

Breakout Session 3C: Emergency Management

February 26, 2025

10:15 AM – 11:45 AM

Moderator: Olivier Jarda – Associate, Pape Salter Teillet LLP

Speakers:

- Itoah Scott-Enns — Director, Department of Planning and Partnerships, Tłıchq Government
- Jenny Freeman — Emergency Program Coordinator, Tla'amin First Nation
- Chief Pauline Frost – Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

Olivier Jarda:

- Emergency management processes must be made a federal priority. They can be seen as a litmus test in policy circles.
- Modern Treaties can bring Canada and Indigenous Peoples together to implement effective emergency management. All levels of government, including Indigenous Peoples, must be included at the table to address barriers for effective emergency management.

Itoah Scott-Enns:

- During the 2023 wildfires there were three evacuations that affected citizens, even the smallest Tłıchq communities. Behchokè was also evacuated, which is significant because that is the headquarters of the Tłıchq government.
- There were risks for those stranded in communities and 19 structures were burnt down.
- The whole city of Yellowknife ended up being evacuated. It's important to consider this if communication goes down—having action plans is necessary.
 - Provinces and territories have different emergency management contexts. Northwest Territories (NWT) is in a territorial context. Federal solutions need to be adaptable to all the different contexts.
- Challenges of the 2023 evacuation experiences:
 - Prior to these fires, the Tłıchq Government (TG) didn't have any emergency plans. The local community or territorial governments are required to come up with plans. Instead, Tłıchq government had to mobilize themselves.
 - There was a lot of resistance to collaboration from the territorial government. The emergency response was not culturally safe, which endangered lives. For example, it was not inclusive of Indigenous worldviews.
 - There was a lack of understanding of unique needs of Tłıchq people – many

- Tłıchq citizens are fluent in the Tłıchq language and thus need to be supported by governments in a way that reflects this.
- There was no planning for residual impacts on other communities. Grocery stores, Canada Post, Pharmacies, were all affected. No actual planning as to what would happen if Yellowknife shut down. This created a lot of uncertainty.
 - When thousands of people are evacuated there is a need for social security.
 - We created a Tłıchq Security Detail.
 - We mobilized quickly to see where the gaps are, as shown by TG's response to the 2023 evacuation experiences and challenges:
 - Created impromptu Tłıchq Emergency Management Organization and relocated essential operations of the Tłıchq government.
 - Daily intergovernmental/interagency meetings to coordinate.
 - Hour long meetings about the pressing issues, what's going on, etc.
 - Staff meetings also happened.
 - Important that people in the main roles speak the language of the people so that people can understand what is happening during emergencies.
 - Some of the supports included food (three meals per-day, but food was running out), transportation, Elder care, security, gas, etc.
 - Sometimes Elders got relocated to hotel rooms but nobody checked up on them. Sometimes houseless people would be flown out to other places without having their information noted.
 - So, many vulnerable people were displaced without strong ways to recontact with them. It took a strong mobilization on behalf of TG to return people home.
 - TG has protected Tłıchq citizens since time immemorial, and values continue to guide the service and protection of the people. These values include:
 - Community, family, working together, caring for each other, no one gets left behind, resourcefulness, capable people, and the importance of feeding others.
 - Legislative barriers:
 - Indigenous Peoples don't exist in the NWT emergency management acts. NWT needs to be better in including Indigenous Peoples in emergency management.
 - Policy barriers:
 - Disaster Financial assistance is designed for provinces/territories. Outdated processes.
 - Financial barriers:
 - Big gap in bilateral relationships as the federal government leaves TG to operate in no man's land.

- TG can fund emergency responses, but some governments may not have the resources to front costs.
- Canada needs to codevelop policies to ensure access to resources and funding for Indigenous governments to do prevention, planning, response and recovery.
- Prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery.
 - Each requires different resources, different conservations and coordination with different people. Need to learn how to work with Modern Treaty holders.

Coordination is a huge factor in terms of responding to emergency management.
- Now, TG has an interim emergency management plan. Recouping costs is only one piece of an emergency management response. Many people lost homes and other important things.
 - Responses need to foreground self-determination.

Chief Pauline Frost:

- Come from the only fly-in community in Yukon. 800km North of Whitehorse. Adaptation, food insecurity, the human element of climate change – floods, fires, etc.
- Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN) has the largest land base in Yukon, and the most parks in Canada.
- We put the People first before anything else and fight to protect the land from oil and gas settlements.
- Work, fight, and advocate as Gwitchin. When flooding comes, the community gets buried in water.
- The airport sits in the middle of the community. In 2023 there was a major fire and smoke event. Fire surrounded the community—there were 20 active fires.
 - Boats had to be put in the river to get everyone out of the community, heading into Alaska.
 - Flooding can also impact wastewater management and treatment. Sewage can flood onto properties if not managed in the proper way. Community based planning with built in call on partners for action.
- August was bad. We had to watch for water levels since they are low, and the planes had a hard time navigating the smoke. People were stranded—we had to be well organized.
 - The people couldn't travel in and out. Planes only have 40 seats and many times they're filled with freight.
 - We had to put together an evacuation plan. Despite community members having firefighting experience, the government failed to give resources to them because of certification problems.
- The community center was developed. Designated community members were named security officers, with Indigenous community members working together.

- Many evacuees were nurses and medical practitioners, so there were lots of people left without medical care.
 - Community members with prior medical training were called to help, even if their credentials were expired.
 - Minister had to be called to get medical responders to get flown into Old Crow. Volunteers ended up coming to help residents.
- Drastic times mean taking drastic actions.
 - We put aside \$1.2 million and had to pay for charter airplanes to move the people.
 - Is that a government-to-government relationship? Is that meeting the needs of Modern Treaty negotiations? In times of crises this is unacceptable. We had to take money out of the trust fund.
- Citizens were evacuated by the VGFN team on the same day as the evacuation order. The success was on behalf of VGFN and not Yukon or Canada.
 - We identified who in the community was skilled to deal with specific issues.
 - The unified command team won the Emergency Management Exemplary Service Award

Jenny Freeman:

- Tla'amin Nation is located on the Sunshine Coast. Our greatest emergency risk is earthquakes, flooding events, and wildfires.
 - The City of Powell River is the municipality of note.
- The Final Agreement was reached in 2016. Ancestral teachings have driven the agreement negotiations.
 - Values include fairness, accountability, humility, integrity, sharing, respect, spirituality, etc.
- 2024: A working group from Tla'amin presented a plan to the government that First Nations should spearhead emergency management plans on their lands. Argued that real life struggles can be understood by the community. The government has yet to respond.
 - Extreme heat events in the most recent summers. First Nations and Provincial/Federal Governments have different interpretations of what meaningful emergency management planning looks like.
 - Nothing in provincial/federal legislation neatly says who is responsible for handling emergency management.
 - Tla'amin responds to community needs whether it's their legal obligation or not.
- The region's population is large – 15,000 people. Tla'amin doesn't have the capacity to

help all these people. The federal government follows through on actions following legislation and policies.

- Tla'amin focuses on taking care of the community and Elders, youth, and family members. There are different points of departure for what help looks like.
- Sometimes there are issues of Powell River rejecting the help/aid of Tla'amin or to help Tla'amin citizens – e.g., through search and rescue missions.
 - Tla'amin has asked Powell River for help, but there have been tensions. Tla'amin citizens need training for themselves, so they don't have to rely on the Powell River team. Calls have been made to the British Columbia provincial government but there hasn't been a response.
 - These types of training can aid in self-determination and service models.
- Wildfires volunteer model:
 - Current cost of living crisis has interrupted the capacity for many to volunteer. The regional and federal government has not aided in this.
 - There is a critical shortage of firefighters. The number of volunteers is becoming less-and-less.
 - Sometimes volunteers are needed for a prolonged period, but these people cannot take that much time off work. As such, funding is direly needed.
- There has been progress and a political will to do better. But the current political landscape has made emergency management responses difficult to attend to.
- Constitutions shouldn't be a vehicle of box checking. Everyone needs to commit to heartfelt collaboration. Words and intentions of legislation are not enough.
 - Federal and regional partners need to meaningfully collaborate with Modern Treaty people. Build meaningful opportunities for collaboration and understanding what the real struggles are and what communities actually need help with.
 - They need to meet and walk alongside the youth. To eat at the tables of Indigenous Peoples.

Q&A:

- **Q: (to Itoah):** When you were setting up the Emergency Operations Centre to deal with the fires, what were some of the pre-existing supports or did you create it on the fly? Was talent brought in on a needs basis?
 - **A:** The pre-existing expertise was our own people—our own people did what needed to be done. We had lots of experience to pull from that allowed TG to mobilize quickly. Security, food, taking care of Elders, all of this was done through systems that were already known. Everything was done on the spot.
- **Q: (to Itoah):** Were/are there any changes so that things won't be ad-hoc for future

emergencies?

- **A:** TG has put a lot of work in emergency planning, like developing a budget and setting up protocols for how to move financial resources in times of crises. Looking at human resources protocols, especially when staff have to work in jobs they are not trained for. The learnings we took out of the situation in 2023 was that conversations are needed with the territorial government to work together in the current legislative framework. We made a lot of progress working with the territorial government and now know what to expect from each other in terms of responding to emergencies.
- **Q: (to all panelists):** Asking about communication and relationship building: a key aspect seems to be communicating. How does this work best and how can it be built upon? It seemed there are struggles for communication to happen effectively.
 - **A: Chief Frost:** An Elder once disappeared in the mountains and there was no communication. Communicating with various government agencies was difficult. There was weak communication at the beginning of the event, so building interpersonal communication is necessary. It's hard to talk about everything in a 20 minute presentation. Essentially, we put out communication from Old Crow to different agencies to outline business continuity plans to understand responses during different crises, e.g. How can we support each other when critical failure points happen? A lot of processing and digesting on both sides.
 - **A: Itoah:** There are many layers of communication. A lot of breakdown happens with different actors at play. The right people need to connect with the right people. Setting up paths for good lines of communication is difficult but necessary. GNWT needed to talk with First Nations from all over the territory. Now when there's an emergency, communication happens across all of NWT to make information more consistent.
- **Q: (to Chief Frost):** Are we looking at emergencies more broadly and including community security, ground search and rescues, rangers, etc.? Looking at emergency from a larger holistic perspective – e.g., global security in terms of Arctic sovereignty?
 - **A:** We think about this all the time. We sit on the Yukon committee for Arctic security. I don't think about it from a global perspective but rather from a community perspective—building a model that works for the community. There are skilled community members that can respond to emergencies. Starting at ground zero but moving forward. Through emergency planning processes, looking back and reflecting on responses, there is a lot of resilience working. The FPT emergency management plan already has DRR, and resilience embedded in them. We can build some of that into Gwitchin responses to emergency management. Including community members is important for building calls for resilience.

- **Q: (to Chief Frost):** Nisga'a Nation doesn't have many fires, but we do have firefighters. The firefighters were told they can't help because they're not certified. How can First Nations communities be certified for the provincial or federal government?
 - **A:** Yukon has devolution that allowed them to receive some support. Because Old Crow is so small, and the self-governing Nations work together, teams could be built to manage fires well. Built it up as a region and now work together. The Nations around Nisga'a could work together to do the same. You have to flex political muscles and ask the provincial government to allow for these regional responses.
 - **A: Itoah:** People have knowledge about their lands. Community members had insight for how fires could be fought, and lots of ideas about how fires could be approached. These are the discussions that need to happen to understand how the broader provincial and federal government manage responses. Guardians were really impactful for Sahtu responses to the NWT fires.
- **Q: (to Jenny):** You mentioned negative impacts associated with accreditation regarding search and rescue (S&R). What would be the best way to redress and trigger change for the Nation and the whole country?
 - **A:** With reference to S&R, we honour the Nisga'a Nation and their capacity to do S&R, especially in a marine context. They have done an excellent job for building their own S&R teams. Western Canada Marine S&R have been supportive of Nations. Ground S&R is different—it should be more self-determined. Training should be centralized to an Indigenous club/hub so that training can be particularized to a Nation and include on the ground training. Ask Guardians or community members what they bring to the table.