

Building Sustainable Fire Research Capacity: How the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council Is Redefining the Future of Fire Safety in Canada

Len Garis and Mandy Desautels

Across Canada, fire services are grappling with rising wildfire risks, aging infrastructure, and widening gaps in community capacity. Yet one organization—the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council (NIFSC)—is quietly building a research-driven, community-centred model that may well represent the future of sustainable fire safety in this country. While many non-profit and public-sector fire organizations focus primarily on service delivery, the NIFSC has taken a different path: embedding research, evidence, and long-term capacity building at the core of its mandate.

A recent report by Dr. Paul Maxim, *Building Research Capacity and Oversight at the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council*, provides a detailed roadmap for how the NIFSC can strengthen and expand its research arm. But more importantly, it reveals something larger: the NIFSC is already ahead of the mainstream fire sector in its vision for sustainable, community-driven fire safety.

This article summarizes the key insights from the report and explores why the NIFSC's approach—rooted in Indigenous knowledge, evidence-based practice, and long-term sustainability—offers a model that the broader Canadian fire community should be watching closely.

A Research Mandate Rarely Seen in Non-Profit Fire Organizations

Most non-profit organizations in the fire sector focus on training, equipment, and service delivery. Research, when it occurs, is often limited, reactive, or externally driven. The NIFSC stands apart. From its inception, it has treated research not as an add-on, but as a foundational pillar of its mission to support safe and healthy Indigenous communities.

The organization has already established core data systems—the National Incident Reporting System (NIRS), Fire Department Assessments, and Home Safety Assessments—that provide a level of baseline information rarely available in Indigenous or rural fire contexts. These systems are not only operational tools; they are the backbone of a long-term evidence strategy.

Dr. Maxim's report argues that this commitment to research dramatically increases the NIFSC's credibility, influence, and sustainability. In the world of public safety, credibility is currency. Governments, funders, and policy makers respond to organizations that can demonstrate impact, measure outcomes, and adapt based on evidence. By investing early in research capacity, the NIFSC is positioning itself as a national leader in data-driven fire safety.

Why Research Matters: Beyond Programs to Sustainable Impact

The report highlights a critical truth: delivering programs is not enough. Sustainable fire safety requires understanding whether programs work, for whom, and under what conditions. It requires the courage to identify what *doesn't* work, redirect resources, and continuously improve.

This is where the NIFSC's approach diverges from many mainstream organizations. Rather than relying on tradition, intuition, or political pressure, the NIFSC is building a culture of transparency and learning. This includes:

- **Baseline data** to understand current conditions and long-term trends
- **Evaluation research** to measure program effectiveness
- **Special projects** to explore emerging issues such as wildfire resilience and housing retrofits
- **Community-based research** to ensure that solutions are culturally grounded and locally relevant

This last point—community-based research—is particularly important. The NIFSC recognizes that sustainable fire safety cannot be imposed from the outside. It must be co-created with communities, respecting local knowledge, priorities, and lived experience. This is a profound shift from traditional top-down fire service models.

Research Priorities: A Long-Term Vision for Sustainable Fire Safety

The NIFSC has identified seven broad research priorities, ranging from diversity and recruitment to fire safety messaging and equipment recycling. But the report recommends going further: distinguishing between long-term strategic commitments and short-term project-based initiatives.

Long-term priorities—such as building community-based research capacity or improving national fire data—require sustained investment over five to ten years. Short-term projects, by contrast, can be planned annually and aligned with budget cycles.

This dual-track approach is a hallmark of sustainable planning. It ensures that the organization can respond to immediate needs while still advancing a long-range vision for systemic change.

The Power of Partnerships: Leveraging Academic and Community Expertise

One of the report's strongest arguments is that the NIFSC should expand its partnerships with academic researchers, engineering groups, and other fire research units across Canada. These partnerships offer several advantages:

- **Access to specialized expertise** in engineering, health, and natural sciences
- **Opportunities to leverage external funding**, especially through federal Tri-Council grants
- **Shared infrastructure**, including ethics boards, research offices, and laboratory facilities
- **Training and mentorship opportunities** for Indigenous students

This last point is especially important for long-term sustainability. By creating pathways for Indigenous youth to participate in research, the NIFSC is not only building internal capacity—it is contributing to the development of the next generation of Indigenous fire leaders, researchers, and professionals.

The report also acknowledges the challenges of NGO-academic partnerships, including differing timelines, priorities, and cultural contexts. But it argues that these challenges can be managed through clear communication, mutual respect, and long-term relationship building.

Networks: Expanding Influence and Strengthening Sustainability

Beyond individual partnerships, the report emphasizes the importance of building broader research networks. Strong networks provide:

- **Access to information and expertise**
- **Multiplier effects**, where collaborative efforts achieve more than individual organizations could alone
- **Greater visibility and influence** in national policy discussions
- **Solidarity and shared messaging** across the fire sector

The NIFSC already has strong relationships within the Indigenous fire services community but expanding into academic and technical networks will further strengthen its national presence.

Best Practices: Ensuring Integrity, Ethics, and Professionalism

Sustainable research requires more than good intentions. It requires rigorous standards, ethical oversight, and transparent processes. The report outlines best practices that the NIFSC should continue to adopt, including:

- Adhering to the Tri-Council Policy Statement on research ethics
- Maintaining cultural sensitivity and community trust
- Ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis
- Protecting confidentiality and intellectual property
- Documenting budgets, contributions, and project outcomes
- Giving proper credit to researchers and partners

These practices are not merely bureaucratic requirements—they are essential to maintaining credibility and trust, especially when working with Indigenous communities.

Building Long-Term Capacity: Internships and Indigenous Talent Development

One of the report's most forward-looking recommendations is the creation of internship opportunities for Indigenous students at both the high school and post-secondary levels. This is a sustainability strategy in the truest sense: building human capacity that will strengthen Indigenous fire safety for generations.

Internships can:

- Inspire youth to pursue careers in fire services, research, or public safety
- Provide practical experience and mentorship
- Support the development of Indigenous researchers and analysts
- Strengthen community relationships

Combined with academic partnerships, this approach positions the NIFSC as a national leader in Indigenous talent development within the fire sector.

Why the NIFSC Is Ahead of the Mainstream Fire Sector

Taken together, the report's findings reveal something striking: the NIFSC is not simply building research capacity—it is redefining what sustainable fire safety can look like in Canada.

The NIFSC's approach is ahead of the mainstream in several ways:

- **A long-term, systems-level vision** rather than short-term program delivery
- **Community-driven research** that respects Indigenous knowledge and priorities
- **Evidence-based decision-making** grounded in robust data systems
- **Strategic partnerships** that leverage national expertise and funding
- **A commitment to sustainability**, both operationally and culturally
- **A focus on building Indigenous capacity**, not just delivering services

In an era of climate change, increasing wildfire risk, and growing demands for accountability, this model is not just innovative—it is necessary.

Conclusion: A Blueprint for the Future of Fire Safety in Canada

The NIFSC's research strategy, as outlined in Dr. Maxim's report, offers a compelling blueprint for sustainable fire safety in Canada. By integrating community-based research, academic partnerships, ethical standards, and long-term planning, the NIFSC is demonstrating what a modern, resilient, and culturally grounded fire safety organization can be.

As fire services across the country confront new and complex challenges, the NIFSC's approach—rooted in sustainability, evidence, and Indigenous leadership—deserves national attention. It is not only advancing fire safety in Indigenous communities; it is charting a path that the entire Canadian fire sector can learn from.

Authors

Len Garis is director of research for the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council, Ret. Fire Chief for the city of Surrey, B.C., Research Associate – University of the Fraser Valley associate scientist emeritus with the B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit. Contact him at lwgaris@outlook.com.

Mandy Desautels is Chief Administrative Officer at the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council. Prior to joining NIFSC, she worked for BC Emergency Health Services and prominent NGOs. Contact her at mandy.desautels@indigenousfiresafety.ca