

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN) in support of the study on *Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Emergency Preparedness of Indigenous Peoples*

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Submitted by:

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
Treaty 8 Territory



**ATHABASCA
CHIPEWYAN
FIRST NATION**

About Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation

We are the K'ai Tailé Déne, "people of the land of the willow"; our name signifies our deep-rooted connection with the rich and vast landscapes at the delta of the Peace and Athabasca Rivers, lands which we have traditionally survived on and connected with for thousands of years. Whether it be hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering, these lands have provided for our people since time immemorial and continue to support the traditional ways of the K'ai Tailé Déne.

K'ai Tailé Déne are ancestors of the present-day Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) and signed Treaty No. 8 in Fort Chipewyan 1899; the Treaty acknowledged and affirmed our inherent and cultural connection with the land. ACFN members continue to exercise our rights and culture and maintain our identity as K'ai Tailé Déne and continue to be the people of the land of the willow.

As a "band" under the Indian Act, we have eight Reserves set aside for our use and enjoyment under the Indian Act: Chipewyan 201, Chipewyan 201A, Chipewyan 201B, Chipewyan 201C, Chipewyan 201D, Chipewyan 201E, Chipewyan 201F, and Chipewyan 201G. Our reserve lands are located on the south shore of Lake Athabasca, on the Athabasca Delta, and on the Athabasca River.

We have a total registered population of approximately 1200 people. Approximately one third of our membership lives in Fort Chipewyan, a large percentage live in Fort McMurray, and some in Fort McKay and Fort Smith, NWT. The remainder live throughout Alberta, Canada and the world.

The community of Fort Chipewyan is accessible by intermittent ice road access in the winter, an airport that operates during certain weather conditions, and a dock that allows navigation to the many waterways in the region.

ACFN's recent experience with wildfires

On May 1, 2016, a wildfire was spotted north of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Unusually dry, warm weather combined with a historically low snowpack that spring created conditions for what would become a catastrophic disaster.

On May 4, Fort McMurray and surrounding areas were evacuated as the fire encroached on neighborhoods, eventually destroying thousands of structures. On that day, ACFN members organized a flotilla of more than 14 boats to go upriver to Fort McKay to rescue people stranded by the fire. The big dock operated by Transport Canada in Fort Chipewyan played an important role in this particular emergency response effort.

In recent years, ACFN has lived under the constant threat of wildfires throughout the dry season. Wildfires have impacted our ability to live, hunt, fish, gather plants and navigate the region. These rights, which have been guaranteed to us under Treaty 8, are becoming increasingly more difficult to exercise due to climate change.

Climate resilience – critical safety infrastructure in the Peace Athabasca Delta

We coordinate emergency response through the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the provincial government, and federal authorities, but we have found that self reliance and local capacity are the only thing that we can rely on in an emergency situation. For example, last summer we had members out on the land, fighting forest fires to protect our communities from devastation.

One small role that the Canadian government can play is maintaining and improving existing aviation and navigable water infrastructure in northern and remote communities. During the summer, these are our only points of supply and egress.

Unfortunately, the federal government is seeking to offload responsibility for the only big dock in Fort Chipewyan through the *Port Assets Transfer Program*.

This critical piece of safety infrastructure has been left in disrepair, despite requests from the community for Transport Canada to repair and continue to operate it.

This type of infrastructure is a public good. There is no real commercial value in it, and as such, any attempt to privatize the dock will inevitably fail.

This is a specific example, but illustrative of the basic things the federal government should be doing to make northern, Indigenous communities' more climate resilient.