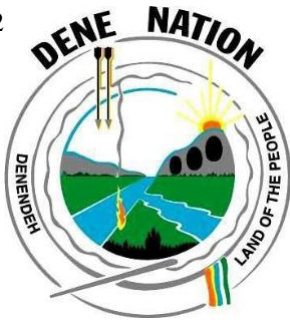


Gerald Antoine
Dene National Chief
AFN Regional Chief NT

CC

Premier, Northwest Territories
Members, Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly
Principal Secretary to the Premier
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly
Hon. Dan Vandal (Northern Affairs)
Hon. Gary Anandasangaree (Crown-Indigenous Relations)
Hon. Patty Hajdu (Indigenous Services)
AFN National Chief
Dene Leadership

"Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation"



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THE DENE NATION CALLS FOR A FULL INDEPENDENT PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSE TO THE 2023 WILDFIRES IN THE NWT.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[YELLOWKNIFE, DENENDEH - OCTOBER 12, 2023] It has been an unprecedented year for wildfires in the NWT with almost 70% of the population being evacuated to communities across the NWT and western Canada. The Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine says “there is much to discuss about the wildfire experience this summer. The best way to do this is to have a full independent public inquiry that encourages everyone in our communities to talk about it.”

A state of emergency was called and 13 communities including Behchoko, Fort Smith, Salt River First Nation, Smith Landing First Nation, Jean Marie River, West Point First Nation, Hay River, K'atl'odeeche First Nation, Enterprise, Ndilq, Dettah, Yellowknife and Kakisa were evacuated.

He went on to say “some people were away from their home community and unsettled in unfamiliar surroundings for over a month. The community of Enterprise was almost completely destroyed and West Point First Nation, the town of Hay River, and K'atl'odeeche reserve were evacuated twice. We must discuss lessons learned and how to prepare for next spring and into the future.”

The climate catastrophe will continue, and uncertainty will be the norm. The Dene National Chief concluded by emphasizing that “above all, we must incorporate Dene knowledge into our emergency response to wildfires. Our People have been here since the beginning of time and have always relied on our own understanding of the land and the environment around us to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Clearly, emergency management and response in the NWT must incorporate the expertise of the Dene.”

The Dene Nation calls for the full independent public inquiry to begin as soon as possible. Some of the fires will burn underground all winter and will resurface in the spring. Dene authority and governance must be recognized and included in all response plans going forward.

-30-

For More Information:

Leanne Goose, Communications

communications@denenation.com PH: 587-986-6215

“Upholding and Protecting the Rights and Interests of the Dene Nation”

August 11th, 2023

CBC North

Confusion in Inuvik, N.W.T., over wildfire evacuation notice

N.W.T. Fire acknowledged inconsistency in labels for different levels of evacuation preparedness

The Inuvik Pavilion in June of 2020. On Friday, N.W.T. Fire acknowledged inconsistency in the labels for the different levels of evacuation preparedness after confusion in the Town of Inuvik. As of Friday, the town was under an evacuation notice. (Mackenzie Scott/CBC)

There was a lot of confusion about how close Inuvik, N.W.T., was to evacuating Thursday as winds pushed a nearby wildfire closer, choking the town with smoke.

As of Friday evening, the town was on evacuation notice, meaning people should gather personal necessities and make a plan to leave in case they have to evacuate, said a spokesperson for N.W.T. Fire, the Northwest Territories' wildfire agency. It's not a call to leave just yet.

On Thursday afternoon, however, it wasn't clear whether such a notice had been issued or when. Gwich'in Tribal Council Chief Ken Kyikavichik posted on Facebook that afternoon that the fire had moved five kilometres closer to town and was then 12 kilometres away. He said, as a precaution, people should gas up their vehicles, pack some light luggage, including important documents and keepsakes, and be ready to evacuate on short notice.

At 1:30 p.m. notice went out that a news conference about the signing of [an offshore oil and gas exploration accord](#) that was to occur an hour later was cancelled.

"There will be no speeches or media because of the wildfire," stated a notice from the federal minister of northern affairs.

Shortly after, Northern Affairs Minister Dan Vandal and Yukon Premier Ranj Pillai, who had flown to Inuvik to participate in the news conference, boarded a plane for Whitehorse. Vandal later told CBC News they left on the flight, which had been arranged to carry wildfire [evacuees from Old Crow, Yukon](#), to Whitehorse, after hearing an evacuation alert may be issued for Inuvik.

"Both Premier Pillai and I made the decision that we should leave with the evacuees and make sure that they get out of harm's way," said Vandal.

In an interview shortly after, the Town of Inuvik's senior administrative officer Michael Trabysh said "the community is in absolutely no danger or threat whatsoever from this particular fire, other than heavy smoke."

- [Evacuation alert issued for Fort Smith, N.W.T., due to wildfire](#)
- [Canada signs 'historic' deal with Inuvialuit, N.W.T., Yukon gov'ts over offshore oil and gas](#)

Later the town issued a public advisory urging people to do much the same as Kyikavichik had recommended.

At a news conference in Yukon on Friday after the evacuees from Inuvik and the politicians traveling with them landed, Vuntut Gwitchin Chief Pauline Frost, speaking from Old Crow, said, "our thoughts and prayers are also with the Town of Inuvik, as they are also on evacuation alert."

That evening, N.W.T. Fire issued an update saying the fire is "not expected to reach Inuvik overnight," but people should gather important documents, medications and other necessities "out of an abundance of caution."

Terminology turmoil

On Friday, N.W.T. Fire acknowledged there was inconsistency in the labels for the different levels of evacuation preparedness.

It has now clarified the following three stages of evacuation preparedness:

- An "evacuation notice" means people should prepare to evacuate because of an increased risk.
- An "evacuation alert" means citizens have to be ready to evacuate on short notice.
- An "evacuation order" means there's an immediate danger and people need to leave as soon as they can.

CBC North

August 23rd, 2023

'It's a nightmare': Tłıchq gov't scrambles to find evacuees down south

'We're very worried about our Tłıchq citizens,' says Tłıchq Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty

Tłıchq Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty said he's frustrated that his government wasn't told where Tłıchq evacuees would end up. (Luke Carroll/CBC)

The Tłıchq Government is scrambling to track down its citizens, who were sent all over western Canada when Yellowknife was evacuated last week.

"We're very worried about our Tłıchq citizens," Tłıchq Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty said Tuesday.

"It's a real issue that our own members were displaced and I guess dispersed outside of our region without us knowing it, and now we're trying to find exactly where they are and what kind of services they have."

Last week, an out-of-control wildfire forced the evacuation of more than 20,000 people from the Northwest Territories capital and the neighbouring communities of Ndilq and Dettah.

Among the evacuees were nearly 900 Tłıchq citizens, according to the Tłıchq Government.

The Tłıchq Government is now trying to find them in Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg, the Yukon and beyond.

A few hundred citizens unaccounted for, says grand chief

Lafferty said about 50 to 60 Tłıchq citizens have registered as evacuees in Edmonton, and another 90 to 100 have registered in Calgary, but a few hundred others are unaccounted for.

Lafferty said he's frustrated that his government wasn't told where Tłıchq evacuees would end up.

"[The N.W.T. government] didn't even consider working with us to identify those individuals, or if we could send them to Whatì, Gamètì, Wekweètì or Behchokò, Rae," he said. "We're very disappointed."

'It's a nightmare, and right now a lot of families are worried,' said Monfwi MLA Jane Weyallon Armstrong of Tłıchq citizens who got lost in the shuffle of last week's massive evacuation of Yellowknife. (Chantal Dubuc/CBC)

He added that the Tłıchq community is particularly worried about its most vulnerable citizens: elders evacuated south without interpreters, patients at Yellowknife's Stanton Territorial Hospital, children in foster care and people who are homeless.

"The homeless, the vulnerable people that were evacuated from Yellowknife, we know a lot of them do not have a proper ID, no money, and a lot of them are dealing with addictions and mental health. We don't know where they are," said Monfwi MLA Jane Weyallon Armstrong, who represents the Tłıchq region.

"It's a nightmare, and right now a lot of families are worried."

On Wednesday morning, Municipal and Community Affairs Minister Shane Thompson said he's had discussions with Lafferty since the evacuation. At the time, he said, they weren't prioritizing identifying which residents are members of First Nations.

"We didn't reach out to everybody, because at the end of the day, it was about getting everybody out safely," he said.

Identifying evacuees who are homeless a 'difficult process,' says premier

In Tuesday evening's press conference on the territory's wildfire situation, Premier Caroline Cochrane said the government is working to identify N.W.T. residents who are homeless and have addictions, and eventually bring them back to the territory.

She acknowledged that it's going to be a "difficult process."

"We'll have to work with private shelters down south, through the privacy commissioner as well, because people didn't identify, we didn't ask them when they registered, 'Are you homeless?'" she said.

The Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA) said Stanton in-patients were moved to B.C., and a support line has been set up for family members seeking information about evacuated loved ones who were in hospital.

Spokesperson David Maguire said in an email that the NTHSSA is "actively tracking the location of all children/youth in care and updating for any change," as well as doing daily check-ins with all children and foster families.

['We'll get them home': N.W.T evacuees reassured financial supports in the works](#)

[Shelves emptying as road, airport closures leave some N.W.T. communities without groceries](#)

He said the health authority is also connecting biological families with their children "wherever possible."

"Many children and youth in care have had contact with their biological families, and we are making this a priority for all those who have yet to have such contacts," said Maguire.

Tłı̨chǫ region residents feel 'abandoned,' says Monfwi MLA

Beyond losing some of its citizens, Tłı̨chǫ communities are also grappling with being cut off from critical goods and services in Yellowknife, the nearest hub for groceries, medical care and other essentials.

Lafferty said the Tłı̨chǫ Government plans to ship its own groceries up from the South.

Weyallon Armstrong said resources in the Tłı̨chǫ region are limited right now, and residents feel as though they've been "abandoned by the territorial government."

"And the premier is not in the Northwest Territories," she said. "We're left alone to look after our own."

Cabin Radio

'We're alone.' Tłıchǫ Grand Chief says community resupply has broken down

[Emily Blake](#) · August 25, 2023

Tłıchǫ Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty says his government may need help from the south after the Yellowknife supply chain to smaller communities appeared to break.

With evacuation orders ongoing for more than half a dozen NWT communities threatened by wildfires, including the territorial capital, residents in smaller communities say they are worried about access to food and other essential goods.

Earlier this week, the general manager of the Łútsël K'é Co-op said the store was ["stressed to the seams"](#) as it was unable to keep its shelves stocked. The store manager said the community had to pay for a costly charter to bring freight from Edmonton in the absence of the usual daily flights from Yellowknife.

Communities in the territory's Tłıchǫ region are also feeling the strain.

One resident of Behchokǝ, who asked Cabin Radio that they not be identified, said they were driving to Costco in Edmonton to stock up on groceries.

"There's not too much available back home right now," she said from High Level.

"When food comes in, people buy it right away.

"We don't normally just take off and go for a grocery run, but we kind-of felt like we can't get the things that we need right now."

The woman said when food is available in Behchokǝ, there are limits on how much bread and how many eggs people can buy, and items are more expensive than normal. While milk used to cost \$6, she said it now costs \$15.

"I know that people are struggling," she said. "We've even heard Elders saying they've never seen groceries so scarce."

Residents aren't able to drive into Yellowknife to get supplies as usual, as the road into the city is closed to all traffic except front-line workers. The Co-op is the only grocery store still operating in Yellowknife, remaining open to serve essential staff that remain.

Jackson Lafferty at a news conference in March 2023. Ollie Williams/Cabin Radio

"We're alone," Tłıchǫ Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty told Cabin Radio earlier this week.

"It's a very difficult position to be in as a community, as a leader of the community.

"We're still living in Behchokǝ and they shut down all the essential supplies like food and medical and gas stations and so forth. It's very challenging right now."

He said the Co-op had opened for a couple of days to help people get supplies, "but we don't know how long this will last – whether it'll be a week or two weeks – and we could definitely run out of supplies."

Lafferty said residents in Tłıchǫ communities need goods such as diapers, milk and vegetables, which are not currently accessible. He said Tłıchǫ leadership plans to reach out to southern organizations about delivering groceries.

“We’re still here. We’re still living in the North. We need those essential services,” Lafferty said, “and the GNWT just picked up and went.”

The [CBC reported](#) on Tuesday that Fort Resolution was also struggling with grocery resupply as a wildfire threatens Hay River and the road into the community is closed. Cabin Radio was unable to reach Fort Resolution leaders for comment.

In an email to Cabin Radio on Tuesday night, the territorial government stated staff had been in communication with communities, airlines and food suppliers to ensure regular shipments continue.

The NWT government said it had also established a working group to address issues related to community supply chains and food security.

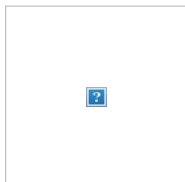
The North West Company, whose operations include North Mart and Northern stores in the NWT, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Ollie Williams contributed reporting.

• FEBRUARY 22, 2024

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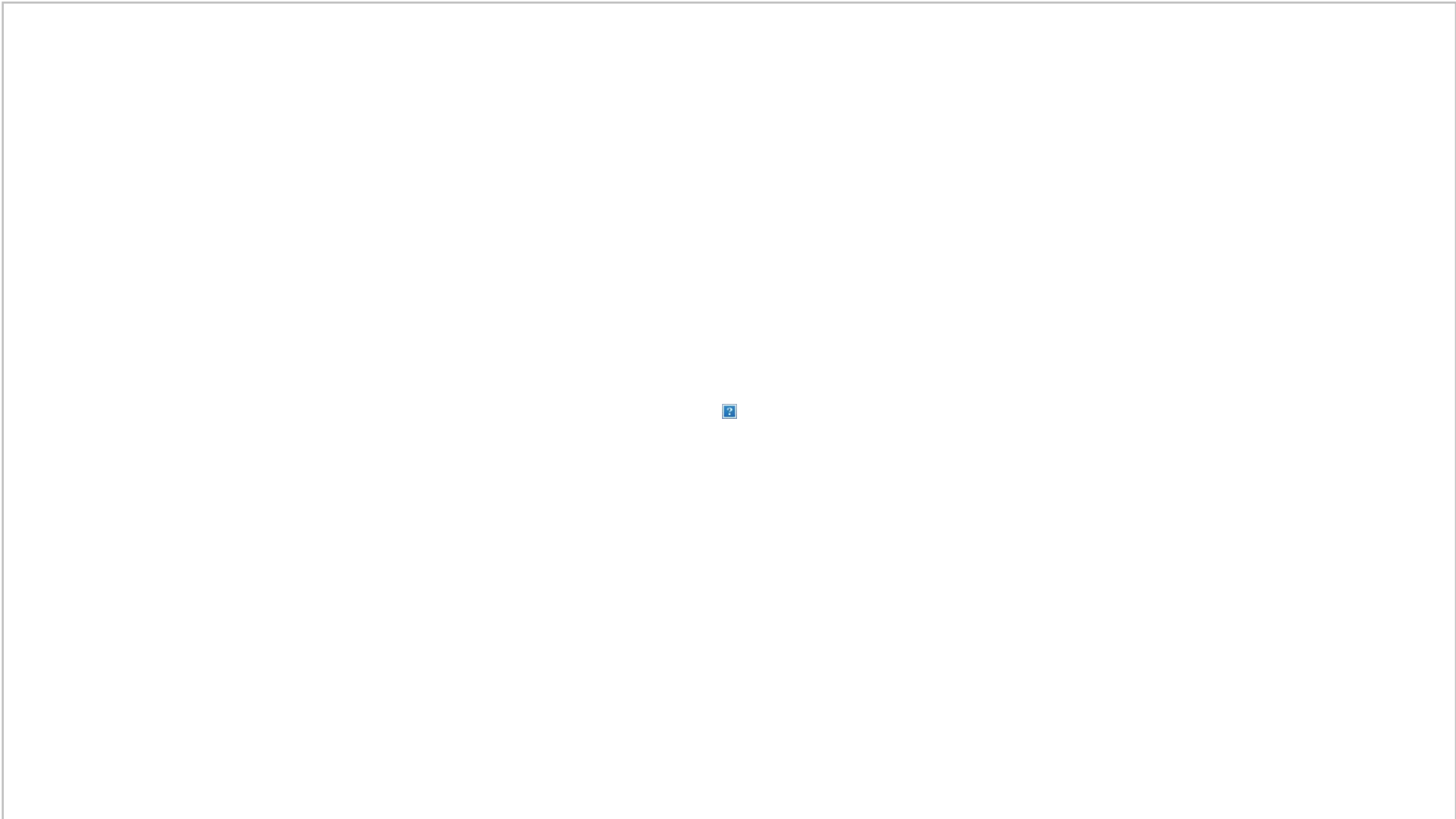
Reading

Inside the NWT's 2023 wildfire decision-making

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Inside the NWT's 2023 wildfire decision-making

Jimmy Thomson | February 22, 2024



Firefighters at work inside Wood Buffalo National Park on August 16, 2023. Photo: Parks Canada

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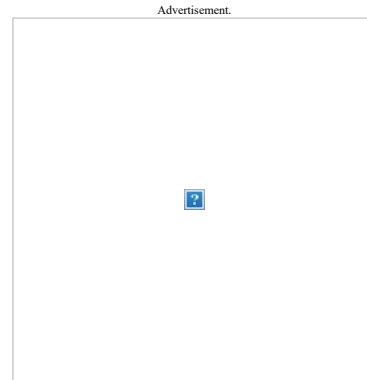
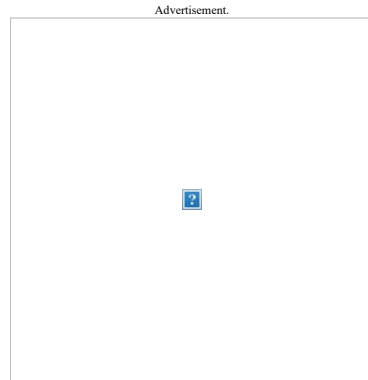


It was hard, at first, to spot the new smoke through the old smoke.

The fire that would eventually cause the largest evacuation in the history of the Northwest Territories may well have been missed in its first days, in June 2023, because of smoke billowing out of the Dehcho region to the southwest.

The Dehcho fires had been burning for a month, the shock troops of an invasion that, by the fall, would burn an area the size of Switzerland.

Emerging through that smoke, a young fire given the name ZF15 was born from a lightning strike at the top of a triangle made up of a line drawn between Yellowknife and Behchokò, then stretching up in two converging 60-km lines at the top. Over the next three months it would burn more than half of that triangle's area in fits and starts, hurtling south toward the highway and west toward Behchokò, then, like a cornered animal, turning back toward the east and Yellowknife.

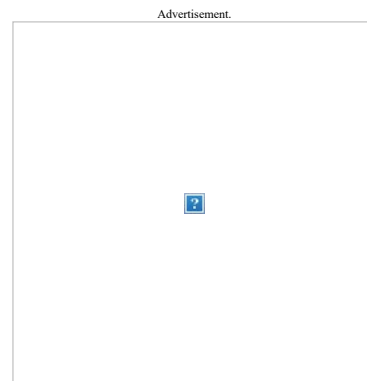
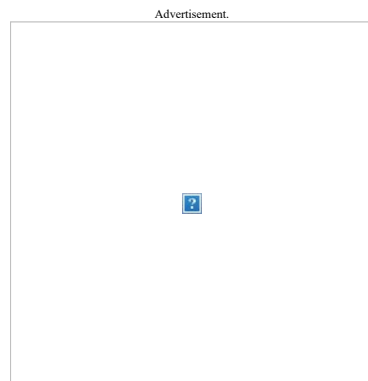


The fire broke through line after line of defence, natural and manmade alike. In the end, only the mercy of rain stopped it besieging the near-empty territorial capital.

The story of ZF15 and its southern cousin, SS52, which tore through the South Slave region with unimaginable speed and ferocity, can help to explain the changing nature of fire in the North and across the country.

Cabin Radio brought questions about 2023's fire season to leading experts in fire management and climate scientists, to understand how it got so bad and whether the people and governments of the Northwest Territories can do anything better to prepare for the next one.

If there was one thing every expert we contacted could agree on, it was that there will be more bad years to come. To the south, that's coming true in record time: as of this week, the Alberta fire season [has already begun](#).



"I can't overstate the urgency of the risk that we face now," said John Vaillant, whose book about the 2016 Fort McMurray fire, [Fire Weather](#), has become essential reading in the new era of human-accelerated wildfires.

“This will be Canada’s reality for the rest of our lives.”

How a horrific summer began

Like many people across Western Canada, Marc-André Parisien had some Yellowknifers living at his place for a while this summer.

Parisien is a scientist at the Canadian Forest Service, the academic powerhouse of fire research in Canada, and his home in Edmonton was a convenient landing place for people who had just been told to pack up and get out along with 20,000 others.

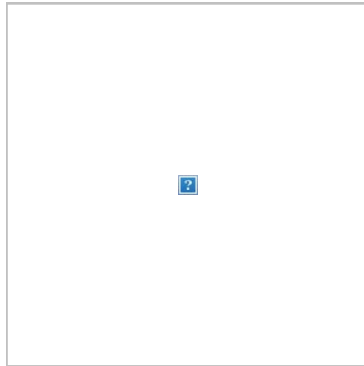
He wasn’t particularly surprised to see 2023 become what it became: a year where more area burned across the country than ever before in recorded history, forcing two-thirds of NWT residents out of their homes.

“We knew this was coming to our country, and this year we really got quite a dose of it,” Parisien said. That’s not to understate how unusual it was, however. “We have a dataset of wildfires in Canada that spanned over 50 years. There was one single fire in there that spanned a million hectares. This year we had two – just this year. Almost three.”

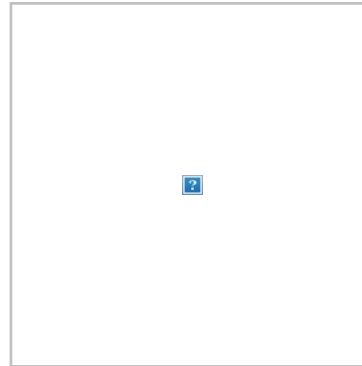
A lot of factors conspired to make 2023 such a bad year for fires across the territory; to make ZF15 so capable of eluding fire crews’ attempts to corner it; to make SS52 move with such speed. From huge stockpiles of fuel in the form of unburned forests, to challenging logistics in a vast territory, the landscape of the NWT is already a very hard place to fight a fire.

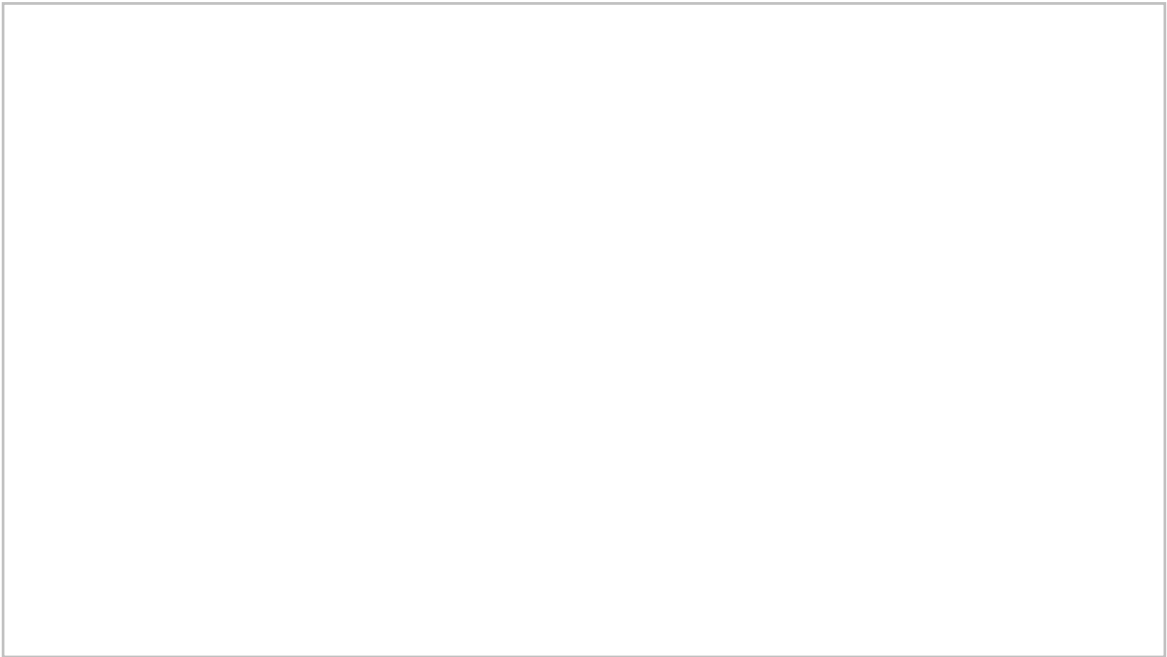
But the most significant factor is one that everyone could feel: it was a very hot summer.

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The sun, shrouded in smoke, in July 2023. Sarah Pruys/Cabin Radio



A flower is bathed in orange as wildfire smoke rolls over Yellowknife in September 2023. Sarah Pruys/Cabin Radio

A flower is bathed in orange as wildfire smoke rolls over Yellowknife in September 2023. Sarah Pruys/Cabin Radio

The planet is warming, and the NWT is warming at three or four times the rate of the rest of the world. That warming has obvious and less obvious effects.

A subtle but critical change is that the warmer it gets, the more lightning will be generated by friction from moving air masses.

Globally, lightning accounts for less than five percent of fire ignitions, and across Canada, about half. But in the NWT, “it’s far away the biggest source of ignition,” explained Mike Flannigan, an eminent scholar of fire who spent much of his career at the Canadian Forest Service. While it’s [still rarer](#) in the North than in the south, lightning is striking [more and more often](#) in the NWT, where, in 2023, lightning caused nine times as many fires as humans did.

That means fires aren’t just starting near highways or towns, where cigarette butts might be carelessly tossed from a car, or an ATV exhaust pipe might overheat. They can happen anywhere, at any time, as long as conditions are right – and increasingly it’s striking where, and when, there’s enough dry fuel to start a fire.

That’s a change most northerners can relate to: the fire season has begun sprawling out across seasons that previously would have been too wet or too cold to allow fire to flourish.

The first fire of the year started on May 4 near Fort Smith. The average daily high in Fort Smith as far back as records go is 12C; on May 4, 2023, it reached 23.3C.

Flannigan has been studying fire since the 1970s. “I don’t recall a May fire season in the territories,” he said.

Those high temperatures dragged on into June. By June 28, when ZF15 started, conditions were so perfect that eight new fires started that day in the North Slave region alone, according to a summary of the summer’s fire reports prepared for Cabin Radio by NWT fire information officer Mike Westwick.



One of those eight fires, ZF9, was [so close to Wekweeti](#) – just two kilometres – that the community was evacuated the next day.

‘Impossible to get to all of them’

Not every fire needs to be attacked, because not every fire is a problem.

Fire is a natural part of the landscape, just like predators or parasites or windstorms: natural systems have evolved to cope with and even depend on fire. It clears out deadfall and tangled growth, cycling nutrients, leaving room for young plants to grow, and making it easier for animals to move through the landscape, among many other benefits. It also reduces future risk of fire.

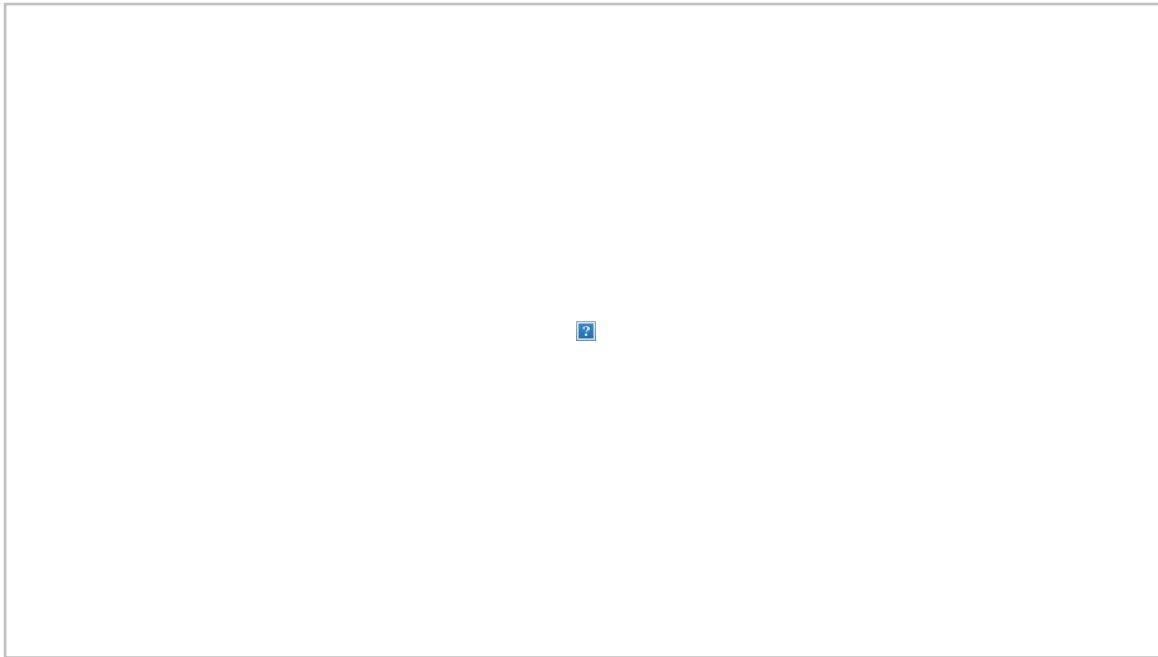
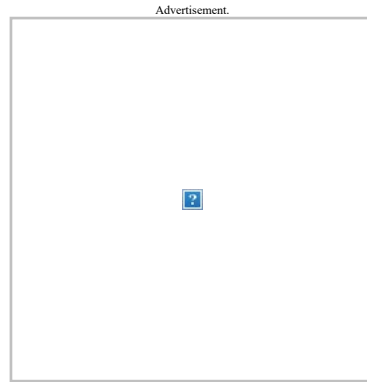
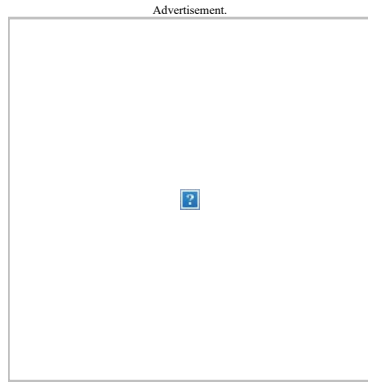
Most of the triangle between Yellowknife, Behchokò, and ZF15’s starting point [hadn’t burned for decades](#), fire maps show. That was exacerbated by a [“buildup index”](#) (a measure of how much fuel is dry and available to burn) firmly in extreme territory by late June.

Aside from the long-term benefits of letting some fires burn, there’s also a practical reason behind this thinking: even if it were the right thing to do, it’s simply not possible to attack every fire.

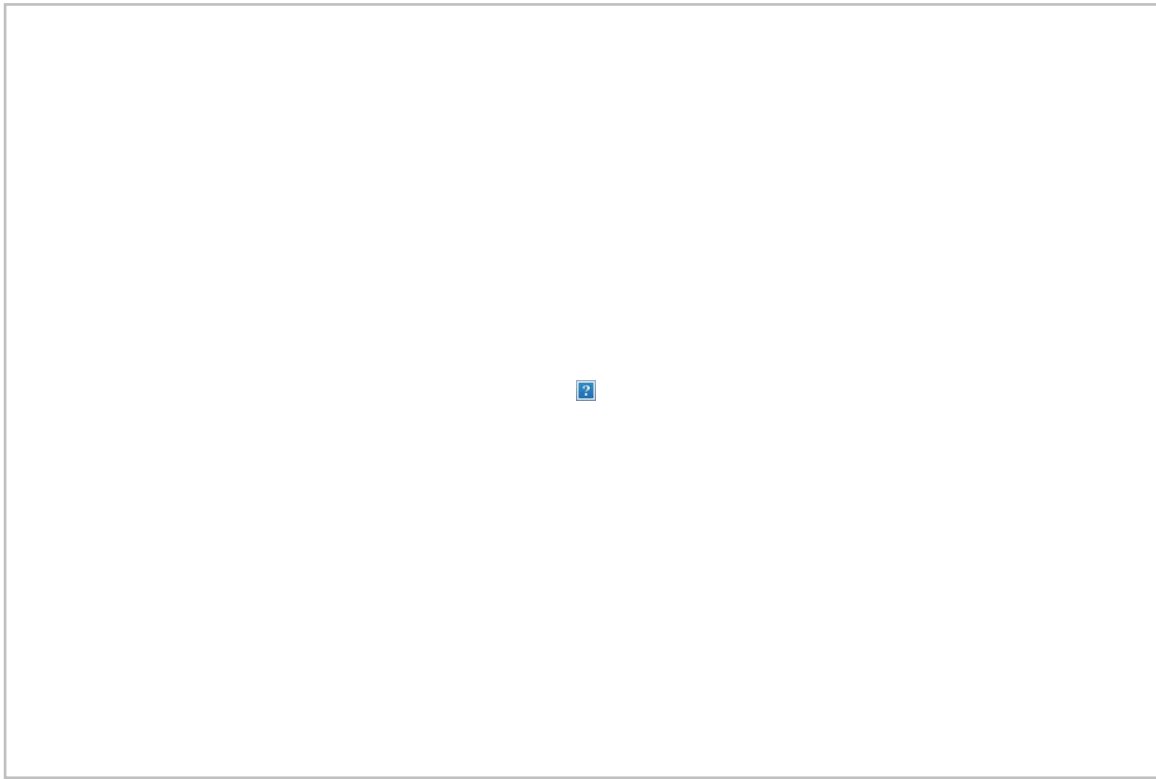
“There’s so many fires igniting at once, you’re overwhelmed; it is impossible to get to all of them while they’re small,” Parisien said.

And by “small” he really does mean small. According to Flannigan, once a fire reaches the size of a soccer pitch, the game is over. Putting out the fire is often out of the question.

“You cannot put it out through direct attack. That’s a common misconception by the public, because they see lovely pictures of planes dropping retardant or water on fire. They think they’re putting it out,” he said. “You may as well be spitting on a campfire.”



An air tanker drops water over the east end of wildfire ZF15 near Behchokq̃ on August 2, 2023. Photo: GNWT



A FireBoss 802 firefighting aircraft. Photo: GNWT

At that point, all that can be done is to try to limit the fire’s spread, hope it doesn’t cross through your barriers, and wait.

That’s why, for Rick Olsen, the NWT’s manager of fire operations, the priority was not the little wisp of a fire 60 km from both Behchokò and Yellowknife, but rather the fires burning within sight of communities, like the one on Wekweeti’s doorstep.

It’s a constant calculation in the fire management world: with limited resources, which fires need to be attacked and which can be left to burn?

Reducing fuel loads on the landscape this way – letting fires burn through that fuel when they’re not threatening communities or other values, like cabins or infrastructure – is a strategic part of managing fire, one that all experts contacted for this story agreed is the right approach when possible.

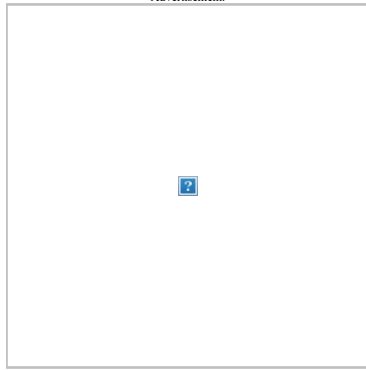
That wasn’t always the case. Parisien said the debate was “pretty vitriolic” when he first arrived at the Canadian Forest Service in the early 2000s but, in recent years, the matter has been settled: not every fire can or should be put out.

“We have to essentially work our way through finding that balance between knowing which fires we have to action and which fires are actually of a benefit, both for the ecology as well as for the safety of people,” Olsen said.

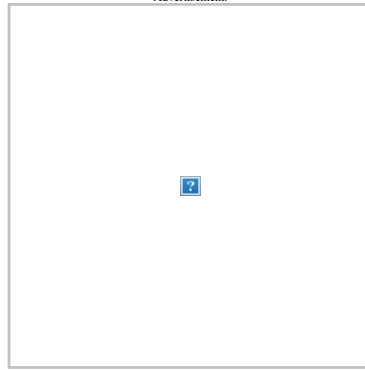
When attention turned back to ZF15, which was by then quickly becoming the biggest fire in the region, Olsen’s team elected to send a group of “ignition specialists” – fire starters. Their job was to scout opportunities to cut off future sources of fuel by lighting their own controllable fires in choke points created by lakes and already-burned areas. It worked, at least for a time.

As with water bombers, there’s a belief that fire breaks are a way to stop a fire dead in its tracks. By clearing a broad strip of land, the thinking goes, the fire reaches the edge of a fire break and starves.

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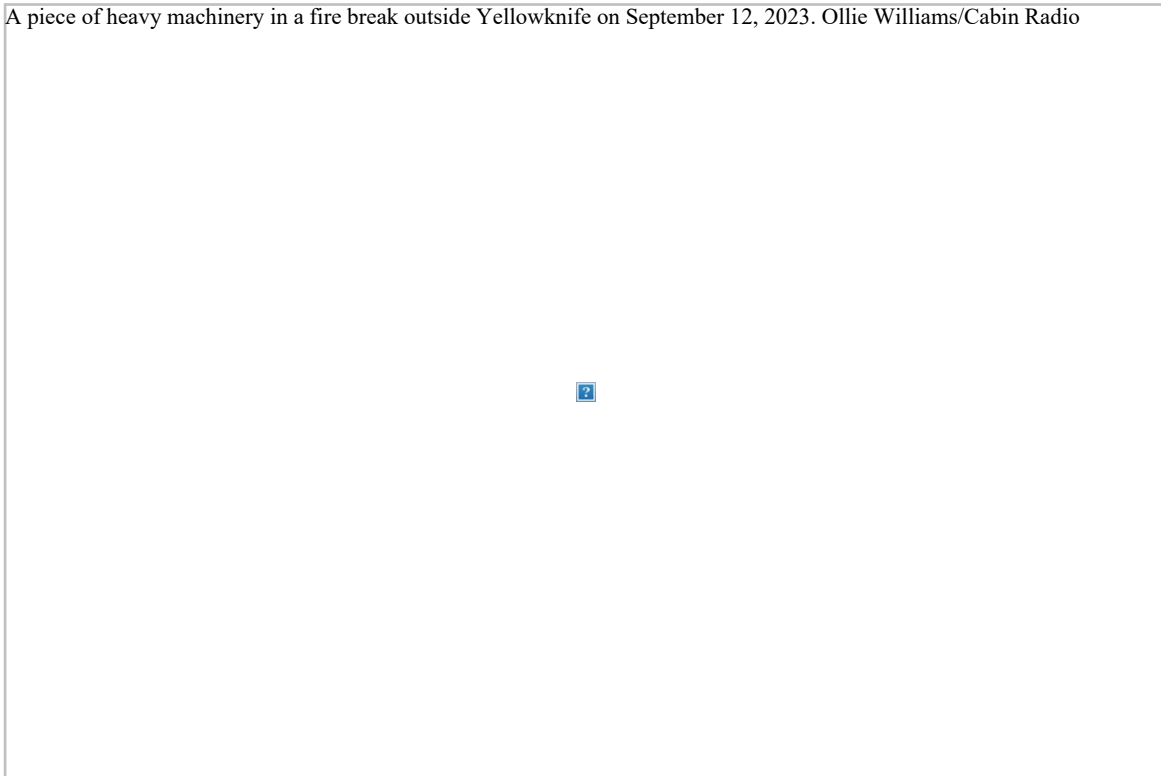


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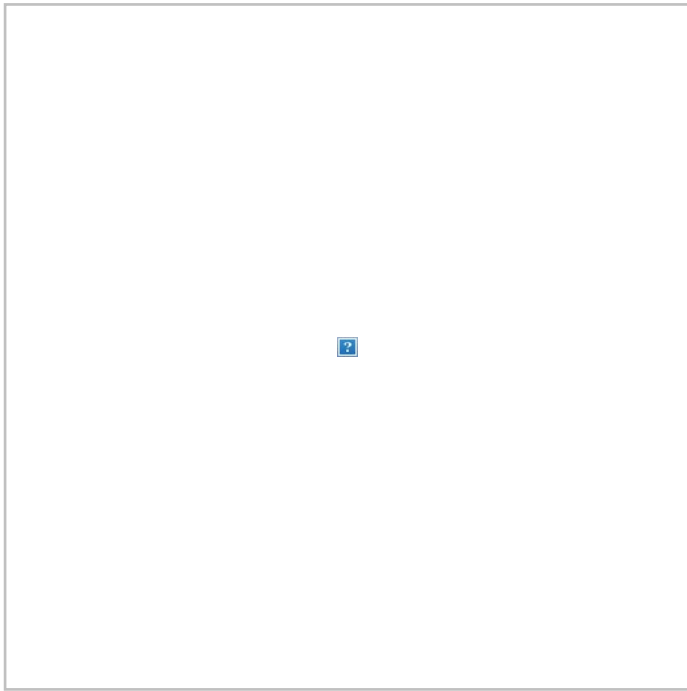


But that's not how a major fire spreads.

A piece of heavy machinery in a fire break outside Yellowknife on September 12, 2023. Ollie Williams/Cabin Radio



A piece of heavy machinery in a fire break outside Yellowknife on September 12, 2023. Ollie Williams/Cabin Radio



An aerial view of a fire break in the Fort Fitzgerald area, next to the Slave River. Photo: Parks Canada

“When you get strong winds – and when you get fire that’s crowning and putting off smoke columns that are 10,000, 20,000 feet up into the air and embers that are the size of your forearms are flying four or five kilometres – a fire break in and of itself is not going to prevent that type of stuff,” Olsen explained.

Even fire breaks like those that would later be dug [out of the forest around Yellowknife](#), 100 metres wide or more and kilometres long, won’t stop a fire of the intensity the territory saw in 2023. That summer, even the much larger, liquid, natural fire breaks of the NWT’s rivers weren’t enough.

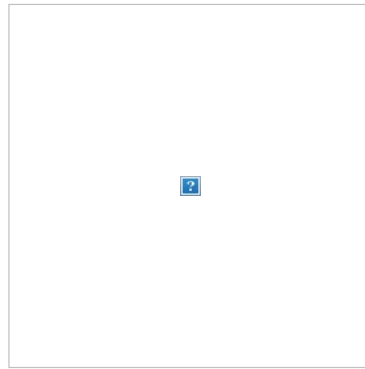
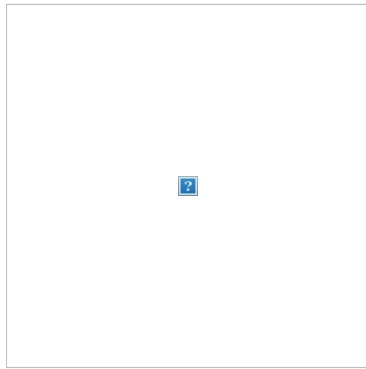
“We had a fire jump the Mackenzie River south of Tsiigehtchic,” Olsen said. “We had a fire jump the Great Bear River just by Tulita. We had the fire jump the Hay River as it went past Enterprise. We had a fire jump the Slave River maybe 30 kilometres north of Fort Smith.”

Where the fire jumped the Mackenzie River, it’s more than a kilometre and a half across; there is no conceivable way that crews could ever hope to build a fire break as wide or as fireproof as a river. Even if they could, it would be pointless. A fire break is more useful as a base of operations, acting as a safe haven from which to launch other efforts.

The fire breaks created by the ignition specialists bought the NWT some time. The delay, however, was only that. By the second week of July, a finger of fire reached south and poked through the already burned areas – “breaching anchor points which we would normally expect to hold,” Westwick explained in an email – and carried on toward the highway. Then the winds came.

The fire in the North Slave region had already grown monstrous with the help of the heat (highs in Wekweeti had rarely dipped below 20C all month) as well as smoke that prevented air operations and an ongoing drought, all within that unburned triangle between Yellowknife and Behchokò.

As ZF15 turned toward Behchokò, driven by 50 km/h winds from the northeast, crews were scrambling to burn some of the fuel in the fire’s path. But the back-burning effort had to be abandoned as the fire swept toward the hamlet, torching 15 cabins along the way.



It overtook Rae on July 25, burning four more homes in the town itself before it could be held back with the help of the lake, specialized fire-retardant gels, and more back-burning. The fire wouldn't progress any farther west but, at that same moment at the start of August, another fire was discovered 200 kilometres due south. Within days, it would eclipse ZF15 in size, speed, and destruction.

Fighting the Enterprise fire

The Canadian Drought Monitor releases regular reports on the drought situation across the country. In August of 2023, the area between Kakisa and Enterprise was on the border between moderate and severe drought, multiplying the risk from fire.

Part of the fire risk in a warm period of drought comes from the air itself.

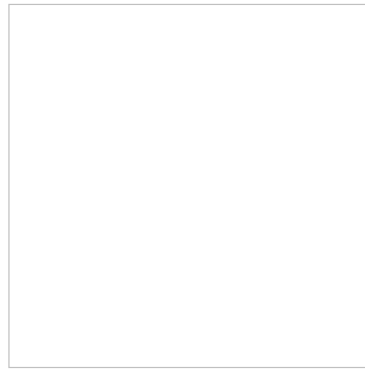
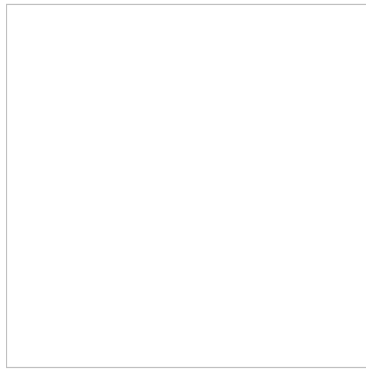
“As the atmosphere warms, the ability of the atmosphere to suck moisture out of the fuel ... increases almost exponentially with temperature,” Flannigan explained. The resulting dryness “leads to higher-intensity fires that are difficult to impossible to extinguish.”

By the time anyone noticed SS52 on August 2, at three hectares it was already about five times the size of a soccer pitch. In other words, putting it out was already not an option. Crews attacked it anyway in an attempt to limit its growth, but it was futile.

It was hot, it was dry, and it was windy. But the South Slave region is notable for its boggy ground, with [peat marshes](#) dotting the low-lying parts of the landscape. The spongy terrain created by ultra-absorbent sphagnum moss is home to woodland caribou, moose, black bears, wolves, spruce grouse, and dozens of other charismatic animal species. That peat used to be fire-resistant – but that's no longer always the case, explained David Andison, a landscape ecologist.

“You have fuel that didn't used to be fuel. But now it's drying up,” Andison said.

Kira Hoffman, a fire ecologist who has extensively studied peat fires, says those fires are particularly problematic from a management point of view. “Once you get a fire burning in sphagnum moss, it just burns really deeply,” she said. “It's very difficult to put out.”



The area into which SS52 headed had barely burned over past decades, with fuel building up to dangerous levels.

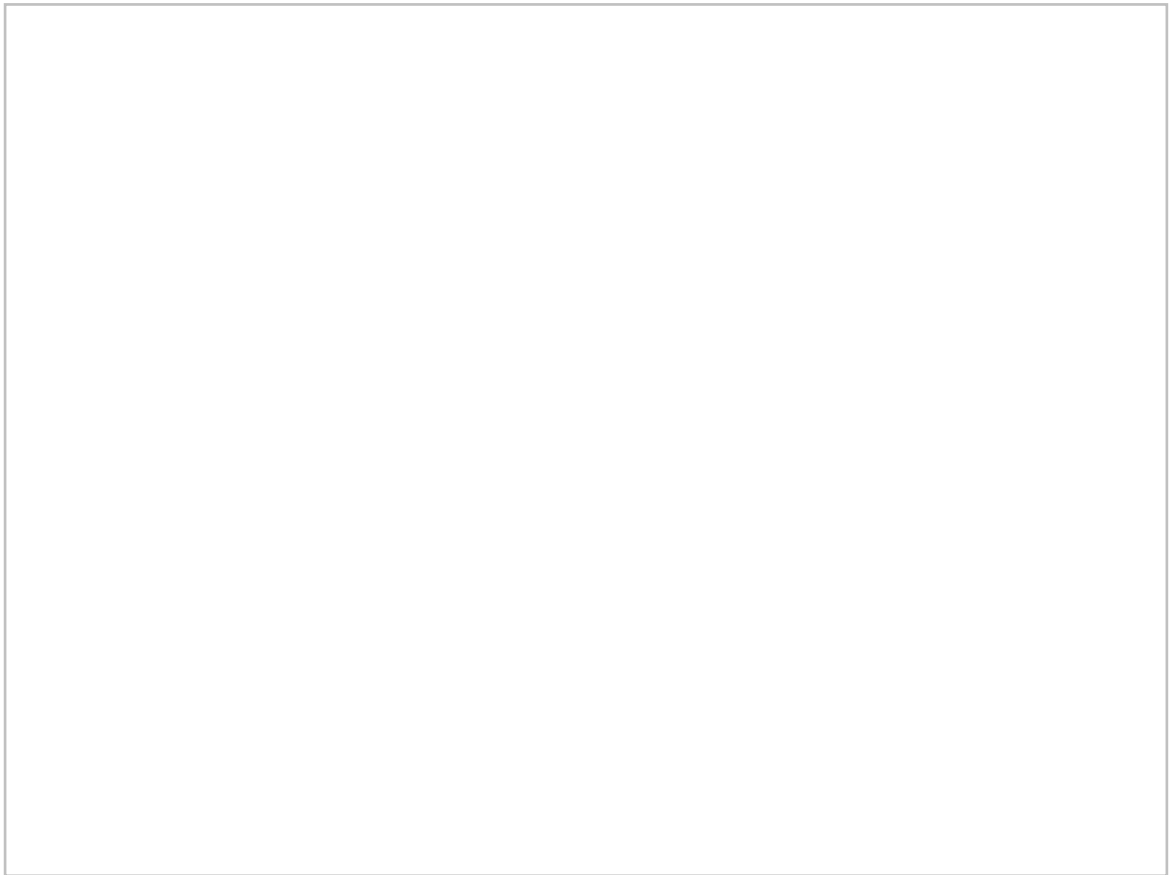
The fire devoured that dry fuel and was soon ready for much, much more. Two hours after crews started in on the fire, it had grown 40 times larger, and easterly winds were now pushing it toward Kakisa.

Just as in the early days of ZF15, smoke prevented some of the aerial attack. Planes and helicopters have to swoop down unusually low to hit a fire with their loads and have any effect. When too much smoke is in the air, it's not safe to do so.

At night, fires would typically calm down as the temperature drops and the humidity rises. Especially in times of drought, that's not as dependable today as it once was. Increasingly, fires are growing through the night.

New technology lets helicopters fight fires at night, but [Alberta is currently the only province](#) to have such a machine – and Olsen said there was enough trouble just finding helicopters, let alone those advanced enough to work at night.

Despite the limitations, crews managed to save Kakisa before the winds shifted. That was when the situation got out of control.

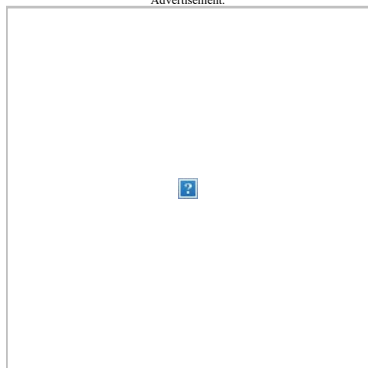


The Hay River-Enterprise intersection on Sunday, August 13, with smoke from fire SS52 billowing on the left-hand side of the image. Photo: April Broekaert-Glaicar

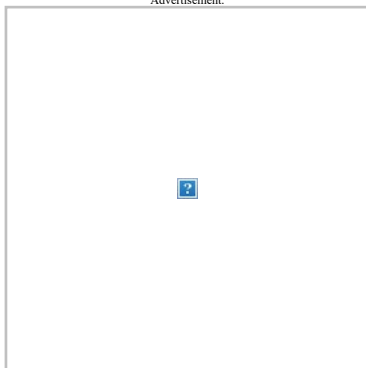
Winds were forecast to reach dangerous levels, gusting to 50 or 60 km/h from the northwest, pushing the fire quickly toward Enterprise. What happened instead on August 13 was much worse.

“I don’t think anything could have prevented that wind event from doing what it did,” Olsen said.

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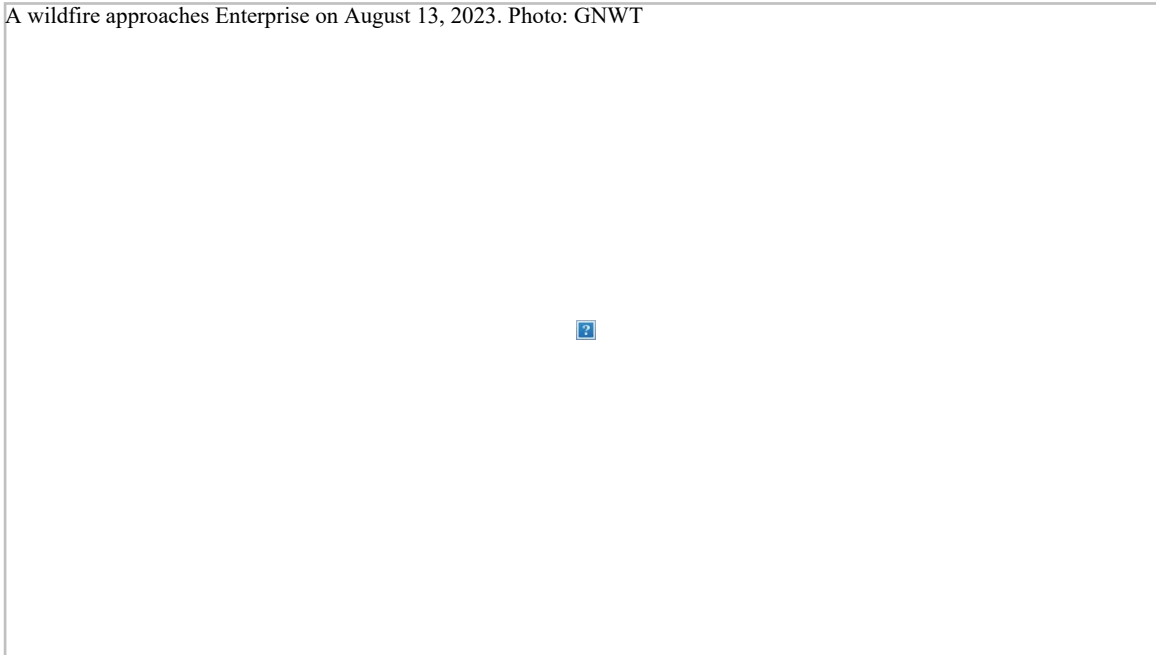


“What we wound up seeing was winds from the west which were clocked as high as 90 km/h, and sustained at a much-higher-than-forecast speed,” Westwick wrote.

Flying became impossible in blackened skies. Crews could not be safely put in the path of a fire moving so quickly. Conditions more than doubled the “worst-case forecasting,” Westwick wrote, for how far the fire could get that day.

Hay River, Enterprise, and the Kátł’odeeche First Nation were evacuated for the second time that year as SS52 raged toward Great Slave Lake from two directions. The fire came within a brisk five-minute walk of the new, \$50-million Hay River hospital. Remaining staff were ushered out of the town in military jets.

A wildfire approaches Enterprise on August 13, 2023. Photo: GNWT



A wildfire approaches Enterprise on August 13, 2023. Photo: GNWT

Enterprise was burned, essentially, to the ground, like Lytton, BC before it. Unlike Lytton, there was no loss of life.

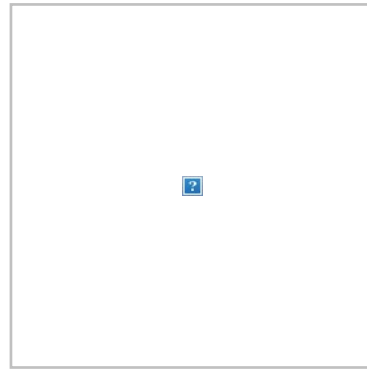
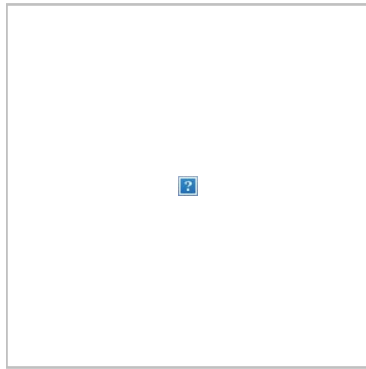
Fire Weather author Vaillant chalks that up, in part, to luck.

“What Canada does not realize yet is how lucky it’s been,” Vaillant said. “There’s no reason that [Enterprise] couldn’t have been Paradise, California or Lahaina, Hawai’i.”

One person was killed as a direct consequence of the NWT’s worst-ever fire season: [firefighter Adam Yeadon](#) of Fort Liard was hit by a falling tree as he worked to defend his own community that July.

Which fires you fight, when, and how

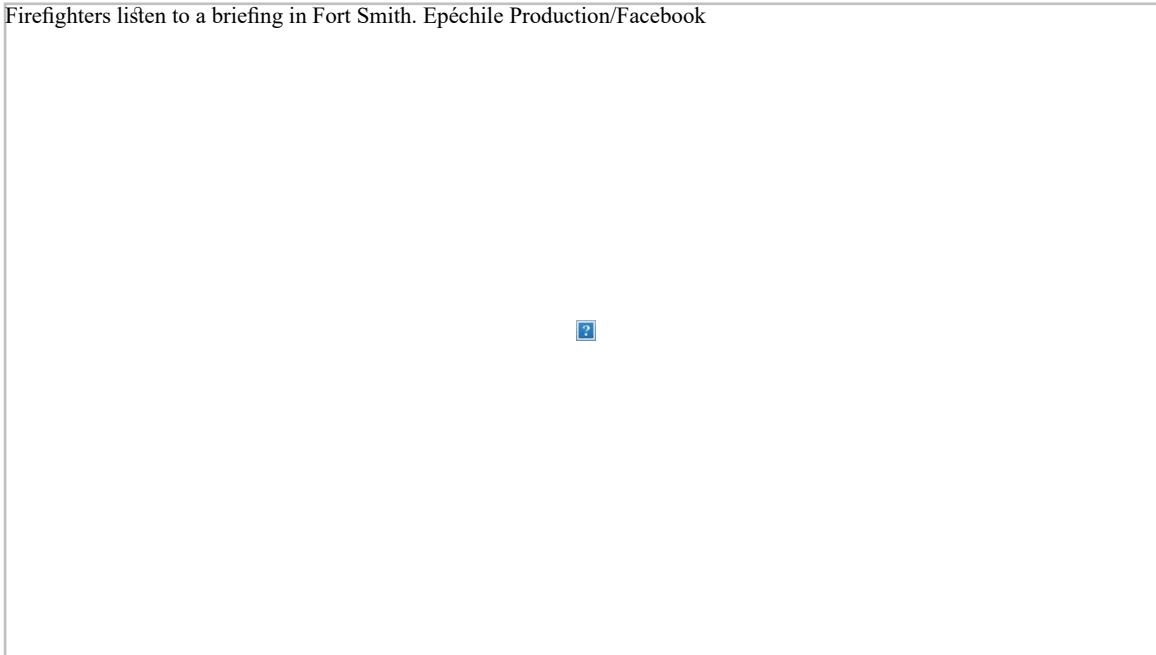
Fighting fires is a matter of resource distribution: choosing where to send crews, in what numbers and with what equipment, and when. The wrong expenditure in the wrong place can mean overlooking a more pressing threat somewhere else.



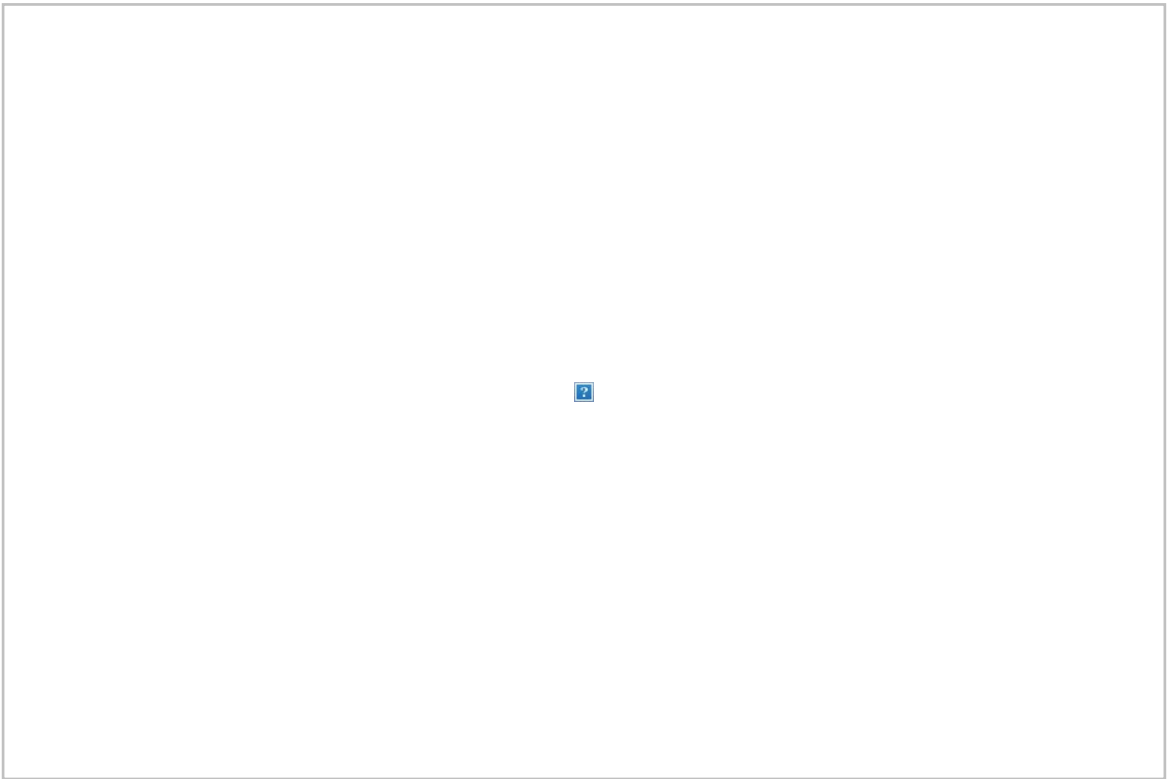
“We always have to look at the potential for fire risks that might start somewhere else,” Olsen explained. “Do you put your eggs all in one basket? Put 20 crews on one fire, leave seven communities unprotected?”

In the summer of 2023, more than 1,000 people were at work fighting fires in the NWT, many from outside the territory and the country. That’s not counting the community volunteers and armed forces members who would be deployed as well.

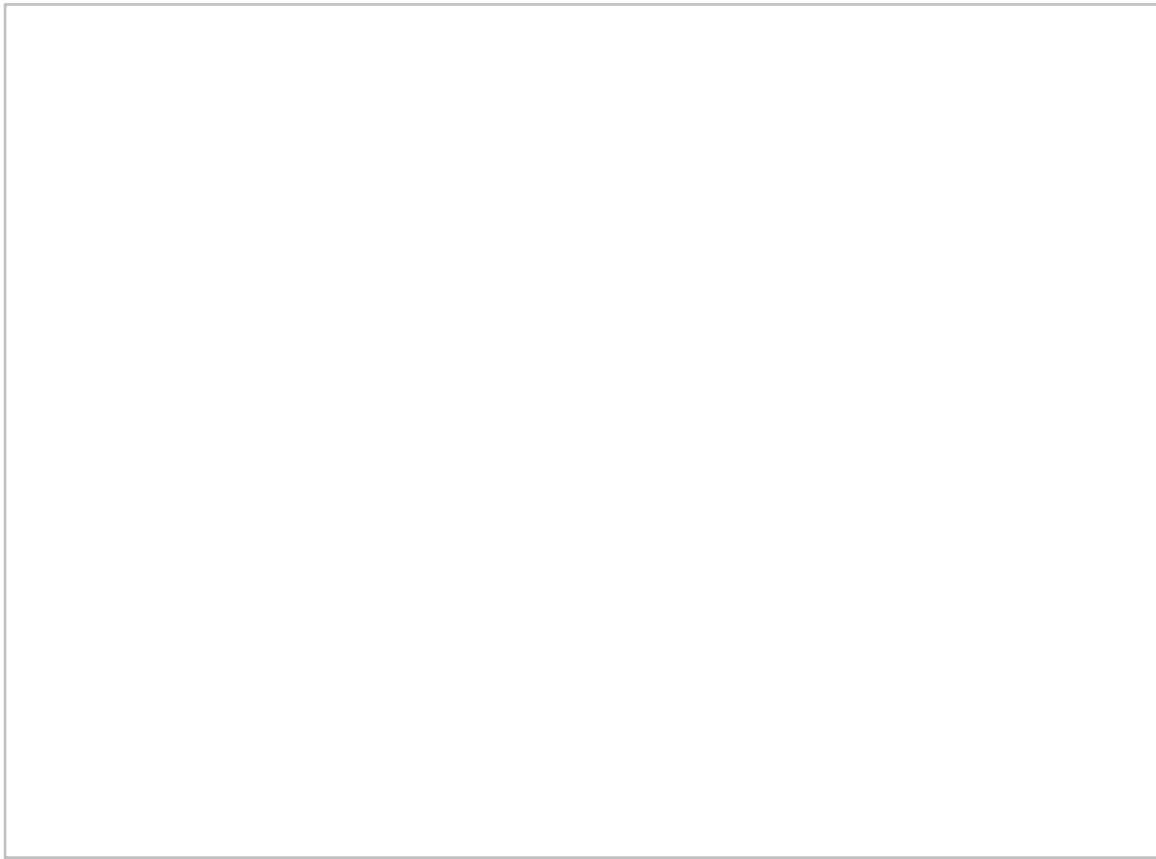
Firefighters listen to a briefing in Fort Smith. Epéchile Production/Facebook



Firefighters listen to a briefing in Fort Smith. Photo: Epéchile Production



Canadian Armed Forces soldiers work on a fire break in Yellowknife on August 16, 2023. Alana Morin/JTFN



South African firefighters outside Yellowknife's Explorer Hotel. Photo: Adriana Zibolenova

By midsummer, with major fires burning near all of the major population centres of the territory ([even Inuvik](#)), those resources were being stretched to the maximum. It was costing [\\$10 million a week](#) to manage the incredible logistical feat of moving those thousand-plus people across the territory, supplying them, and preventing worse disasters, and the bill would eventually come to around \$100 million – more than double what had been budgeted, and approximately equivalent to what the territory spends annually on all schools outside Yellowknife.

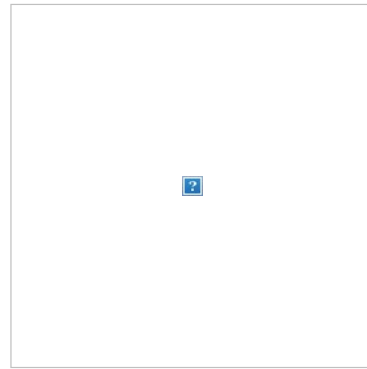
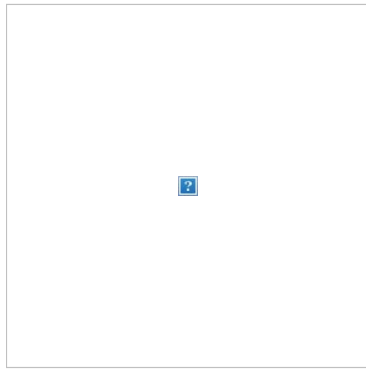
Even so, residents were seeing what amounted to chaos around them as communities evacuated. People asked questions about why the wildfire response was happening this way and whether things should be done differently.

Then-environment minister Shane Thompson [commented in the Legislative Assembly](#) in late September: “We have heard from some people that wildfires are not managed like they used to be 40 or 50 years ago, and that with more initial attack, we would have avoided the worst of this.”

Thompson went on to argue that reliance on extinguishing fires early is, historically, part of the problem. Parisien agrees.

“That thinking is what got us in trouble,” Parisien said. The buildup of fuels from previous generations’ more aggressive firefighting approach left Behchokò, Kakisa, Enterprise, Hay River, the Kát’odeeche First Nation and Fort Smith more vulnerable than they needed to be, with what amounted to kiln-dried wood piles stacked around them.

In mid-August, the same buildup meant the rest of the Behchokò-Yellowknife triangle was ripe for attack from a newly invigorated ZF15 as the winds wheeled around to the west.



Once again, the skies darkened, blotting out the ability for air-based action against the fire. Two other fires near the city added to the mess; wind from multiple directions, in the absence of rain, would threaten the city. With projections showing ZF15 could reach Yellowknife by the weekend, on Wednesday, August 16, the GNWT ordered residents to evacuate by Friday.

That decision has undergone considerable analysis, some of which is ongoing. Moving 20,000 people over hundreds of kilometres along a single road out of the territory is a risky move at the best of times, on top of the normal difficulties of any evacuation, which, Vaillant pointed out, “can create its own disaster.” That’s leaving aside the fact that the fire was, at that moment, burning on both sides of the highway. Miraculously, no one was killed or injured in the evacuation itself.

Clearer air (which allowed aircraft to work again) and rain returned just in time to save the community, Westwick wrote, halting it within 15 km of Yellowknife.

What we could do now or next time

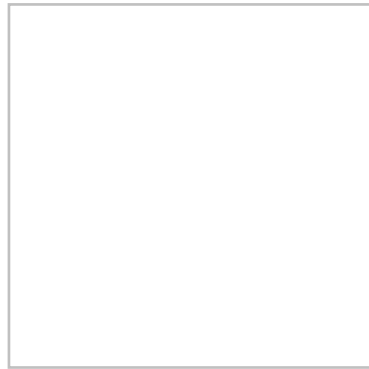
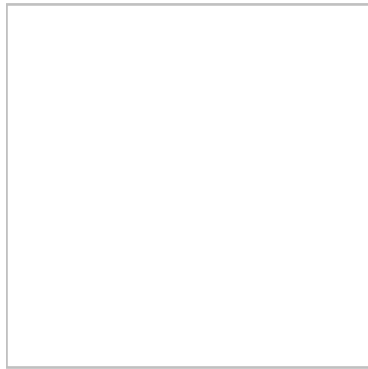
Had the fire reached Yellowknife, there were several lines of defence: crews in the air and on the ground, fire breaks to buy some time and, behind the fire breaks, sprinkler systems to dampen surfaces and put out embers as they landed, preventing “spotting” if fire rained down on the city.

Firefighters and volunteers stood ready to jump on any fires that broke out behind those lines.

“Most of the risk communities could experience is going to come from spotting. So literally tens or hundreds of thousands of embers coming down on the community like a rain, and anything that’s capable of burning has the potential to burn,” Olsen said.

To make that less likely, Olsen and others urged people to firesmart their homes.

Firesmart principles were developed in 1993 with the “wildland urban interface” in mind. (That’s what Yellowknife is, surrounded as it is by combustible, undeveloped land.) [The principles](#) come down to trying to limit the amount of fuel around homes and buildings so spot fires have less of a chance to light them up, and include things like clearing a 1.5-metre “non-combustible zone” around the house and deck, cleaning gutters to prevent buildup of flammable leaves and mosses, cutting grass and weeds, and keeping firewood away from the house.

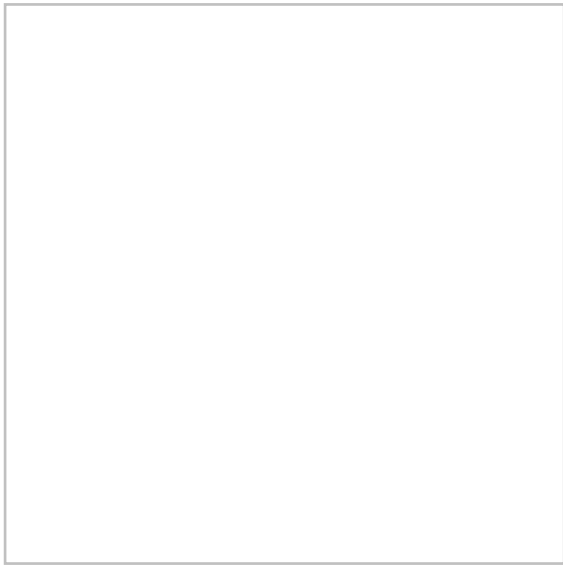


“It’s easy to do, it’s cheap to do, and it can reduce the flammability of your home by double-digit percentages. I’m a big fan,” Vaillant said.

Firefighters work to FireSmart a community in the Northwest Territories, in the absence of fires requiring attention



A file image of firefighters working to firesmart a community in the Northwest Territories. Photo: NWT Fire



A rainbow above sprinkler systems in Yellowknife. Photo: Pete Houweling

Directly beyond the communities of the NWT, there are huge buildups of unburned fuel. Hoffman, the fire ecologist, says that is not how First Nations of the North would have traditionally managed their communities' fire risk.

"Burning was done kind-of right from the doorstep in the past and still is in many communities today," she said. She works with communities like Gitanyow in BC, where residents value prescribed burns for fire risk management or other purposes like improving berry harvests. But today, conducting a prescribed burn is much more complicated than it would have been before colonization.

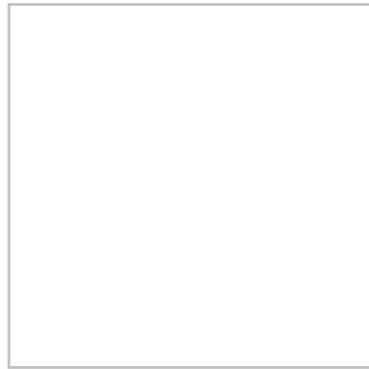
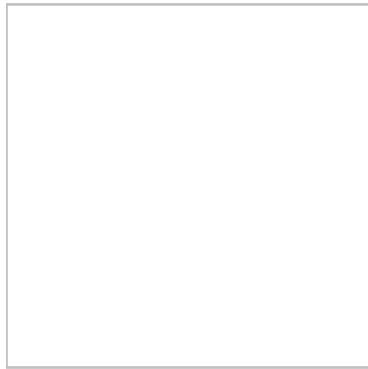
"You have to go through a lot of hoops in order to get these burns happening," she said. Smoke and its increasingly clear health impacts, potential liability for escaped fires – plus an understandable aversion to seeing fires burning on the edge of one's home community – can make prescribed burning an unpopular idea.

Last year, there were only 23 burns approved in all of BC. It can take years to get a permit for a single burn.

As a result, Parisien says prescribed burning, which could limit the intensity and frequency of wildfires near communities, is "massively underused" in Canada. Vaillant agrees.

"We need help here, and there's a whole tradition and a wealth of knowledge that's been ignored, repressed, disrespected, that we'd be well-advised to return to," he said.

Westwick said there were two prescribed burns in the NWT last year, one near Inuvik and one near Fort Simpson, the latter part of a training exercise. Plans for 2024 are still in the works.



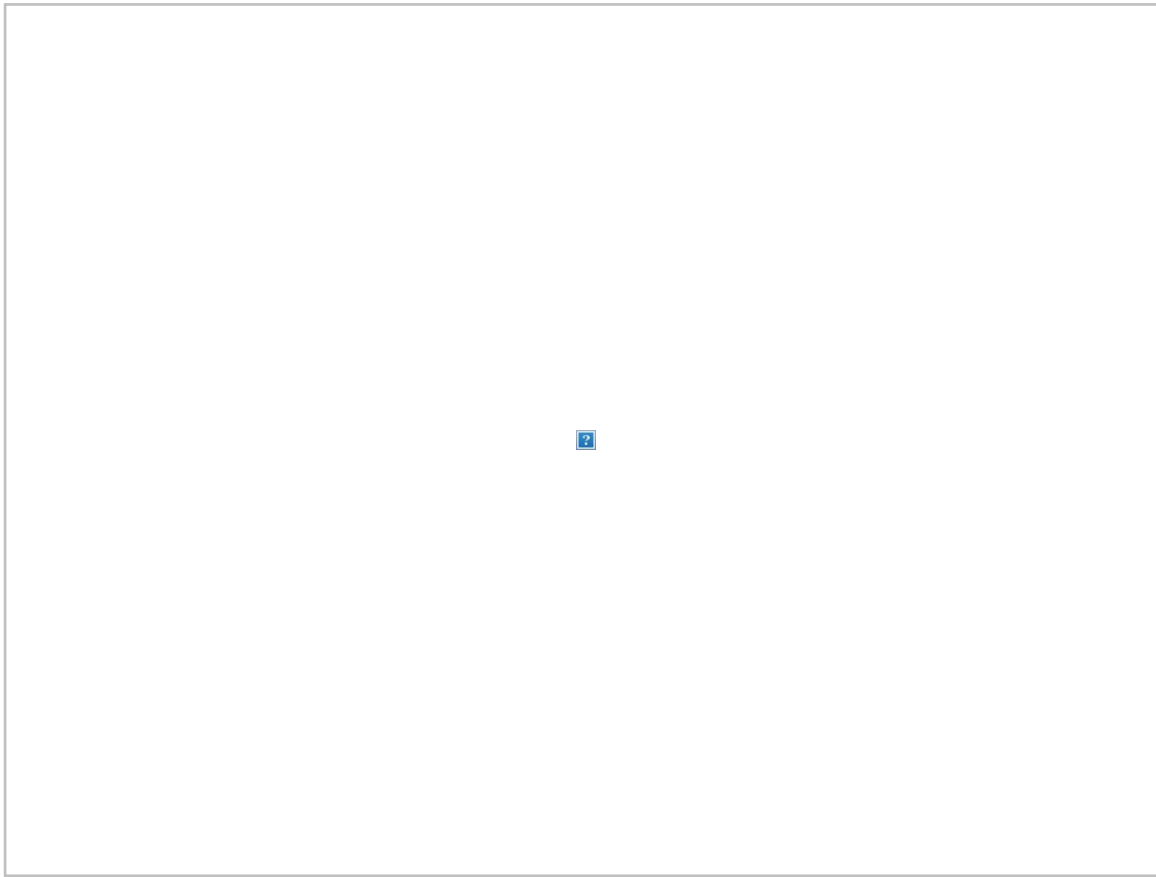
The Dene Nation, which has repeatedly called for a public inquiry into last year's events, wants Dene traditional knowledge to be incorporated into wildfire response, since the Dene have "always relied on our own understanding of the land and the environment around us to maintain a healthy lifestyle."

They're not alone in their demand for a review into wildfire management.

Regular MLAs stand to oppose a postponement of debate over a wildfire public inquiry.



NWT MLAs stand in February to oppose Premier RJ Simpson's request to postpone debate regarding a wildfire public inquiry.



Incident commander Frank Lepine, left, briefs federal emergency preparedness minister Harjit Sajjan and NWT MP Michael McLeod at a command post in Hay River. Photo: GNWT

[Residents of Enterprise and Fort Smith](#) have also called for an inquiry, and MLAs will shortly vote on whether to endorse such a measure. Internal reviews are happening at the Department of Environment and Climate Change, Department of Municipal and Community Affairs and the City of Yellowknife, where independent contractors will look at lessons learned. The territorial government has said those existing reviews should be enough.

Whether the territory makes changes to its approach or not, the land itself is changing under them.

The area between Enterprise and Kakisa that lit up in the first days of August was in the Taiga Plains ecozone, a kind of forest Diana Stralberg has been studying for its relationship to fire. What she has found is this forest type is in the process of a profound shift to something much more southern-looking and grassier.

“I started getting into projecting future fire and I think at that time, there was really a lot of skepticism, like, ‘Oh, this must be too extreme.’ I feel like increasingly, as we’ve started to observe the impact of these – especially after the last couple of fire seasons – people are starting to see this shift,” said Stralberg, a University of Alberta researcher.

Forest types are changing because of the severity of fires and, in turn, the fires are changing too. They’re coming more frequently and [burning younger forests](#).

While governments debate their response, just outside Hay River – in the blackened forest where the drought has now widened in area and grown to extreme levels, and where the cold and snow that once kept fires at bay is increasingly absent – smoke is still rising from the ground.

“Essentially,” Olsen said, “We’re still firefighting in the winter.”

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This article written by:

[Jimmy Thomson](#)

Jimmy is a freelance journalist and former NWT resident now based in Victoria, BC.

Email: mailbox@cabinradio.ca

Phone: 867-688-9309

Mail: Cabin Radio

PO Box 2545, 5007 50 Avenue

Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P8

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CBC North

September 4th, 2023

Canadian military needs dedicated climate disaster force, former army commander says

Lives at risk because Canada has no rapid response, warns retired Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie

Members of the Canadian Armed Forces Air Task Force carry hospital patients during wildfire-related evacuations from Yellowknife on Aug. 18. (Submitted by Alex Roy/Canadian Armed Forces)

A former army commander says Canada is behind its allies in not having a dedicated agency that can deploy personnel to disasters nationwide.

Retired Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie told CBC News the lack of a national rapid response force to help with wildfires, floods, evacuations and other emergencies is putting citizens' lives at risk.

In an exclusive interview with CBC News on Thursday, he said a dedicated national force is needed urgently, and could be "built into" or "adjunct to" the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) — but only if it comes with increased funding and doesn't further strain the country's already-stretched troops.

"The impact of climate change is irrefutable — it poses dangers to us all," Leslie said. "What has current government done to prepare for what they knew was coming?"

"The answer is nothing. They continue to go to the armed forces and allocate troops and resources in penny packets, in dribs and drabs, more for the political optics."

Retired Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie says Ottawa is far behind allies in creating a national emergency agency to help provinces. He warns Canadians' safety is at stake, but cautions against relying on an already-strained Canadian Armed Forces.

A federal emergencies ministry spokesperson told CBC News there are multiple ways Ottawa is preparing for future natural disasters, including \$700 million spent on wildfire management, where the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre — which co-ordinates mutual aid between provinces and territories — is key.

Ottawa says it is also pumping millions into training, equipment and planning, plus plans to update its Federal Emergency Response Plan. Defence Minister Bill Blair said he'll continue deploying the CAF when needed, calling Ottawa's commitment to national security and increased military funding "ironclad."

"While the primary responsibility for response to natural disasters rests with provinces and territories, Canadians can expect to see the military continue to respond to emergencies when the capacity of provinces and territories is overwhelmed," Blair said in a statement.

- [Why doesn't Canada have a national wildfire-fighting force?](#)

This summer has seen the CAF deployed to multiple natural disasters at the request of provinces, which are ultimately responsible for emergency management and natural disasters. These include Quebec, Alberta and now — until at least Sept. 15 — in B.C.

Meanwhile, the Royal Canadian Air Force helped the unprecedented evacuation of Northwest Territories residents. Previously, soldiers were essential in the wake of catastrophic floods in B.C.'s Lower Mainland after an atmospheric river in 2021.

Scientists agree such natural disasters are becoming more devastating and more frequent as a direct result of a warming climate.

"In Europe, it's hard to find a significant country ... which doesn't have a standalone emergency response force," Leslie said. "Do you have it as standalone, per se, or do you nest it within the armed forces so they can leverage heavy equipment to transport their stuff?"

"We already have military infrastructure bases spread across our country; we already have [CAF] transportation hubs which are well established."

'Broadening it beyond fire is appropriate'

Mike Flannigan, the B.C. innovation research chair in predictive services, emergency management and fire science, has called repeatedly for a dedicated national wildfire response force.

He sees several options for what authority might oversee such an agency, but the armed forces have an obvious appeal — especially if they can gain specialized training, and respond to multiple types of climate disasters quickly.

- [Military begins deployment, highway to Bella Coola closed as hundreds of wildfires burn across B.C.](#)

Another option is to emulate the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), but with a greater emphasis on prevention and mitigation before disaster strikes.

"Using the military as a special branch with appropriate training, and being able to address the emergencies before, during and after ... should be explored," the wildfire science professor at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C., told CBC News.

"And broadening it beyond fire is appropriate, like a FEMA organization."

Military already 'under-equipped and under-resourced'

But continuing to send in the CAF for the growing number of disasters would have some major drawbacks, several military experts warned.

Already, experts say, the country's military is severely underfunded, and struggling to maintain operational readiness — let alone coming close to Canada's NATO obligation to invest two per cent of its Gross Domestic Product into its armed forces. According to NATO, Canada currently [falls \\$20 billion short](#) a year of that pledge.

"In a democracy, I think we need to be careful with the use of armed forces," said Christian Leuprecht, professor at Royal Military College and at Queen's University. "This is an organization set apart for special purpose ... whose ultimate purpose is the application of the use of force.

"It's probably not your optimal first-responder organization."

- [Military personnel shortage will get worse before it gets better, top soldier says](#)

He said Canada's overseas commitments — including thousands of troops in Russian neighbour Latvia, and training and supplying Ukraine — combined with multiple domestic deployments this year alone have pushed the CAF to the "breaking point."

"It is seriously imperilling the organization from operating," Leuprecht said. "The armed forces have become the easy button for government ... every time somebody cries for help.

"People always have the impression if there's no war to fight, the military just kind of sits around, but quite the opposite is true. This is an organization that is massively overstretched because it's under-equipped, and under-resourced, for what it is being asked to do by politicians."

Defence Minister Bill Blair says the government will invest to ensure the Canadian Armed Forces can continue to keep Canadians safe at home and abroad.

'Proud of the work the armed forces does'

That concern is shared by the former lieutenant-general. As tensions with Russia and China escalate, Leslie said, domestic disaster relief must not be allowed to further stretch an underfunded military.

"They're called upon by the government because they have nowhere else to go to provide essentially brute force," Leslie said.

But, he asked, is soldiers filling sandbags during floods, felling trees to create wildfire breaks, and going door-to-door during ice storms going to actually mitigate the worst to come with climate change?

[Government prepared to order military airlift out of Yellowknife, defence minister says](#)

"Those tasks could actually be done by almost anybody," he said, adding what is needed is a full-time, highly trained specialized force — one with as much a focus on prevention as it is on disaster relief.

"I'm very proud of the work the armed forces does ... they respond at the drop of a hat," he said. "We desperately need a focus on emergency and disaster preparedness.

"Stop talking about climate change and actually start doing something to help Canadians faced literally with threats to their lives, certainly their homes, and most certainly their livelihood."