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Free Wildfire Planning Tool Available

PRESS RELEASE: The National Indigenous Fire Safety Council is providing access to a free digital tool to help communities prepare for wildfires.

August 30, 2023

As wildfires rage across Canada this summer, the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council (NIFSC) has released a new digital tool to help communities better prepare for and manage their wildland urban interface (WUI) fire risk.

The NIFSC, which helps Indigenous communities build internal capacity for safety and resilience, commissioned the University of Waterloo to prepare a research study and create a digital tool to support communities with WUI fire risk. WUI is a term used to describe areas where human development intermingles with the natural environment.

The new Wildland Urban Interface Community Preparedness Digital Tool identifies the various community members that have a role to play – including residents, leaders and emergency personnel – and outlines what each need to do before, during and after a wildfire. In all, the tool covers about 18 distinct roles.

“Preparing for wildfires is a significant challenge in small remote communities with limited resources,” said Nathan Wright, Executive Director of the NIFSC. “This is a timely and important issue – our research shows 12 per cent of all Canadians live in wildland urban interface areas, including nearly 80 per cent of Indigenous communities, comprising about one-third of First Nations people living on reserve.”

The NIFSC has made the WUI tool accessible free to all, available on their website at <https://indigenousfiresafety.ca/en/community-preparedness>.

“Our goal was to develop a practical tool that breaks down the numerous roles and their responsibilities, essentially providing a step-by-step guide to prepare for and manage wildfire risk,” said Blaine Wiggins, Senior Director of the Indigenous Fire Marshal Service (IFMS), the delivery arm of the NIFSC. “This was developed with Indigenous communities in mind but can be helpful for any community at risk of an interface fire. We invite all communities to make use of this tool to better prepare themselves.”



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How the Tool Works

Accessed from either a cell phone or desktop computer, the WUI tool uses a graphic format that groups related roles together and uses icons illustrated by Anishinaabe Onyota'a:aka artist Tsista Kennedy. Visitors click on an icon for a specific role to find lists of tasks for before, during and after a wildfire. Roles include:

- Residents
- Local leaders
- Emergency Operations Centre roles including Communications, Coordinator, Liaison, Outreach and Information Officer and external liaison
- Advisors on the environment, agriculture, health, h and transportation
- Emergency responders such as internal emergency responders, local fire department, ambulance, police and wildland firefighters
- Evacuation roles such as Evacuation Centre, Coordinator, Liaison, Communications and volunteers.

Development of the Tool

The tool was developed based on the research study [WUI Fire Risk in Canadian Indigenous Communities](#) completed in June 2023 by E. Weckman, K. Senez, B. Southern and A. Winter of the University of Waterloo's Department of Mechanical and Mechatronics Engineering.

The researchers were commissioned by NIFSC to review existing knowledge, resources, guidelines, practice and management approaches to understand the specific threats of fire, and to develop a preliminary WUI fire safety and response network, along with best practices and implementation strategies.

The report drew on case studies, reports, government document and other available data for First Nations on-reserve populations. Cases studied included the Sandy Lake First Nation fire in Ontario in 2011, the Dene Tha' First Nation fire in Alberta in 2016, the Whitefish Lake First Nation fire in Alberta in 2011, and the Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation fire in Ontario in 2011.

Insights gained through the research led to the development of the digital tool and related outreach materials, including slide decks and brochures. Six high-level recommendations provided the overall direction for this work:

- Work directly with community leaders and knowledge keepers to understand specific wildfire fire threats and management challenges in their communities.



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- As more experience with planning for, and the management of, wildfires in First Nations communities is gained, modify the existing roles and responsibilities or create new roles and responsibilities, adjusting databases and tools accordingly.
- Develop a strategy for familiarization and education around outreach package and resources from this research.
- As more experience with the outreach package and web application is gained, ensure the tools are updated to continually improve their design, accessibility and functionality.
- Modify the outreach package and web application to reflect the individuality of each community with language, art, and community-specific roles and responsibilities.
- Develop a long-term strategy for ongoing maintenance, and improvement to the resource databases to ensure relevant stakeholders have a clear and accurate picture challenges faced by First Nations (and other Indigenous communities) at the WUI.

The project has put a practical wildfire planning tool into the hands of WUI communities across the country, while adding to the body of research related to First Nation fire safety in Canada. The authors noted the continuing need for new forms of data collection and research that include Inuit and Métis communities as well as First Nations off-reserve populations.

Links to the WUI tool, slide decks and the study *WUI Fire Risk in Canadian Indigenous Communities* can be found at <https://indigenousfiresafety.ca/en/community-preparedness>.

About NIFSC

The National Indigenous Fire Safety Council (NIFSC) is the result of a Indigenous-developed framework designed to support Indigenous communities in the development of their internal capacity to support community safety and resiliency. The NIFSC is Indigenous inspired, designed, and led in collaboration with regional and national Indigenous communities, organizations, and leaders.

For more information regarding the WUI Interface tool:

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