

Wildfire at the Edge: What Canada's Fire Service Must Learn from Indigenous Communities

By Len Garis & Mandy Desautels

Canada has entered an era of megafires. The Senate's 2026 report *On Fire* makes this clear: wildfires are no longer seasonal anomalies but a structural threat to public safety, national infrastructure, and community resilience. But for Indigenous communities, this crisis is not new — it is simply the latest chapter in a long history of being placed in harm's way without the tools, authority, or recognition needed to protect their people and lands.

For fire chiefs, emergency managers, and prevention officers across the country, the report offers a stark message: **Canada cannot build wildfire resilience without Indigenous leadership, Indigenous fire knowledge, and Indigenous operational capacity.** And right now, the systems we rely on are failing them.

This article distills the Senate's findings through the lens of Indigenous experience — not as a moral argument, but as an operational imperative for the Canadian fire service.

A Disproportionate Burden

The report states plainly that **Indigenous Peoples are the most affected population in Canada when it comes to wildfire evacuations.** One line captures the scale of inequity:

"First Nations and communities with a primarily Indigenous population experience 42% of evacuations but make up 5% of people living in Canada."
(PHAC, 2023)

Between 2014 and 2024, **97,496 First Nations people** were evacuated due to wildfires. Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba alone accounted for over 60,000 evacuees.

These are not one-off events. Many communities face **repeat evacuations**, sometimes multiple times in a single season. The cumulative trauma — physical, cultural, economic, and psychological — is immense.

For fire service leaders, this means:

- Indigenous communities are the most frequent clients of wildfire evacuation systems.
- They are also the least resourced to manage them.
- And they are often excluded from decision-making, even when they have trained firefighters ready to deploy.

This is not just inequity — it is operational inefficiency.

Case Study: Little Red River Cree Nation — A Fire Service Ready, but Sidelined

The Senate report highlights the 2023 and 2024 fires that devastated Little Red River Cree Nation (LRRCN) in northern Alberta. The community has 1,500 homes and a long-standing wildland firefighting workforce.

Chief Conroy Sewepagaham told the committee:

“Every home has two or three wildland firefighters... When the 2023 fires happened, a couple thousand of us were told we couldn’t action it.”

Despite having trained, certified firefighters, LRRCN was ordered to stand down until provincial deployment protocols were activated.

The consequences were catastrophic:

- 800 residents lost their homes in 2023.
- All three communities were evacuated in 2024 — 8,700 people.
- \$150 million in forestry revenue was wiped out — “70 years of employment,” according to the Chief.
- As of late 2024, 60% of displaced residents were still waiting for rebuilt homes.

For fire chiefs, this raises critical questions:

- Why are trained Indigenous firefighters not automatically integrated into provincial wildfire response systems?
- Why do deployment rules override local knowledge and readiness?
- Why are communities with the highest exposure given the least authority?

This is a structural failure — not a local one.

Case Study: Fort Good Hope — Fighting Fire with No Equipment

In the Northwest Territories, the K’ahsho Got’ine Charter Community faced a 2024 wildfire with almost no support.

Chief Collin Pierrot testified:

“They told us to run up to the ECC base and get the fire equipment, only to find out there was no fire equipment in the community — maybe five bags of hoses; that was it.”

The community evacuated elders by air and 150 people by boat. Meanwhile, 85–90% of residents were former firefighters, yet:

- No retardant was available locally.
- Aircraft had to fly **five hours round-trip** to Yellowknife to reload.
- Trauma teams never arrived, despite two deaths.

This is not a remote-community problem. It is a **logistics and governance problem**.

Métis Nations: The Missing Jurisdiction

Unlike First Nations, Métis governments do not have access to federal emergency management funding.

The result?

- Métis evacuees were turned away from evacuation centres in 2025 because staff “could not determine jurisdiction.”
- Métis governments had to pay out of pocket — over \$3 million — to support evacuees.
- Métis citizens lost homes, cabins, hunting grounds, and economic resources with no dedicated recovery stream.

For fire service leaders, this matters because:

- Métis communities occupy vast wildfire-prone regions.
- They often provide **the first local response**.
- Yet they operate with **zero federal emergency management support**.

This is a gap that directly affects operational outcomes.

Traditional Fire Knowledge: A Suppressed Asset

The report repeatedly emphasizes that Indigenous fire stewardship is not symbolic — it is evidence-based, operationally effective, and urgently needed.

Examples include:

- Cultural burning to reduce fuel loads.
- Reading fire behaviour through soil strata and microclimate cues.
- Nighttime suppression techniques that agencies often prohibit.
- Drone-assisted “digital elders” — LRRCN’s innovative Fire AI system.
- FNESS’s integrated four-pillar emergency management model.

Yet the report states:

“Indigenous knowledge and expertise remain underutilized, excluded, and unrecognized.”

For the Canadian fire service, this is a missed opportunity of national scale.

Evacuation Trauma: A Public Safety Crisis

The mental health impacts documented in the report are staggering:

- After the Fort McMurray fire, **20,000 mental health referrals** occurred in 51 days.
- PTSD rates among youth reached **37%**.

- Five years later, mental health conditions **increased**, not decreased.
- Indigenous communities often receive **no trauma teams at all**.

Fire chiefs know that evacuation is not just a logistics exercise — it is a human one. The Senate report makes clear that **evacuation trauma is now a predictable, measurable public safety outcome**.

Barriers Identified by the Senate

Across all testimony, the same barriers appeared:

1. Exclusion from decision-making

Indigenous firefighters are often not allowed to fight fires on their own lands.

2. Lack of equipment and pre-positioning

Communities frequently have no hoses, no retardant, no aircraft access.

3. Slow or absent mental health support

Trauma teams rarely arrive.

4. Funding inequities

Métis governments receive no emergency management funding.

5. Bureaucratic delays in rebuilding

Years-long waits for reconstruction are common.

6. Under-resourced Indigenous fire organizations

FNESS requested \$27.9 million over three years — a fraction of federal wildfire spending.

Indigenous-Led Solutions the Fire Service Should Champion

The Senate report is clear: Indigenous communities are not asking for charity — they are offering solutions.

1. Indigenous-led fire crews and guardian programs

These programs already exist and are highly effective.

2. Cultural and prescribed burning

The most cost-effective fuel management tool available.

3. Pre-positioned equipment in high-risk communities

A simple fix with major impact.

4. Culturally safe evacuation planning

Designed by communities, not imposed on them.

5. Long-term mental health funding

Not short-term crisis response.

6. Integration of Indigenous firefighters into provincial systems

Not as “auxiliary,” but as equal partners.

What Fire Chiefs and Prevention Officers Must Do Now

The Senate’s recommendations are aimed at the federal government, but the fire service has its own responsibilities.

1. Build formal partnerships with Indigenous fire organizations

FNESS, Wabanaki Wildland Crew, Métis fire teams — these are operational assets.

2. Advocate for Indigenous inclusion in provincial deployment systems

If a community has trained firefighters, they should not be sidelined.

3. Integrate cultural burning into local and regional fuel management plans

This is not optional — it is essential.

4. Ensure evacuation planning includes Indigenous leadership

Evacuation without cultural safety is not effective evacuation.

5. Push for national standards that recognize Indigenous fire knowledge

This includes training, certification, and operational authority.

6. Support the creation of a national wildfire agency

The report recommends a FEMA-style coordinating office — the fire service should back it.

Conclusion: Wildfire Resilience Requires Indigenous Leadership

The Senate report ends with a warning:

“Wildfires are a matter of national security.”

For Indigenous communities, this has been true for decades. For the rest of Canada, it is becoming true now.

If the fire service wants to meet the scale of the crisis, it must embrace Indigenous leadership not as a gesture of reconciliation, but as a core operational strategy.

Canada cannot fight megafires with half its fire knowledge sidelined.

It’s time to bring Indigenous fire stewardship, Indigenous firefighters, and Indigenous governance to the centre of wildfire management — where they have always belonged.

Authors

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