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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody. We are continuing our meetings on the issue of wildfires and emergency measures in communities. This is the 83rd meeting of the committee on indigenous and northern affairs.

In the first panel, I'm very pleased to see that we have the First Nations National Building Officers Association. We have Keith Maracle and John Kiedrowski. Then we have the Tk'emlups peoples with Viola Thomas. Finally, we have Chief David McDougall, chief of St. Theresa Point First Nation.

Welcome. I understand that you couldn't make it out to Ottawa, but we appreciate that you're here by video conference.

Each group will have 10 minutes to present for the record. You're also able to present an additional brief if you choose. After we hear from everybody, we'll go through a round of questioning from MPs. I'd ask MPs to please direct their questions specifically, because we have three distinct groups on this topic from different parts of the country.

If we go according to our agenda, we'll start with the First Nations National Building Officers Association. I'll give you indications of how many minutes are left when we're coming close to our timeline and try to cut you off when you've exceeded it.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Keith Maracle (President, First Nations National Building Officers Association): Thank you very much.

My name is Keith Maracle. I'm a Mohawk from the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in the Deseronto-Shannonville area. I've worked in native housing since 1974.

The First Nations National Building Officers Association was formed in 2003. When working with some of my colleagues across the country, we would get together in Ottawa; everybody was under the same program but we were all doing something different. Everybody wanted us to do something different. Ontario wasn't doing the same thing that other provinces were doing. We got together and decided we would put the First National Building Officers Association together. At that time we hired John Kiedrowski as our project manager.

We're a non-profit organization. We don't get involved in politics at the first nations level or any other. Our association likes to be the odd man out, you might say. Our association is all volunteers, except for our project manager. We're the only association in Canada that works specifically with first nations on housing issues, inspections, building codes, and stuff like that.

We recently established a partnership with the Canadian Construction Materials Centre. Under that we'll get their advice on technical issues and stuff like that, which we can pass along to our members. Our biggest and hardest thing is to keep our members up to date with what's going on in the building codes and stuff. These are changing so quickly, and with the minimum funding we get, it's very hard for us to keep up.

Since our inception we've worked very hard on the living conditions of our first nations people. We see a lot of stuff. I'm probably one of the most experienced inspectors, FNNBOA member, in the field. There are 132 first nations in Ontario. I've worked on a 128 of them. I've travelled from Labrador to British Columbia in the last 20 years doing training courses, and I've dealt with many first nations in between.

In 1974 we started an Indian inspection unit in Ontario. It was a pilot project put together with funding mostly from Indian Affairs and some funding from CMHC. Then in 2003 we started FNNBOA, the First Nations National Building Officers Association. In the first five years we couldn't spend all of the money you guys gave us in both organizations. After five years, we get crumbs. We have to fight for our money. Right now, I think FNNBOA gets about—

• (1110)

Mr. John Kiedrowski (Project Manager and Consultant, First Nations National Building Officers Association): On a project base we get \$100,000.

Mr. Keith Maracle: We get a \$100,000 on a project base, but we have to complete the projects and stuff like that and get this stuff done.

It's really different.

I've seen some really good stuff out there, but there's some really bad stuff too. I find the really good stuff is in the larger first nations. They had the infrastructure, the people, the money to do this.

When we get into the smaller first nations, they don't have the infrastructure. They try to build with the subsidy given to them by CMHC and the department. That's when the houses start to become in pretty bad shape.

I talk with community members as I go around. They are no different from the people sitting in this room. All they want is a comfortable house to live in. They don't want to have to fight for it. They want to be able to build this house, to be comfortable with it, to raise their families in it, and to move on from there.

I'm going to let John speak for a minute.

Mr. John Kiedrowski: One of the issues facing fire codes in first nations is the role of authority having jurisdiction. For example, the City of Ottawa is the authority for any construction that takes place within its boundaries, and that includes a number of inspections. You have to apply for building permits—it doesn't matter if it's new or renovated—and you have a series of inspections that take place. The plans are reviewed by building departments in consultation with fire people at the same time.

What happens in first nations is.... The concept of authority having jurisdiction was introduced in 1983, when Indian Affairs downloaded a lot of the construction practices to first nations. They said, "Here you go. You are now the authority having jurisdiction." One of the challenges we find is that a lot of the first nations don't really understand what authority having jurisdiction means when it comes to fire codes specifically. Fire codes relate to renovations, whereas building codes are for new construction. When there is a renovation, there are no inspections, no plans, no processes taking place. What happens if you have a home that's being renovated is that it's done on an ad hoc basis, with no inspections and not really in accordance with any fire codes, in many cases.

If you have new construction, chiefs and councils are the builders, at the same time as they are the inspectors. It's basically a case of the fox looking after the hen. What happens is that the first nations don't really have an inspection process. Inspections are done for a progress payment, but not necessarily to make sure they are meeting both fire and building codes. What you have is homes being built but not necessarily meeting building codes or fire codes, especially on renovations.

While the band council may own the home, tenants sometimes go ahead and do their own renovations. They might rewire, put in an additional heater or wood source, or make some amendments without really talking to the chief and council, because they probably wouldn't approve it, since they don't have the money to rebuild. Authority having jurisdiction really causes concern.

Let's look at some of the key points of why that happens. We have eight or nine different points. One is that many don't believe building permits apply to them. They believe that all inspections are the responsibility of the federal government, CMHC and INAC. There is also the issue of treaty rights on housing. Heating sources that are being installed are not necessarily to WETT certifications. There are a number of reality checks that don't happen on reserve but happen off reserve. Those same checks and balances need to be incorporated into chiefs and councils.

We have some final points. Go ahead, Keith.

•(1115)

Mr. Keith Maracle: We currently give presentations on housing authorities across Canada. We provide information and have a booklet on that. We have homeowner maintenance courses for tenants and stuff like that. We work on things like that across Canada.

We work with the Aboriginal Firefighters Association to try to address some issues. Also, we've developed a checklist for tenants and other people to go through and see how their house is doing and what needs to be repaired.

Did we make it?

The Chair: You made it. Thank you. You are very co-operative. I appreciate that.

Next we have the Tk'emlúps First Nation, or is it an association?

Ms. Viola Thomas (Councillor, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc): It's a first nation.

The Chair: Viola is a councillor for the band. Welcome. We are happy you made it to Ottawa. You've had a long trip.

Are you breaking our equipment?

Ms. Viola Thomas: It's an emergency situation.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Okay, tell us all about it.

Ms. Viola Thomas: First of all, *kukwstésemc* to the Algonquin nation for their continued generosity in allowing us to be on their unceded territory.

I want to say *kukwstésemc*, Madam Chair, to you and to each of the members of the committee for providing us with the opportunity to share our reflections regarding the emergency incidents we experienced within our community and nation. I want to share a little bit about our people and our territory because it's relevant to how you respond to emergency situations.

The territory that I come from has a lot of ranch lands. It's semi-desert. The Kamloops Secwépemc is one of 27 distinct tribal nations in British Columbia. We have the most diverse indigenous languages and culture in the country. The Kamloops Secwépemc actually translates as "people of the confluence". We have the North Thompson River and the South Thompson River that flow through our land. In terms of animals that are unique to our territory, we have mountain sheep, whitetail deer, and rattlesnakes. We have lots of ranchers. In fact, we actually have a ranch in our community. We also have a lot of distinct grasslands that you will not find anywhere else in the country. It's unique to our territory.

•(1120)

Our people are referred to as the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc nation. We are part of 17 distinct communities that make up Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc nation.

Madam Chair, I want to share with you today reflections on our response to the emergency preparedness and the challenges that our community faced. I want to start off with May of 2017. We had major flooding that occurred within our community. We never received any adequate support from the province or the federal government to respond to those flooding incidents. Many homes were flooded. People are still waiting for compensation and a response from the authorities regarding the impact that the flooding had within our community.

The emergency operational centre was not operational when the flooding occurred, so there was absolutely no contact from Canada or the province when that emergency situation evolved. The only person we had contact with was the local fire chief.

There was so much damage, and not just done to the homes, but also to many of our roads. Our community is right across the river from the city of Kamloops. Our main reserve is 49 square miles, so it is a very large land-based community. We have an industrial subdivision within our community. We have a lot of leased lands and sublessees in our community.

We require greater infrastructure for fire protection. We have a dire need to build an additional reservoir in our community, so that should another fire break out we have access to adequate infrastructure to respond efficiently to that kind of emergency.

We've approached Indian affairs for the past three years to seek that infrastructure support funding and been denied every year for the past three years. That is the continuous challenge that we face.

Also, the emergency plan that is currently laid out is so outdated. We need to be able to work with Canada and the province to update that emergency plan. It doesn't have proper mapping, for example, and that sort of thing.

We also had to hire equipment operators to deal with bringing in emergency materials, such as sand. There was no formal process for repayment. We have to do that out of our own ways and means.

The cost of damage to houses is \$54,657, and some of them are CMHC low-rental units. There is no new money for addressing that.

During the wildfire emergency situation, we had the same experience with no contact from Canada or the province. We took in a number of evacuees. We had over 5,000 evacuees that we put up in our own community. It wasn't until about three weeks later that we finally had contact with Canada and B.C. to try to access support for indigenous evacuees, as well as non-indigenous evacuees.

We housed lots of livestock from neighbouring communities. Once again, there was no reimbursement for any of those costs to help out. Individuals were still fighting Canada to get the adequate reimbursement for those situations.

Two weeks ago, we had a gun incident right across from our school. There was poor communication from Canada once again

when we had to resolve that. It traumatized our children because it happened right across the road from our school, which is an elementary school from kindergarten to grade 7. It was a beautiful day. The children were outside playing when the gunman came through our territory.

Therefore, I think there's a real need for effective coordination and communication, both from Canada and B.C., to work with first nation communities to better respond and coordinate our efforts for the safety and protection of all human beings, regardless of residency or race.

I urge this committee to address the ineffective coordination efforts on the part of Canada and B.C.

I will leave all of my material with the clerk so that it will be tabled with the committee.

•(1125)

The Chair: Very good.

Our final presenter is Chief David McDougall from Manitoba, representing St. Theresa Point First Nation.

Welcome.

Chief David McDougall (Chief, St. Theresa Point First Nation): Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to present to your committee.

To start, I'd like to introduce you to the area where St. Theresa Point First Nation is located. It's in northeastern Manitoba and part of the three communities on Island Lake. Island Lake is a lake full of islands that's about 80 kilometres long by 40 kilometres wide going east to west. There are three communities on there. St. Theresa Point has about 4300 members on its band list. Garden Hill probably has about 4,600. Wasagamack has over 2,000. Red Sucker Lake has about 1,200 or more. Nevertheless, there are 12,000 to 13,000 people who are registered treaty first nations people. We are accessed only by air and have access to winter roads, ice roads, for about six weeks now, due to climate change.

What we want to highlight in this presentation is that, as you know, at St. Theresa Point, where I'm from—I cannot speak for the other communities, but I can allude to their involvement in the whole experience—we have an emergency response protocol. This is due to having experienced three major fires coming through the community. In one case, five residential houses burned down.

If I may add at this point, MaryAnn, one of them that burned down happened to be Judy Klassen's house.

So, we have some experience in handling situations like this.

I'd also like to add that way back in 2007, or around that time, we had the H1N1 crisis, and it occurred right across this country. I guess the focal point was at St. Theresa Point. We had to do emergency measures.

We have a protocol that was triggered when the fire started coming toward Wasagamack First Nation because we knew there was an imminent threat from smoke. The forest fire erupted on the north side of Wasagamack First Nation early in the afternoon of August 29, 2017. The wind was coming from the north-northwest direction. A smoke plume quickly arose in the sky and developed into a vast, dark smoke cloud that passed through the sky above St. Theresa Point. The smoke developed energy, and lightning was observed emanating from it.

A forest fire, assisted by a strong breeze, approached Wasagamack First Nation and forced a full evacuation of the community members. The Wasagamack First Nation was evacuated to St. Theresa Point, about six kilometres to the southeast of Wasagamack. The only airport in the area is on an island across from the mainland of St. Theresa Point. The Wasagamack people were assisted by St. Theresa Point First Nation people, who accommodated them at the high school gym and middle years school gym. We also assisted in transporting them in using a barge, a pontoon boat for medical, and also another larger craft for medical evacuations. We also commandeered 16-foot Lund boats from the community—I think about 10 of them—and we assisted in bringing in people from Wasagamack. There were 917 people at both school gyms. We also deployed our school buses to take them from the dock to the school gym. Initially, people were transported to the airport island, and there were 197 people who spent the night at the airport.

With all this happening, we did assist in the evacuation of Wasagamack, and we used our resources to do this. We have been urged by the Red Cross and Indian affairs to submit billings for reimbursement and also for payment for use of these resources or assets.

The health centre and all the St. Theresa Point staff put in their work time after hours to assist in the fire and smoke emergency.

● (1130)

The Wasagamack people were put under a general evacuation order, meaning everyone had to leave for St. Theresa Point. An evacuation coordination unit was established at the first nation office and monitored by the evacuation supervisor. The health centre put together a health priority list that outlined persons with urgent health issues, such as the elderly, newborn babies, chronic needs persons, asthmatics, cardiac patients, etc. They were categorized into priority one, or P1s, priority two, and priority three categories. These were the people who needed to be evacuated after the Wasagamack people had been evacuated the next day, even though the evacuation began the same evening.

St. Theresa Point first nation began evacuating P1s and their families as early as the evening of August 30, 2017 and into the next day, August 31. The number of evacuees totalled over 1,000 people from St. Theresa Point. The first nation leadership had refrained from the beginning to send P2s due to the smoke situation being manageable at St. Theresa Point. We stayed in contact with the Manitoba Conservation unit in the Stevenson Island detachment, and the first nation monitored the situation and was prepared to mobilize P2s if necessary. The first nation sent administrative staff to monitor.

St. Theresa Point first nation's medically challenged people were assigned to the sports complex and convention centre to sleep in

dorm-style army cots in Winnipeg. This quickly became an issue, because people were subjected to hardship from the accommodations and care. We set up a unit at a hotel as a base camp for the people of St. Theresa Point. From there, the evacuees were eventually set up in more comfortable accommodations in hotels, thanks to the work of our people.

At this time, back in the Island Lake region, the forest fire continued to present spot fires and strong smoke over St. Theresa Point, creating uncomfortable air to breathe. Most P2s and P3s were required to stay indoors until action could be taken, if the fire erupted again. Cooler temperatures prevailed.

The nearby community of Garden Hill First Nation, 10 kilometres to the northeast of St. Theresa Point, was mainly covered by dense wood smoke from the forest fires to the northwest of its community. They had evacuated due to the heavy smoke covering the community, and people attested that you couldn't even see across a 50-foot clearing to the road. That's how dense the smoke was at Garden Hill.

Most of the Garden Hill first nation people had to be evacuated due to the intense blanket of smoke. When the sky cleared, the conservation sent for professional forest fire workers from British Columbia and other areas in Canada. The teams began controlling the fires by establishing fire lines and starting fires to control existing fires. Chiefs and councils, with the help of Canada conservation, chartered helicopters and small planes to inspect the burned sections to the north of Island Lake. The conservation officers explained that the expanse was covered with burned forests, and community leaders flying in the aircrafts observed the extent of the forest fire. It stretched as far as the eye could see into the northern direction, and all of the natural destruction was observed. Seventeen square miles had been destroyed, land once used by first nations to supplement diet and continue traditional activities such as camping, hunting, fishing, etc.

During the evacuations, there were over 1,100 people from St. Theresa who had been evacuated to Winnipeg, and these were all P1s. Also, there were over 1,200 people from Wasagamack, as many of their members were away from the community at that time during the summer. From Garden Hill, there were 2,900 people who were evacuated.

Coincidentally, at that time—I verified this through the department—there were over 900 people from Poplar River who had previously been evacuated from the east side of Lake Winnipeg. There were over 6,000 first nation people evacuated to the city of Winnipeg due to the wildfires. Throughout this time, they had to endure the situations at the emergency centres, and there was no state of emergency declared by the Province of Manitoba.

•(1135)

Also, for the expenses that were documented, the Red Cross would get pre-approved expenditures from the department, but for St. Theresa Point and other first nations, we've had to take our chances with submissions after the fact.

I just got word on one claim for about \$121,000. The letter said it was glad to inform us that \$71,000 had been approved. Where do we get the rest of the \$50,000? I guess we have to eat that up from our existing budgets that are already strained.

I want to make that last note on what's happening now. We're putting in our submissions to claim for expenses in dealing with the wildfires.

Thank you, everybody, for listening and giving me the time.

The Chair: It's a very short time when you have such a big story, with over 6,000 people being evacuated from a remote area. Thank you so much.

We'll get into more of the details through questions from MPs, starting with MP Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair; and thank you all for being here today.

It's great to have Keith Maracle here today. I've known him for a number of years. I really have to commend him for founding and advocating on behalf of FNNBOA, the First Nations National Building Officers Association, over all these years. It has made a difference in many indigenous communities that wouldn't have happened otherwise. Thank you so much for that.

First, why did you see the need to establish FNNBOA?

Mr. Keith Maracle: The need to establish it was the fact that we have all these programs in place and everybody was treating them differently. My colleagues in Manitoba were being treated different from the ones in Ontario and B.C. in everything, even though we were all supposedly working under the same requirements. We couldn't exchange information, because what they were doing I'd never heard of, and what we were doing, they'd never heard of. Finally, a bunch of us got together in Ottawa at CMHC and said we had to try to get this all in one spot and everybody on the same page. That was the driving force behind it.

•(1140)

Mr. Mike Bossio: In doing so, you have created a certain level of fire safety in a number of indigenous communities, but not for enough. As you say, amongst the building officer side, there's no consistency across the country. Do you see the creation of a fire marshal bringing that consistency across the country in trying to deal with the lack of a legislative framework, the lack of fire safety codes across the country within indigenous communities, and the lack of the ability to even use the fire marshal within the provincial areas? Would you like to speak to that?

Mr. Keith Maracle: We need some coordinating body such as that, because as in the story that the gentleman just related and the lady just told us, who coordinates this type of stuff for our first nations people? Nobody does. It goes by the wayside.

I run into that all the time as I travel the country: "Oh, you guys are federal jurisdiction, so the province doesn't have anything to do with you," or "That's a provincial issue and it doesn't apply on reserve." We get that all the time. There's still that big division out there, an "us and them" type of thing. They say, "All you first nations people are a federal responsibility", so it stops when we get to provincial borders and there's nobody to pick it up on the other side.

I'm not saying they have to be our responsibility. I don't really care. All I know is that somebody needs to start having our best interest at heart here.

Mr. Mike Bossio: John, you're the feet on the ground in this. What difference do you see a fire marshal making?

Mr. John Kiedrowski: I see a fire marshal being quite positive. I've talked with Richard and Blaine on this issue on many occasions. The real challenge is this whole authority having jurisdiction. If you take the concept of the authority having jurisdiction, any fire deaths or fire injuries as a result of the buildings is squarely on the shoulders of the chief and council. What we find quite interesting is that all of a sudden it becomes a comparable challenge in terms of fire deaths and the responsibility of the chief and council. So the fire marshal will be in a good position to help further provide information to councils on the authority having jurisdiction, what this means in terms of responsibility, and making sure that everything is built in accordance with building and fire codes.

Right now, there are no technical specification standards. We have a building code and we have a fire code. What happens in a lot of first nations is that there are no technical standards for the councils to follow up.

Mr. Keith Maracle: Just to follow up on that, most reserves are under part 9 of the national building code, which only requires one door in a residential building, whereas the fire code requires two. There's a conflict within those codes.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Has FNNBOA—and I know you've been talking to Blaine and Richard—been consulted directly on the creation of this fire marshal's office?

Mr. John Kiedrowski: We've had input from him on the discussions, so we probably all know what's happening there.

Mr. Mike Bossio: What advice would you give? I know I don't have a lot of time left, but if you had a few points that you think are key to creating a successful fire marshal's office, what would they be?

Mr. John Kiedrowski: I would suggest inspections of renovated buildings in first nation communities. That's really where the death traps are, and it's not being done.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Do indigenous building officers now exist in all first nations? Do you know?

You're a national organization, right?

Mr. Keith Maracle: They exist in all provinces but not in all first nations. We have building inspectors in every province across Canada.

• (1145)

Mr. Mike Bossio: Are those building inspectors advising all the different first nations on setting up building codes?

Mr. Keith Maracle: They advise the ones they're responsible for.

Mr. Mike Bossio: So, there are many that don't have any whatsoever.

Mr. Keith Maracle: That's right.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Are there any training programs in place right now for building officers?

Mr. Keith Maracle: No.

Mr. John Kiedrowski: I think the challenge, Mike, is that the inspectors may be telling the chief and council what to do, but a lot of chiefs and councils don't even have that framework, such as building codes and building bylaws.

For example, if Keith walks into a community and sees that something is not being built in accordance with the fire code, he can't do a stop-work order. He can't stop it down. Mostly, chiefs and council say, "Look, we have to get this thing built, and we're not going to do the inspection because we need to ensure that the home is being built so that we can get that payment done. It may not be in accordance with the codes, but we need to get that payment through."

Mr. Mike Bossio: The fire marshal would help with that.

Mr. John Kiedrowski: Well, he would help in terms of education.

The Chair: All right.

Questioning moves to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses here.

I'm going to start, and of course the focus will be the B.C. wildfire issue. To put it in perspective, I think 1.2 million hectares burnt. That's 3 million acres, and tens of thousands of people evacuated. It's not as big a challenge in terms of remoteness as it is in terms of its massive scope.

I do want to give a particular shout-out to Viola, whom I'm really glad to see her here today. Tk'emlúps opened up their powwow grounds. It didn't matter whether you were first nations or non-first nations, because they welcomed people from across the province. They fed them. They provided showers and washrooms. It was just very heartwarming. I think there's a great appreciation for what your band and community did.

When we first talked about it, there were barriers between first nations and non-first nations. You could be supported to help first nations, but you were sort of told that the other people didn't count in terms of getting support, even though you opened up your land and your hearts to them, and fed them. Did that issue get resolved?

Ms. Viola Thomas: No. We're still trying to resolve that, and it hasn't been resolved at all. It's still a big challenge.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Where is the challenge? Obviously, for the non-first nations people, the responsibility would be through province, perhaps right across.... Where's that challenge still?

Ms. Viola Thomas: It's at all levels. An example is the people who were evacuated from Esk'etemc, one of the neighbouring Secwépemc reserves. Because the emergency preparedness centre that was set up in the city didn't have them on their list as an evacuated community, those individuals were denied support. It was just as fundamental as that: they didn't know that it was a community of people who were evacuated, so they couldn't even get the emergency allowance because they weren't on the list. It starts at the very basic level.

The other challenge is that first nations aren't adequately acknowledged or recognized as a local authority in the same way as municipalities. Therefore, in any provincial or federal emergency planning preparedness training, we're not included. We should be included, because we have four bridges that come through our community, we have Highway 1, we have the Trans-Canada Highway, and we also have the CN railway that comes through our community. To exclude first nations in that way is putting all of our lives in danger.

We're already at risk because of the wildfires killing off a lot of the animals. That's food security for a lot of our families who hunt in the winter and fish in the summer. There will be a lot of families who will have hard times this winter because of the impact of the wildfires. Historically, Canada used to be proactive and have effective collaboration around resource management to prevent wildfires. Traditionally, our people did early spring fires to get rid of the underbrush, so that was a prevention method. We did traditional fire burning, so we need to restore some of those practices, but we need Canada and the provinces to actively include us in training around emergency preparedness.

• (1150)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I have two questions.

Typically, a local government declares a state of emergency. A province can declare a state of emergency.... There are levels. When you talked about Kamloops declaring a local state of emergency and triggering support, for example, for the flooding that you talked about, was a local state of emergency also declared for your flooding, or do the first nations not have the ability to declare an emergency?

Ms. Viola Thomas: We didn't have the ability to declare that, so that's one of the barriers. That's a really good example of why you need to engage first nations in emergency preparedness.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: We heard on Tuesday from the First Nations' Emergency Services Society, who have a bit of a coordination and a responsibility role. How does that group interplay with your community?

Ms. Viola Thomas: We had some real challenges with trying to convince the Red Cross to come to our powwow grounds to train our volunteers and staff on how to access the emergency allowances.

The application requires that you have an electronic mail address. A lot of our people don't have computers. They're not connected to the Internet, so even the fundamental process of making applications for emergency allowances doesn't take into consideration our realities within first nations communities.

Fundamentally, the Red Cross really needs to step up and train more indigenous people if they're going to be the first responder for emergency preparedness for our communities because, quite frankly, they were a barrier to us. It took four weeks before they were able to send their staff over to train our volunteers.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Maybe you can spend some time thinking about it, because we can take submissions for the next little while, but if you were going to give two or three recommendations, and I'm hearing indigenous community members trained by Red Cross... Can you talk about what you would believe would be some important lessons learned that we could contemplate?

Ms. Viola Thomas: I think that the public safety ministry—

The Chair: Make it a very short answer, please.

Ms. Viola Thomas: —should be decentralized and not be centralized out of Ottawa. There should be regional offices in each province and territory where they can provide community resources for training so that it's comprehensive in all facets of emergency preparedness.

The Chair: Please, I'd remind MPs to ask your question and leave enough time for our guests to answer.

MP Cannings.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Thank you, and thank you, all, for being here before us today.

I'd like to start with Ms. Thomas.

Kukwtsésemc for being here. *Lim'limpt*, as we say in the Okanagan. It was nice to hear your talk, especially how you described your land. I grew up in the desert grasslands in the Okanagan and still live there. In my previous life, I worked a lot with the local Indian bands there, the Pentiction, Osoyoos, and Lower Similkameen. You mentioned some of the traditional practices that helped deal with wildfires. I know that in the Pentiction Band they have firekeepers who are still doing that to some extent, but I imagine those prescribed burns, as we now call them, are difficult to get through any permitting process.

I just wonder what issues you face there and what your band does about them. Is there an interest in your band to do that practice more often? After the 2003 fires in B.C., we had a program that was going to help pay for all of that on both reserves and municipalities to fireproof those, but it seems to have been forgotten about.

I just wondered if you could comment on that.

• (1155)

Ms. Viola Thomas: Currently Tk'emlups has an agreement with the Kamloops Fire Rescue. During the wildfires this summer we ended up having a lot of homeless people come from across the river from the city. That's created a real safety issue for our community because many of those individuals have life challenges with addictions. Quite often they're leaving their dirty needles along our

beach and whatnot. Every spring, we still do our prescribed burning. We do it in collaboration with community members.

But we also need to look at it in terms of the human factor, in terms of how these emergencies play out with people who are marginalized or vulnerable, particularly homeless people. I really feel there's that lack of coordination inter-ministerially to address that facet of emergency preparedness.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Do you carry out the spring burning on outside areas, away from the river, up from the edges of the forest, that interface area that might be most impacted by wildfires?

Ms. Viola Thomas: We target different areas each year depending on the underbrush growth.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'd like to turn to Mr. McDougall.

We've heard about a lot of the limited infrastructure that a lot of first nation communities have. I've heard of communities without fire trucks or even access to water. I assume water is fairly close at hand where you are.

Perhaps you could just list the top two or three priorities that you would need met by the federal government for that firefighting infrastructure.

Chief David McDougall: The problem that occurred was due to the fact that right now most fires near aboriginal communities are left to burn out, according to the laws of nature, and no action is taken to monitor or avert the possible outbreak in these sections. Why can't the evacuation be averted by the Nature Conservancy of Canada, by putting out the small fires near the community? They wait until they escalate.

The water bombers were deployed to another area. They're not deployed until it's a real emergency in our area. These are some of the things that people don't realize happen in the remote areas of the country. Why do they wait and spend millions of dollars on evacuations when they can avert these situations with early intervention? In the past we would ask our local able-bodied men to be trained by traditional forest fire fighters. We'd go out there with these elderly gentlemen who knew how to tackle the fires, and we would put out the small fires before they escalated to major fires. But now we are told by the Nature Conservancy not to engage the fires. So another strategy needs to be embarked on.

Yes, we have lots of water around. However, there are no assets to pump the water to douse the fires. This happens. Also, in the past, as I mentioned, our community was threatened by fire three times. We took the initiative to deploy our heavy equipment to create a firebreak, and we saved a \$30,000 school complex. If it were up to the strategy the government was utilizing, we probably would have lost the school and would have been back again on the list trying to get a new school.

In other cases where we did our own emergency measures, we evacuated a minimal number of people. But as in this case, we are asked by the government if it's time to mobilize people in danger, and we say, yes, we declare it. That's what they give to the first nation council. Now, when the people get to the city, they are at the whim of whether an important convention is happening. We go to the hotels. We had to move elders around to accommodate venues that had been booked beforehand, because the province did not declare a state of emergency. Two hoteliers who look after the Radisson here in the city said that back in 1997 when the flood took place south of Winnipeg, they were able to cancel venues to accommodate these people so they were not disrupted. They were traumatized as it was, and they wanted to leave them in that place.

That was never done for us. We were moving elderly people, small families, all over the city, wherever there was space. They could not stay in these places, especially in the soccer compound, because that facility is kept very cold because of the athletic activities. So they're asked to sleep in there on cots. If you've ever tried to sleep on a canvas cot or an air mattress out in the cold, there's no insulation below. A couple of our elders caught pneumonia from that.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

Sorry, but we've run out of time.

Mr. Richard Cannings: That's fine.

The Chair: For clarification, was the education complex worth \$30,000 or \$30 million?

Chief David McDougall: It was a \$30-million project.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning now goes to MP Anandasangaree.

We'll take a couple of minutes. Because we started late and we have guests who flew in, perhaps we could—

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): How long are you proposing?

The Chair: Could we take five minutes?

I see that we have agreement for five minutes.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, panel, for being here.

Mr. McDougall, I know quite a few young people were affected. Can you tell us what supports they had during the evacuation?

Chief David McDougall: Which people?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Young people, children and youth.

Chief David McDougall: By during the evacuation, do you mean in the city?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Yes.

Chief David McDougall: There were some very innovative attempts, I would say, to keep them occupied and out of trouble, but people start testing the boundaries and whatnot. We had some scary moments when certain young people went missing for a few hours.

At the same time, I'd like to commend the efforts of our MLA, Judy Klassen, for getting people and groups to come to entertain the kids. The soccer compound was very conducive to efforts to maintain the kids' interest. It was a great compound for that purpose, including the open area, the field. The kids were having a great time, including having a wiener roast and also activities inside. The facility itself is conducive to that.

Downtown at the convention centre, out the door, I saw drug dealers hanging around and trying to get their attention. I had to intervene a couple of times myself and with the city police. I was in close dialogue with them, and they helped out quite a bit.

They had virtually nothing to do at the downtown location, the convention centre. There were no shower facilities, and these people were there for eight days. But in the soccer complex on the north side of the city, they had shower facilities and whatnot.

That's why we wanted to take them out of that setting as soon as possible. It was getting really tense.

• (1205)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Chief.

Councilor Thomas, can you give us a sense of what lessons were learned and what we can take forward in our report?

Ms. Viola Thomas: The challenges around communicating with so many different bodies was a huge challenge to overcome. For example, when we had to have the lockdown when the gunman came through our community, it created total chaos, because once the RCMP requested that our community be locked down—the schools, everybody working at the band office, and the folks who were in the community cleaning up our community graveyard—there was no communication coming back as to when that lockdown was going to be lifted. It just created more chaos and more trauma for the families, especially the young people.

Whenever there is an emergency response, we need to ensure that there is adequate trauma counselling provided after those emergencies occur. That incident had a huge impact on the children at the school. Many parents were scared to send their kids to school the next day. That's one lesson. We really need to encourage government to provide that type of support after emergency situations.

Another lesson is about advanced planning, with all the different agencies, around emergency preparedness so that we're all on the same page in terms of how to respond to an emergency, based on the type of emergency.

With the wildfire situation, we certainly didn't plan for that to happen. We certainly didn't plan to open up our community to allow evacuees to come in. It put a great strain on our existing services. A lesson from that would be to recruit more volunteers in advance.

Connecting with the right officials was also a big challenge, because we were getting different information from different sources. They weren't all on the same page. The key is to ensure that we are connecting with the appropriate officials.

The Chair: Thank you.

We've run out of time.

It's a complicated issue with many different factors.

I want to thank each and every one of you for coming here to Ottawa on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. Thank you very much for coming out.

Chief, thank you for coming down to Winnipeg. I know that others will be presenting their perspectives as well.

We look for recommendations as to how we can do better, so if you choose to submit a brief, that would be appreciated.

Meegwetch to everybody. Safe travels. Thank you.

We'll suspend for a short time and reconvene in about five minutes.

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: Let's reconvene the meeting. I see that our panellists are with us now.

On the telephone we have Mr. Al Richmond, chair of the Cariboo Regional District.

Al, you'll explain how you feed into fires and emergency measures.

Then we've got MLA Judy Klassen, who represents the area that was evacuated, and she is by video conference.

We're very pleased to have you.

In Ottawa, we're on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. We recognize that because we're in the process of truth and reconciliation.

You will have 10 minutes to present, and then we will open it up to questions from the MPs who are here in Ottawa.

First on our agenda I've got Al Richmond.

Al, are you ready to start? Do you want to go first?

Mr. Al Richmond (Chair, Cariboo Regional District): Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen and Madam Chair, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I'm Al Richmond, the chairman of the Cariboo Regional District, a regional government in the central part of British Columbia. We are a large area of 80,000 square kilometres. We have a rural population of about 60,000 residents. We have 15 first nations, and one, of course, is the Tsilhqot'in First Nation, which just had the land title case settled in the Williams case.

You may have heard that our region was significantly impacted by wildfires last summer. Our emergency operations centre was open for an unprecedented 77 days. During this period, we had over 211 wildfires in our region. As a result of those wildfires, we issued about 149 evacuation orders and alerts, which is a staggering number. During most of these types of events, we might do six or seven, but it kept changing.

Throughout the summer, nearly 36,000 people in the Cariboo were put on evacuation alert and order, equating to about 60% of our population. In fact, 48% of our population was evacuated over the summer. These numbers reflect the data we have for our regional

district residents and municipal residents, but they don't give the full impact on first nations communities in our region. Through our response, we had over 167 people working, because you can appreciate that, when we had our main offices evacuated, we had to bring people in from the outside. We brought in about 167 people over the period of 77 days with the co-operation of the Province of British Columbia and various local governments throughout the province to help and assist us in doing the various tasks that we have in our EOC. It takes about 44 people to run an emergency operations centre of our size.

The unfortunate news is that we lost around 60 homes, as well as another 167 structures, for a total of about 227 structures. What is very fortunate for us, and we're thankful for, is that we had no fatalities. We did have some seniors and some people with complex care issues who passed away, not directly as a result of the fire, but perhaps indirectly in the transfer to other health locations because our hospitals were evacuated.

In B.C., local governments operate their emergency operations centres to respond to emergencies in their jurisdictions, and we have the ability to issue evacuation orders and alerts. The regional district has the authority, and our local municipalities and first nations also activate their emergency operations centres to respond to emergencies, and we all report to the PREOC centre of the provincial government. In our case it's in Prince George, and there's a central operations centre in Victoria. As local governments, we work together where we can, but we all have separate authorities, and we all issue our own evacuation alerts and orders for our residents.

Specifically referring to first nations in B.C., they issue a band council resolution to evacuate or to place residents on alert. We have no authority over the residents or their areas, because it's federal jurisdiction, but we work with them on a government-to-government basis to coordinate adjacent evacuation orders and alerts. We were very successful this summer in working with our first nations partners. We had a liaison from the Province of British Columbia in our emergency operations centre throughout the emergency who helped coordinate the flow between the regional district and various first nations. We included the first nations communities in our order and alert information in our public mapping program at their request, so all the residents in our region could see one map with all the alerts and orders.

Our message to first nations is that we will come and help and do everything for you if we receive an invitation. We have to recognize that there are autonomous levels of government. We are pleased if they invite us and ask for our assistance, but we're always cognizant and respectful of the fact that, when we go into their territory, we recognize the chief and the power of their councils. I can't say that enough. We're here to help. We're not here to tell people how to do things.

We coordinated the timing of our orders with the first nations, and if they were interested, we made some changes if they were at all possible. This meant we issued several joint press releases, hosted joint press conferences, and held some joint public meetings that were quite successful.

One challenge we saw with the first nations communities in the emergency this summer was how the different communities had varied understandings of their own authority as a local government. In some cases, they have limited capacity to respond. Some of our first nations set up their own emergency operations centres, issued orders and alerts, and coordinated emergency services for some residents without difficulty.

• (1220)

As for other first nations governments, I had a chief in our office who didn't know that they had the authority to do what we did. She thought we did it. She thought our evacuation orders applied to her, and I explained to her that no, she needed a band council resolution, and if they needed our assistance we would help them write that resolution. We were there to help, not to obstruct.

So they went back and managed through their own, but that chief and I had very close contact through the remainder of our event and evacuations here. It was not the proper time to build relationships, but we improved our relationships there.

We also had regular meetings with the band representatives to discuss how we would manage re-entry to our communities. I found in most cases that while it's important to have staff communicating with first nations staff, it's extremely important to ensure there's leader-to-leader interaction, because if you don't contact the leadership, if I didn't call the chief, they felt we weren't treating them as equals and they wanted that interaction.

The chiefs attended the first few meetings we had with respect to re-entry in our community. After that they sent their staff, and I was able to remove myself as it became a staff-to-staff conversation. We needed to keep in mind that for significant things we would contact them directly.

Overall our response in the region was quite successful this summer. We lost no residents. Our residents co-operated and left the area safely. We were able to adapt and refine our policies and processes as we responded, and we were able to coordinate with our local governments and learned a lot.

There's always room for improvement. Permitting re-access to locations was a challenge for us, and we solved some of those issues by working with our cattlemen's association on agricultural issues.

The reason I'm not in a place with the technology that would allow me to video conference with you is that we've been conducting 18 community meetings over the last two weeks to talk to residents about what they thought went right and what they thought went wrong so we can learn from our experience this year and move forward to do a little better job should this happen in the future, although I pray and hope that no one has to experience what we did this past summer.

Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes my opening remarks. I always learn more by listening, and so I'd be quite pleased to take any questions at this time.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going to hear from MLA Judy Klassen and then we'll come back to with questions, I'm sure.

Judy, welcome to our committee, and please go ahead. You have 10 minutes for your presentation, and then we'll have questions after that.

Ms. Judy Klassen (Member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, Kewatinook, As an Individual): Thank you for inviting me here to speak. I am the MLA for Kewatinook here in Manitoba. I have 16 communities in my riding. Two are towns, and then I have 14 first nations, 11 of which are remote fly-in communities, and of course Churchill is now a remote fly-in community.

The wildfires continuously force my people out of their homes and into shelters and hotel rooms down south. Typically we use Brandon and Winnipeg. This year, over 6,500 people from first nation communities were forced to be evacuated from their homes. However, with respect to Island Lake, such an event did not need to occur. If proper fire prevention methods had been in place, as well as proper actions taken on behalf of Manitoba Conservation, there would not have been a need for people to be evacuated. I have not received the report yet as to the cost of this unneeded evacuation, but I am waiting patiently.

In mid-August, there were concerns about the fire situation developing close to Wasagamack First Nation. Residents had been complaining of the heavy smoke coming into the community. On some days, the smoke was really thick due to the wind direction. People, especially those with respiratory issues, were having difficulty with the air quality. Our people were told that the local conservation officers and the leadership were helping keep an eye on the fire. There could have been better planning. The fire location was known and the fire was small. It was less than 700 hectares. If it had been dealt with sooner, there would have been no need for the Island Lake evacuation.

The leadership did put in a request to have water bombers deal with the fire, but it was denied. The chief of Wasagamack First Nation, Alex McDougall, told me that the conservation officer, CO, stated that the fire near his reserve was not within their jurisdiction. I am still getting that investigated, as the CO hasn't provided a response as of yet.

I also need to point out that there was a small kitchen fire in one of the restaurants on Stevenson Island, where the CO office is located, and a water bomber was called in to help put out that fire. There are many Garden Hill members who are adjacent. Those closest to Stevenson Island are quite angry about that fact today.

On August 29, the Wasagamack First Nation leadership announced a state of emergency, and that priority one residents would be evacuated to St. Theresa Point, to be further evacuated to Winnipeg. I must state that Wasagamack First Nation does not have an airstrip, so we share our airstrip in St. Theresa with the Wasagamack people.

They had to go by boat. The smoke had blackened the sky, making it quite hazardous. There were two prenats who lost their babies in the following days because of that hazardous trip to the St. Theresa First Nation. Initially, we had only about 300 people who were going to be evacuated from Wasagamack as priority one. They consisted of the elderly, the prenatal, and those with respiratory illnesses, but within an hour of the announcement, due to the sudden change in wind direction, all members of Wasagamack were ordered to get to the docks for transport to St. Theresa Point First Nation, which is 15 minutes by boat.

I have many recommendations in my full report, but my number one recommendation is to continue with East Side Road Authority's plans to build a common airstrip capable of handling larger aircraft for both the Wasagamack and St. Theresa Point first nations. I know that provincially we have shut down ESR, the East Side Road Authority, but the roads identified in that project still need to be made. We need access for health, economic opportunity, cheap housing materials, and food security. There are many reasons why we need those roads. It should be noted that, as I stated, Wasagamack does not have its own airstrip. People must travel to St. Mary Island. That is where our airport, St. Theresa Point's airport, is located. Again, it's 15 minutes by boat for Wasagamack, and five minutes for St. Theresa Point band members.

●(1225)

Planes could not be sourced by the Red Cross to come to help with the airlift. That resulted in nearly 200 evacuees having to wait and stay at our airport, as well as being housed in St. Theresa Point schools for the rest of the 1,200 Wasagamack First Nation members.

After the announcement, both St. Theresa Point and Garden Hill First Nation had to announce their evacuation due to the fire growing from 700 hectares to, I believe, 22,000 hectares. Over 3,700 people were identified as having to leave. Upon arriving in Winnipeg, we maxed out the hotel rooms in the city and in Brandon. The majority were put into a temporary shelter at the RBC Convention Centre and later the Leila soccer complex.

The handling of the evacuees at the temporary shelters was horrific to witness. People who had just had open-heart surgery and amputations were put onto hard cots. They were given only one measly blanket. The buildings were very cold and drafty and very bright, so sleep was not to come.

Elders and prenats were not placed near bathrooms. Exhausted mothers were chastised when their children ran freely as they were looking for something to do. We lost children within the building, and the security would not lock down the building for us so that we could locate these kids who went running freely. One child even managed to get on a city bus. Luckily by evening, within four hours, she was located and returned to the centre.

That was in the early days. Some mothers had not slept in nearly 48 hours, due to having to stay at the school. Evacuees were forced to wait in lines for up to eight hours to be registered, to be given a chance to eat food or relax comfortably. I asked the Red Cross site manager to allow—

●(1230)

The Chair: Judy, we need to pause. We have a technical problem. You're now speaking French. We want to understand you. We'll go right back to you. You won't be penalized.

Okay, we're good. Please go ahead.

Ms. Judy Klassen: Evacuees were forced to wait in line for up to eight hours because of the slow registration process by CRC—the Canadian Red Cross—before they were even given a chance to eat food or relax. It was quite frustrating.

I had asked the Red Cross site manager to allow our own people to help with the registration, because there were only eight people registering at a time and perhaps two or three were on a break, meaning five people were registering the 300 to 400 people in line at a time. It was heartbreaking. I stopped asking after being denied twice.

It was after his shift had ended and his replacement came in that I appealed to the second site manager, and he let us get our own people in line. For all the preliminary data—names, addresses, birth dates—our own people didn't have to ask the parents the kids' names, because they already knew them, so we got through. It was the same for the medical conditions. Our people knew what each other was suffering from, and that saved the embarrassment of having to publicly list all your issues with someone else sitting right beside you.

We got through 300 people in less than an hour. As the buses came in, it was easy to manage people who were coming in off the bus.

People were starved. Many Wasagamack people said they wished they hadn't been forced to leave St. Theresa, as our own people fed them far better than the Red Cross did. There were gracious donations of food, clothing, and items from the general public—Manitobans—which the Red Cross did not want to handle, but we found a way to accept them, each band having set up a receiving unit in hotels throughout Winnipeg.

After an evacuee was processed, they were allowed to eat. There were then issues with hygiene and sanitation. Everyone was completely smelling like smoke and was dirty from having to sleep on airport floors or outside the airport while waiting for a plane. There were no facilities that would allow for our elders or our children or young mothers to wash their clothes or take showers. Doctors, health care aides, or nurses were not made available upon the arrival of our people, despite many issues.

These were our priority one people; all had health issues. I personally called 911 there at RBC Convention Centre so that my people could get the medical aid, as many evacuees were told by Red Cross staff to find their own way to health care clinics—of which typically they wouldn't have any knowledge, as they were not Winnipeg residents—or were told to go and wait in line at hospital emergency rooms.

Going forward, on-site medical care should be a priority for evacuees, particularly in the event of a natural disaster, so that the sick and elderly can receive the care they desperately need. We have had many elders suffer from pneumonia because of the draughty evacuation shelters. As well, our newborns and our prenatal women all have serious issues with health because of what they went through.

Regrettably, some of our hotel evacuees did not fare much better. Some of the hotels had no restaurants. Even when they did have a restaurant, many evacuees ended up paying out of pocket for food or outright starved, as the food vouchers given to them were insufficient. Also, the menu selection was very limited. Not many elders can digest pizza or spicy foods.

Again it was my own people coming to the rescue. We've had first nations from the area surrounding Winnipeg come in with moose meat, goose, fish, bannock. We were able to find kitchens. It was very hard to find kitchens—

• (1235)

The Chair: Ms. Klassen?

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes?

The Chair: Hi, Judy. I'm sorry, but we've run out of time. You can, though, submit your brief to us. We need to move on to questioning. I'm so sorry I had to interrupt your presentation.

Moving on to questioning, we start with MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both so much for being part of this today. It's valuable information that will help to inform this report.

Ms. Klassen, several of your photos on social media put the wildfires into perspective for Canadians on the ground and across the country. They showed the scale of the wildfires and the emotion of the evacuees. What part of the story do they not tell? Can you provide some further perspective that goes beyond the photos?

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes. One of the things that my people are known for is their resilience. We're known for not sharing our issues. Privately, I had one prenatal mother who had a two-week old, just standing in the middle of the shelter, who was just outright crying. She was so worried about the issues with the mumps outbreak that occurred. Her baby was two weeks old and was not immunized. They weren't putting her into a hotel room and she was just so despondent, so I feared for her. We have also a high rate of suicide and there were people who actually attempted suicide. There were people who ran away. We did have children taken away from us due to CFS issues. We know our people who are intergenerational trauma survivors and they are alcoholics, but we couldn't do anything for them.

It was just heartbreaking. I told the media several times that they didn't need to know all the issues that we went through because they could just believe me that we were facing heartbreak.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

Are there any local people with emergency management training in any of the first nations in the region?

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes. However, the funding was taken away. It was unfair. We're trying to get those plans back into place, but

everything was cut off under the Harper government for a lot of our programs in the first nations. We're still seeing the fallout of that to this day. Thankfully, there were a lot of initiatives and we're working with the government to try to get those back into the communities, but it's a long process. I have submitted proposals and I'm waiting to hear back.

Mr. Mike Bossio: When we were visiting Winnipeg recently as part of our land claims study, we came across Kapyong Barracks.

We talked about the lack of hotels and that people were sleeping on floors, soccer pitches, and cots, while elders got chills that could cause pneumonia, etc. As you were speaking, I was thinking about that barracks sitting there, basically falling apart. Do you not think that maybe it might be a good idea to turn that into an evacuation centre? I know that many have tried to say that we should hand it over to indigenous communities, but maybe we should consider looking at that as an opportunity to make it a permanent evacuation centre.

• (1240)

Ms. Judy Klassen: I believe that it would be better for it to go to the indigenous community because I know for sure that they would open their doors readily and easily to indigenous people when they are evacuated. My goal is that people do not need to be evacuated because we do have the knowledge. Way back when, we had indigenous knowledge on fire prevention and I put that in my proposal. It's similar to what the B.C. indigenous people do. I know that they have ideas and it's traditional knowledge to create fire breaks around communities. However, I'm sure that if the indigenous people were given that opportunity, those barracks would be open to our people if we had to use them as an evacuation centre.

Mr. Mike Bossio: You made a very good segue into my next question about prevention and the creation of a fire marshal position, which once again, should be indigenous-created, indigenous-led, and indigenous-trained.

I'd like to get your thoughts on the difference that you feel a fire marshal would have made, leading up to this emergency situation in Manitoba.

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes. There was a great person by the name of Ivan Mason. He had those plans readily available. He's not in our communities any more because his job got cut, but when he was there in our communities, we never had to face this issue of running here and there at the last minute trying to keep all our people safe.

I faced a forest fire once before and ended up losing my home in that forest fire. I believe my chief mentioned it earlier. The process that time compared to the process that people went through this year is very shocking and very sad. We should be listened to. We know how to help our people. We have that intelligence in the communities. We just don't have the permission.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Would a fire marshall's office, then, ensure that first nations are properly involved in emergency planning, in emergency preparedness, prevention, and in evacuation or non-evacuation, as far as dealing with wildfires is concerned? Do you see that as a pivotal role that could create a standard of service and fire safety across all indigenous communities nationally?

Ms. Judy Klassen: Definitely. There has to be something in place. We need those plans worked out. I explained that we have practice sessions on what to do during evacuations. We need something like that for first nations. That was what my proposal was largely based on.

It was sad to see after we had marched from the Leila Avenue complex all the way to the legislative building that our premier, Brian Pallister, responded in a tweet. We're a first nations community and barely have access to the Internet. We wouldn't download the Twitter app. That was how he responded to me, yet I work with the guy in the legislative assembly. I was really shocked at that type of treatment, which led me to put a resolution forward for the government to respect first nations leadership as governors in their own right and make a phone call.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you, Ms. Klassen.

The Chair: We've gone over the time on both sides. Let's try to be cautious.

We'll move to MP Cathy McLeod.

• (1245)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you. I'm going to be directing my questions mostly to Mr. Richmond.

We heard from Viola Thomas, who lives in the south of my area. Al Richmond lives north where it intersects higher up, another area that was extremely impacted. I do have to give a great shout out to our local government that, for eight or nine weeks, worked 16 to 20 hours a day dealing with this and really were on the coalface of the fire challenges. It took a huge amount of energy and effort to take care of their communities.

I know one of the challenges in the area, both within the ranching community and within the first nations community, was the conversation around, "We know our land, we know how to deal with things, and if we stay behind we can take some protective measures that the government doesn't have the capacity to do." In Australia, they have a program called "Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early", and they actually acknowledge and train community members to respond in that way.

Mr. Richmond, have you any comments around those particular challenges? Obviously we always want to keep people safe, but we also have people who are desperate to protect their land, their communities, and their livelihoods.

Mr. Al Richmond: I'm glad you got the title right, because what has come out of Australia is "stay and defend", which has been misleading because most people haven't delved into the issues of what that actually means. One of the concerns is that they train people in British Columbia, both the ranching communities and the first nations communities. Of course, the first nations are autonomous and can stay and defend their communities. We've had an issue where our forest service needs to work better with the

ranchers and work with them in defending the land. There are some good points to be made about their knowledge of the local area, about their ability to defend, about the fact that when they have a large hayfield or a large irrigated field, the fire is not likely to get to them.

You need to look at the defend policy in Australia and say that there are probably some good things there, and there are some bad things too. If you look at Black Saturday, there were so many people who died in 2009, some 173 people, defending their homes. Sometimes what happened is that it was too late to get them out.

With many of our evacuations here, it was because of lack of egress. We had to get people out because we were losing a way to get them out, because of the limited ability to exit the community. That's a challenge.

Training is paramount. What the forest service in British Columbia tells folks is that they need to have these courses. Of course, they don't sign up for them early enough, and then in the middle of an event they want to become partners in dealing with fires.

The ranchers have equipment. The ranchers know their area, and we have to encourage, and we will be encouraging, the forest service to work with them.

In terms of partnership issues, we saw areas where incident commanders worked well with the local community, worked well with the local ranchers, and then we'd see that incident commander change and the new one would have a different philosophy. If you can believe it, he would actually send them away and say, "We don't want you. Get out of here. You can't help us."

I'm on a conference call today, and one of the challenges in our area, and I would suspect in Manitoba and other locations as well, is that we put all this money into improving broadband and cellular services, and the statistics say how much of Canada has those provided population-wise. However, the reality is that a vast area of Canada, rural Canada, has not been provided with broadband services, so our problem with communicating this stuff is a lack of broadband, a lack of cellular services to get our messages out. That's a huge challenge to rural and indigenous communities.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you. I guess if some support from the federal government is ultimately offered to ranchers, maybe it would be appropriate to look at and also make available that sort of training and support for the communities in that area.

Mr. Al Richmond: I think it would be a great thing to see another level of government put forward assistance. Of course, we always found that you would check with us regularly to see if you could assist from a federal point of view, but we need the province to request help from the federal government. There needs to be more of a partnership together so that things can be done in the middle of an event instead of waiting for paper to be processed and establishing certain states of emergency.

I think this would be a very proactive program to get some training in place and to better understand it so that we can equip people. Remember, those folks who decide to stay and defend need to realize that they need to be physically fit to do that. They need to be able to prepare for some of the situations they're going to face.

You're well aware of the situation, Cathy, down in Loon Lake, where people stayed and hired a private company to defend their property. They were successful, but I think they said they'd never want to go through that again, because the fire rolled over them. Fortunately, they survived. Rank five and rank six fires are not something you can stop. They just keep coming.

• (1250)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I think we have two very different examples here today, and two very different structures. In British Columbia we have an agreement with the province. The EOCs and the emergency support services were coordinated provincially, with the Red Cross playing a role but a different role than the one they played in Manitoba.

I think it would be really good to try to understand which model actually works a little better. My sense is that when you have the province as a partner, and the Red Cross as a partner, and all levels of government, you perhaps can be a little more sensitive. With the emergency support services centre, I know that registration is always a challenge, but when it's run locally by community members, do they have the capacity to be a little bit more sensitive than when it's run through an organization like the Red Cross?

Mr. Al Richmond: I would agree with you, Cathy, that the success with our ESS people is that they're volunteers, and our weakness there is that they're volunteers. Our weakness in this situation is that normally we take people from rural areas and evacuate them to our municipalities. In this case, we have four municipalities: two of them were under evacuation order. There was no hospital. There were no medical facilities.

I would like to offer a comment with respect to the dietary concerns of the first nations people. We learned something very early on with our emergency social services. By the way, we're trying to get them to change the name from "social" services to "support" services, because that's an important component. At any rate, we learned very quickly that we're better to have first nations come in and provide the food, or to provide them with food they can provide their elders, because their dietary needs are different from those of non-first nations people. They don't survive well when they come in off the first nations and they're brought into a city with the diet and food that's provided.

That's a very key component of being aware of how you can support those first nations people when they're brought into an urban centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to questioning by MP Cannings.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

Thank you to you both for being with us today.

I'll direct my first questions to you, Mr. Richmond. Thank you for joining us from Anahim Lake. I lived for a short time out in Risky Creek, so I can appreciate that part of the country. I explored the Chilcotin a lot. The vast size of that plateau fire this summer was pretty mind-boggling, so I'm glad you're here before us to answer some of these questions and give your thoughts.

You made the comment that although it was perhaps an awkward or bad time to build relationships among communities and governments and officials, you did build those relationships. I'm just wondering whether you have any plans to build in a process to continue those relationships so that you don't lose them and so that we're better prepared next time this happens.

Mr. Al Richmond: We had a good relationship with most of our first nation communities. I had built the relationships over the past six or seven years. The challenge is of course when governments change.

Quite often, first nations government changes. Not only does the political representation change, but all of the staff changes, and so I find myself doing a lot of that work every two years. It's an ongoing challenge.

It wasn't that we didn't have relationships. We had some very strong relationships with a number of the bands. For example, we knew the position of Mr. Joe Alphonse and the Tl'etinqox First Nation. Their position was to defend, and they were going to stay. Our orders don't apply to them.

What I was trying to say and maybe didn't articulate well was that we developed a better understanding and a closer relationship, more of a friendship. One of the chiefs, Chief Belleau of Esk'etemc First Nation, gave me all of her numbers and said to phone her. She would phone me and talk to me about the challenges she was having in her community. She found that it was a great relief to get somebody from the outside who would perhaps offer her support, and sometimes, quite frankly, who would just sit and listen.

Those are the types of relationships we build. They are personal relationships. She understood and respected it when I said, "We are here to help you, not to tell you. If you need buses, tell us, and we'll get them." We tried to mow down those barriers.

The province would prefer that we let them do their own orders, but we say that we're there to help them process their paperwork because some of the paperwork they have to process through the federal process to get their money is mind-boggling to them. We knew this in 2010. We've actually helped them do some of their paperwork where we have the capacity to do that. The way we look at this, these are people. They're flesh and blood. I don't care whose jurisdiction they live under; we're going to help anybody we possibly can.

• (1255)

Mr. Richard Cannings: Yes, those are the kinds of relationships I was talking about, those personal friendships. I wondered if you have plans to kind of put in a structure so that you meet with people very regularly to build them.

I want to go on to the federal government's involvement in that emergency response. The RCMP obviously had a role in the Williams Lake centre. I'm sure Cathy was involved in asking for federal help. I wonder if you have any comments, specifically on what the federal government did and perhaps on what they might do better in the future.

Mr. Al Richmond: Locally, we can't request direct help from the federal government. We have to go through the province to do that. We had discussions very early on to have the army come in, for example, because we knew very quickly that the RCMP were outgunned, and there were [*Inaudible—Editor*] to do that. When the request went in, the army came in very quickly.

I have to say that those federal forces did an admirable job. I didn't run into one member who wasn't respectful. They were pleased to be there. They weren't running around the barracks and waiting to see if there was something to do. They actually felt that they were helping people, and they were helping their own people. It made a big difference to those folks.

One of the folks who listened to the presentation I did at the recent Union of BC Municipalities convention was a fellow from the Armed Forces. He approached me and said that he was there to learn more. He ask what I thought was wrong with how they deployed the army. I told him that the challenge we have in Canada is that when people see the army run in, they think they're into military rule. If we were to have them about more in our communities on a regular basis and develop that relationship, there wouldn't be that fear factor.

That said, many people welcomed them and understood why they were there. They were there to help us, and I never at any time felt that I was under military rule at all. They were just great folks, and we really appreciate that level of support.

I think you'll see this in Manitoba, for example, but we in rural Canada need assistance to expand and properly do broadband service and cellular service so we can contact people. We've become a people who rely on these phones, and when we don't have them, we can't function. It would be so much easier if we could communicate with folks. The old technology of VHF radios has been taken out by the major telecoms, and that means of communication is gone. They're really playing almost third-world sometimes, with our ability for communication limited to satellite, and that's a real challenge for us. Communication is one of our biggest challenges with the really rural areas, so we need help on broadband and cellular service.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm glad you said that because I hear that in other respects from all over rural Canada.

I will ask Ms. Klassen a question. We've heard from both you and the chief about the decision of whether or not to attack that fire. It was obviously a contentious issue. You said the decision was made initially by a conservation officer. Do you have fire response people in the government in Manitoba who make those decisions? Could you could fill me in on who decides?

Ms. Judy Klassen: A Manitoba Conservation office is located in Island Lake on Stevenson Island.

They are the ones that make the final decision. The leadership can recommend and ask, but ultimately they are the ones responsible.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Are they trained in forest fire behaviour?

Ms. Judy Klassen: We hope so.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm just curious.

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes. They go up. They use a plane. They survey the area. Then a decision is made. It's not directly us, the

indigenous leadership, that can order a water bomber. It has to go through that channel.

● (1300)

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

The Chair: We've run out of time.

Now questioning moves on for a couple of minutes to MP Zahid.

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

Thanks to both our witnesses.

MLA Klassen, this Tuesday we heard from our witnesses that first-hand data collection is an important part of the ongoing process of evaluating the frequency of fire-related emergencies, as well as developing plans and best practices.

Are there gaps in data collection on reserves that, if addressed, could assist with emergency preparedness?

Ms. Judy Klassen: Yes. Definitely. We largely have an elected band system in the communities. Every two years there's an election. A new council comes in, and so there are gaps in that way. There are not enough resources to gather the facts and data. Much is lost. We lost our band office a couple of years ago in St. Theresa Point, and a lot of that data that had been collected was lost from forest fire to forest fire.

Resources need to be put into that area because within Manitoba, we have lost about 860,000 hectares of forest due to the fires that we've seen every year from 1990 to 2015. We face those forest fires every year. We end up losing our food source because our animals are not protected from those forest fires.

With climate change happening at such a rapid pace, 45% of that happened within the last five years.

We're looking at those kinds of numbers. We need to mitigate those losses.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: We know that as of January 2017, INAC has agreements in place for emergency mitigation preparedness response and recovery with Alberta, Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

Why do you think we don't have any as yet with Manitoba?

Ms. Judy Klassen: As Hansard shows, every time I ask my premier a question on indigenous issues, I'm told to talk to my federal cousins. That is unfair because we have over 130,000 people here. I know that Manitoba gets money for our indigenous people, but where that money goes we do not know. They are not forthcoming in trying to work with me on behalf of the indigenous people here in Manitoba.

The Chair: It is a challenge.

Thank you very much for participating, Ms. Klassen.

Al Richmond from B.C., I wish we had video from you. It was nice meeting you as well.

I appreciate your time. *Meegwetch*. Thank you for coming out.

That concludes our meeting for today.

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