



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

The First Nations at the frontline of Canada's fires

written by Brandi Morin
June 12, 2023

As smoke and smog choke the Northeast, Alberta's Indigenous Nations face down apocalyptic wildfires

And the provincial government's "let-it-burn" climate policy.



People look at a map of the fire in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Friday, June 2, 2023. Over 800 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken

June 9, 2023



This story was produced by [Ricochet Media](#) and [IndigiNews](#), and is being co-published by The Real News.

As he watched the last plane lumber down the runway, Chief Allan Adam was finally able to breathe freely again.

He had just posted a live video from the Fort Chipewyan airport on the evening of May 31, documenting the last flight out with evacuees fleeing impending disaster. A wildfire was advancing approximately seven kilometres from his remote community, which is accessible only by boat or plane.

But the relief was short-lived. The straight-shooting leader of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, one of three Indigenous communities in Alberta who call Fort Chipewyan home, was abruptly hit with biting pain.

“That was the stress that hit me, right after that post, that’s when the pain came to my neck,” he said in a telephone interview the evening of June 1, between back-to-back meetings with local leaders, authorities and firefighting officials.

Despite the searing ache in his neck, he continues to roll with the punches. The homes and livelihoods of nearly 1,000 people are on the line. It’s the first time in anyone’s living memory that the hamlet, located about 300 kilometers north of Fort McMurray, has been under a mandatory evacuation order. Chief Adam — together with Billy-Joe Tuccaro, chief of the Mikisew Cree First Nation, and Kendrick Cardinal, president of the Fort Chip Métis — has stayed behind to oversee efforts to save his homelands.

“We had to get everybody out. Everything that we’ve done, that was our main focus, to get everybody out immediately. And then once that was accomplished, it was a relief for me because now we can focus our attention on preparedness (for) what’s coming.”

Record heat waves and dry conditions have sparked an unrivaled wildfire season of destruction across the country, affecting almost every province and territory.

In May, roughly 2.7 million hectares of forest — an area equal to about five million football fields — were burned to the ground in Canada, said Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair at a [press conference](#). Over the last 10 years, the average number of hectares burned in the same month was just 150,000.

Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson told reporters at the same press conference that the rampant infernos are caused by climate change.

“It’s a simple fact that Canada is experiencing the impacts of climate change, including more frequent and more extreme wildfires,” he said.

Chief Adam is all too familiar with the consequences of climate change, and particularly the contamination of his territories. Fort Chipewyan, commonly referred to as Fort Chip, is downstream from Alberta’s notorious tar sands, one of the largest oil developments in the world.

The settlement is perched on the tip of Lake Athabasca, the largest body of water in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Known as the oldest community in the province, it once served as a hub for the Indigenous Nations who live up and down the mighty Athabasca River, as well as the European settlers who trekked north for trade. But since commercial-scale extraction of the oil sands began in 1967 — and then expanded to fuel the economic wellspring of Canada — the water, land and air quality of the vast Indigenous territories downstream has deteriorated.

Finding deformed fish and polluted water here is a normal occurrence. And dozens of Fort Chip residents have [succumbed to a rare](#) strain of bile duct cancer.

In April, Chief Adam testified before a House of Commons committee hearing in Ottawa to decry the release of millions of litres of toxic tailings waste in two separate incidents involving Imperial Oil’s Kearl mine. Just weeks later, Suncor reported it had released almost six million liters of contaminated water into a

tributary of the Athabasca River.

Earlier, he had predicted his community would become environmental refugees.

Now, Fort Chip could be swept away by out-of-control flames.

“I tell them this,” he said during the phone interview, explaining that he confronts the Alberta and federal governments about climate change.

“I speak with them all the time and we hold them very accountable. The climate change issue is not going to go away. And we’re gonna have to deal with it — and you (governments) are gonna have to deal with us.”



Syncrude’s Mildred Lake site north of Fort McMurray, Alberta on Thursday, June 1,

2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



Dwight Courtorielle, 48, with his son Kade McKay, 10 months in Fort McMurray, Alberta on Thursday, June 1, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



Rob Leavitt, right, and Preston Wanderingspirit watch smoke on the horizon after clearing trees for a fire break in the Allison Bay area of Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Friday, June 2, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken **Feels like 2016 all over again**

About 250 kilometres south from Fort Chip, the boat launch in Fort McKay First Nation — a community of 800 people about 58 kilometres north of Fort McMurray — is clogged with dozens of docked boats. Volunteers are patrolling the river day and night, searching for evacuees whose boats may have gotten stuck or broken down.

It's déjà vu for Fort McKay residents, who are survivors of the worst natural disaster in Canadian history. They were forced to flee their homes during the [massive 2016](#)

[blaze](#) that ravaged Fort McMurray.

Even so, ushering Fort Chip evacuees to safety is a treacherous undertaking, according to Fort McKay Métis Nation president Ron Quintal.

“There’s a combination of the smoke, of the water coming up and having sticks in the water and traveling at night — it’s a concern for damage to your boat and could cause an emergency,” he says while visiting evacuees at a hotel in Fort McMurray.

Quintal directed his staff to focus on comforting the displaced, including whole families with children and elders who had made the eleventh-hour trip.

“We were there when families were pulling in,” says Quintal, his voice pinched with emotion. “You try to put on a happy face. These kids, they’re afraid, you know, they’ve had to leave their homes, given they’re an isolated community. And we let them know that you’re safe here, we’re here to help you.”

Jimmy Shortman, 64, waits at the boat launch for Ginger, his German Shepard, and her six three-week-old puppies to be delivered by a peace officer. He fled his home in Fort Chip by boat along with his wife and granddaughter. His beloved dog was cared for by officials in Fort McKay while he escorted his family to a hotel in Fort McMurray.

Shortman also fled the infamous Fort McMurray blaze in 2016. Now, he’s experiencing flashbacks of flames, falling ashes, and traffic jams holding back frantic passengers desperate to escape.

A former firefighter, he witnessed the moment the current wildfire ignited near his home community.

“When that lightning happened on Saturday in Fort Chip, I was outside my house, sitting on the deck. All of a sudden, lightning strikes.” His brown eyes widen as he describes the jolt of electricity hitting the ground.

“It started that night, because the lightning did it. It got bigger and bigger, and the wind was picking up.”

He did not expect the blaze would burn out of control and turn so many lives upside down. He describes people panicking in their rush to get out of Fort Chip. “My wife was scared and crying. Everybody was excited to just get out of there.”

“There were 14 boats trying to get out at the same time, and that’s unheard of. You couldn’t even see across the lake — it was covered in smoke. I don’t panic, but....” His eyes briefly well with tears. “The only thing I worried about was my wife and the little girl.”

Now, he’s happy to be heading out to his cabin along the river with his brother, Stanley Shortman, about an hour and a half south of the fire. He feels most comfortable there, as do hundreds of other Fort Chip families whose cabin homes dot the shoreline. They have a kinship with the land and water. Many, like Shortman, spend half their lives in the wilderness of their territories.

Shortman says he will clean the yard around his cabin while he waits out the fire. But he predicts the situation will intensify.

“Look how hot May was.” Shaking his head, he emphasizes that the dry weather isn’t helping. “We haven’t gotten hardly any rain yet. Wait ’til July. Wait ’til it’s really hot. Oh, it’ll be worse. It’s scary. Maybe the whole country will burn.”



Loretta Waquan sorts care packages for evacuees in Fort McKay, Alberta on Friday, June 2, 2023. Three boats delivered eight care packages to evacuees staying in cabins. Each cabin received: one 10lb bag of flour, dried beans and barley, bread, 20lbs of potatoes, evaporated milk, canned tomatoes, baking powder, canned ham, canned corned beef, minute rice, two flats of canned soup, oats, vegetable oil, chocolate, coffee, red rose tea, arrowroot cookies, macaroni, powdered milk, jam, sugar, chocolate chip cookies, powdered coffee creamer, onions, oranges, apples, granola bars, honey, canned beans, water, and lard. Amber Bracken



Smoke hangs over oilsands tailings ponds north of Fort McMurray, Alberta on Friday, June 2, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



Madeline Piche, 93, holds the rosary she evacuated with at the elders residence in Fort McKay, Alberta on Thursday, June 1, 2023. At 93-years-old, Piche is the oldest resident of Fort Chipewyan and says she is praying for everyone as they navigate the crisis. Amber Bracken

‘Praying helps’

The oldest resident evacuated from Fort Chip rests in her bed at the long-term care facility in Fort McKay. Madelaine Piche, 93, clutches a sparkling rosary, her milky brown eyes conveying a gentle naivety.

“I’m so tired,” she says with a sigh. “I’m scared, I was nervous inside the plane.”

Along with several other elders, Piche was airlifted out of Fort Chip and transported to the Fort McKay facility on May 30. She’s comfortable, she says, and the food is

“good here.”

The view of the river outside her window reminds her of home.

Now Piche — grandmother of 43 and great-grandmother to countless great-grandchildren — patiently waits for one of her daughters to visit from Fort McMurray.

She cries as she prays for her hometown, the only place she’s ever lived.

“Fort Chip is beautiful.... Praying helps,” she says with a whisper. “I pray a lot for everybody and for it to stop burning.”

Meanwhile, hundreds of displaced residents are scattered in various hotels throughout Fort McMurray. The Municipality of Wood Buffalo’s Emergency Social Services department is accepting donations of essential supplies such as toiletries, clothing, diapers, baby wipes and menstrual products. Families gather in hotel parking lots to catch up on the latest updates about the wildfires and let their children play on the grass.

But essential supplies for cabin dwellers are needed.

Riding the river

Mikisew Cree Nation evacuees Matthew Coutoreille and Yancey Kaskamin volunteer to deliver packages of food and water to nine cabins spread out along the river. They work alongside Coutoreille’s father, Lloyd Donovan, a resident of Fort McKay.

After sorting through various dried goods, gassing up, and loading their boats, the crew embarks on a Friday morning mission that will last until dusk.

Coutoreille, 36, has travelled the river since he was a young boy. He knows every

bend swirling throughout the hundreds of kilometres of his homelands. He studies the current and weaves in and around sandbars, islands and debris to safely navigate his boat.

“My grandpa was one of the old-timers that used to come up and down this river,” he says in a calm and steady voice.

“You always have to have an eye out here. When you’re travelling with the old-timers, they tell you where the rocks are, where the sticks are and where to go. So I’ve learned from them.”

The river is ever-changing and unpredictable. Coutoreille is an environmental monitor for the Mikisew Cree. He observes the dwindling water levels as a result of impacts from industry and B.C. Hydro’s damming system. It makes maneuvering the river more dangerous.

“You can tell how much water dropped here and if it’s safe. And it’s gotten worse over the years because of water levels. Now everything is just drying up.”

A thick, smoggy gray haze blankets the horizon. Another wildfire to the east of the river a few hours south of Fort Chip is colliding with the smoke blowing in from there — as if Armageddon were descending upon the territory.

But Courtoreille isn’t afraid. He’s fixated on the task of helping his neighbours. Approaching the mouth of Lake Athabasca, he slows to assess the strength of the winds.

“It’s going to be rough.” He winks with a slight smile and takes a shallow breath.

After pulling on a hoodie and securing the boat canopy, he confers with his father and Kaskamin. They will steer their boats in the direction of the northeast-blowing winds.

Courtoreille nods as if to reassure me as he explains his boat is designed to take on water at the bow. If the waves are not navigated properly, they can swamp an open boat or capsize it. He's crossed the lake in poorer conditions and is confident in his ability to safely do it again.

"Let's get 'er done!" yells Donovan.

Motors roar in succession. Courtoreille leads the way to create a trail for the ensuing boats to have a smoother ride. After a harrowing 15-minute journey of dodging full-length logs and climbing whitecaps that crash against the boat, Courtoreille securely guides us to a bay in Fort Chip.

Whirling sounds of helicopters flying to and from the small airport penetrate the stillness of the near-empty hamlet. Pickup trucks, emergency vehicles and ATVs intermittently race between the emergency command centre in the middle of town and areas that personnel are working to fireproof.

Sheets of smoke billow into the sky less than three kilometres from Alison Bay, a residential area of the Mikisew Cree Nation on the boundaries of Fort Chip. Workers have dug trenches to the lake there to make the water more accessible.

Excavators clear fields of trees and shrubs surrounding the Mikisew community and Fort Chip. Pumps connected to water hoses supply a web of sprinklers attached to the rooftops of homes and other structures around town.

At an emergency meeting that evening of approximately 200 people, including local leaders, authorities, firefighters and community volunteers, one person yells out that they will work through the night to protect Fort Chip.

Chief Adam echoes the sentiment: whatever it takes to keep the fire at bay.

"We can cut grass, remove all the garbage and debris, and do all these little things,"

he tells the crowd, appearing exhausted but unwavering.

“We will make it happen. If the fire does come into the community, we will assist in some way with the fire department,” he says. “But the forest fire, that belongs to Alberta Forestry and the professional firefighters. Now a lot of prayers are with us from other communities. Stay strong.”

After a hot meal, volunteers line up to attest to their skills so officials can enter them into a database.

It has been stressful to coordinate a community-led emergency operation at times, says Jay Telegdi, intergovernmental relations senior manager for the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation. Yet he has been down this road before. He helped evacuate members of Fort McKay Métis Nation in 2016. Now he buckles down to make sure every community member on the ground is assigned a task.



Evacuee John Edmund Mercredi, 84, plays the fiddle in Fort McKay, Alberta on Thursday, June 1, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



A dog eyes an overnight offering of coffee and cookies for residents and first responders at Chiefs Corner gas station and corner store in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Saturday, June 3, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



Sprinklers protect houses on the edge of town in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Friday, June 2, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken

No time to contemplate causes

Calvin Waquan, Mikisew Cree, is the general manager of the Chief's Corner gas station and convenience store in Fort Chip. He didn't question staying behind to keep the store open when others closed their businesses down and left. After kissing his wife and two young children goodbye at the airport so they could fly to safety and find shelter in a Fort McMurray hotel, he sprang into action.

He cooks meals every day for up to 150 people in his store's kitchen and caters to the varied schedules of anyone needing cigarettes, snacks or toiletries. He's tallying

the purchases on a charge basis, having buyers sign receipts for reimbursement from the province, which he says will be covering the full costs.

“I’m here to serve,” he says while mopping the store floor.

“I know one guy in town already passed out and fainted. So I’m making sure I get a lot of fruit and vegetables in me. And I don’t want my wife to come home right now.” He stops to laugh. “Because it’s pretty messy around the kitchen at home. But I’ve been trying to listen to what she used to tell me about taking in nutrients and vitamins.”

“It’s tough because it’s emotional. It’s tough on my daughter, she cries and then I start crying. The way I see fires, what’s happening with Mother Nature, it’s kind of resetting and teaching us a lesson to slow down maybe and appreciate what we have.”

Calvin Waquan, Mikisew Cree, general manager of the Chief’s Corner gas station and convenience store in Fort Chip

Waquan is a former elected councillor of the Mikisew Cree Nation. He lobbied governments for compensation and accountability from the oil industry for damages to his territories. Lately, he’s noticed rapid changes to the seasons.

“We had the winter road come in way late this year, the water was open right until January. And now this.”

But in an active emergency, there isn’t much time to contemplate root causes. Every night since the evacuation, before he heads home to catch a few hours of sleep, Waquan sets up a table outside the store with two filled coffee urns, cream, sugar and a package of cookies for workers.

He speaks to his family daily, although he tries to avoid video calling them.

“It’s tough because it’s emotional. It’s tough on my daughter, she cries and then I start crying. The way I see fires, what’s happening with Mother Nature, it’s kind of resetting and teaching us a lesson to slow down maybe and appreciate what we have. And I think that’s what the families are learning and especially myself. Not having the kids being in here grabbing a slush, kids running by to go to the park or just hanging out on the concrete outside — I miss seeing the kids and all the noise that’s always going on.”

Lifelong Fort Chip resident Doris Cardinal works at the K’ai Talle Market a few blocks from Chief’s Corner. She and her husband, Happy, chose not to leave.

“This is my home and I wasn’t going to go anywhere,” she says while having a break outside the market. “I’d be afraid if I see the fire coming over the hills, then I’d run for the water.”

Cardinal is still processing the news that her cabin burned down two days prior. The home she and her husband built along the river just three years ago was their retirement plan. It was located north of Fort Chip, around the corner of what’s called Devil’s Gate, by Little Rapids, she explains.

She grew up on the land and river. It’s a special place she goes to wind down and take in the northern lights while sipping strong tea.

“Some of the leaders went up in the choppers and took a snapshot. And then my niece told me my house burned. I shed tears, I’m not gonna lie, and I swore. It was not the greatest feeling.”

Cardinal’s was one of several cabins devoured by the wildfire. Her husband vows to rebuild one day. For now, Cardinal is immersed in keeping the market afloat and lifting the morale of others on the ground.

“As long as the robins are singing, I’ll be okay,” she says with a chuckle.

Enter the army

That afternoon the Fort Chip airport is abuzz with anticipation as local rangers, chiefs and workers congregate to welcome the Canadian military. A gray Lockheed C-130 Hercules plane rumbles down the airstrip as a crowd watches in awe from behind a metal fence.

The warplane is carrying 65 soldiers dressed in camo and combat boots ready to battle the flames. It will return with dozens more soldiers later that evening.

The encroaching wildfire is less than three kilometres away, and smoke is descending on the site.

Chief Adam paces the parking lot while recording a Facebook live video. His long silver hair is tied back, and his shoulders slightly droop from an overwhelming cocktail of emotions. His eyes light up at the sight of the incoming army, and a grin emerges.

Kendrick Cardinal, the Fort Chip Métis Nation president, greets each soldier with a handshake as they march to an awaiting bus that will shuttle them to their command post.

He feels relieved. “I’m happy the army is here to help us out. It’s more manpower. With their help we’ll try to extinguish the fire as soon as possible.”

Officials are unsure when it will be safe for evacuees to return home. As of June 8, the wildfire has scorched over 31,000 hectares, and firefighters have so far been able to hold it back from Fort Chip.

But firefighters have their work cut out for them across the country. According to

the [Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre](#), there are over 400 fires actively burning in Canada, 240 of which are deemed out of control.

The effects of the wildfires are far-reaching. A thick haze drifted into parts of the northern United States mid-week, blotting out the sun, and creating a [Code Red air quality](#) level for millions of people.

Chief Adam notes a large influx of moose flies swarming the airport. The large insects, known for sending irritated moose into a frenzy, bite chunks of human and animal flesh in order to reproduce.

But it's too early for moose flies, he says. They usually don't appear until well into July.

It's another sign something is off with the patterns of Mother Nature.

"Climate change is such a part of this, everything ties into it," he says with frustration.

He declares he'll continue confronting government leaders who push [the status quo of excessive oil production](#) up the river, which is exacerbating carbon emissions.

"(The Alberta government's) let-it-burn policy has to change because it's gonna get worse. It's burning out of control."



A pointed message spray painted on a fence in Fort McKay, Alberta on Thursday, June 1, 2023. Over 1000 people have been evacuated from Fort Chipewyan as wildfires threaten the community downriver from the oil sands. Amber Bracken



Calvin Waquan in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Saturday, June 3, 2023. Although they have been running short staffed, the family has kept Chiefs Corner open to help care for people fighting fire—and have given away all merchandise except for cigarettes and gas. Amber Bracken



Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation chief Allen Adam watches military arrive to help fight fires in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta on Saturday, June 3, 2023. Amber Bracken
This [article](#) first appeared on [The Real News Network](#) and is republished here under a Creative Commons license. 

