

## **Title: Wildfire Evacuation Perspectives – Wood Buffalo, Alberta 2016**

**Tara K. McGee, PhD, University of Alberta**

### **Introduction**

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo includes diverse communities including Fort McMurray urban centre, First Nation reserves, Metis settlements, and other communities. Wood Buffalo is located in the boreal forest of northern Alberta. On May 1, 2016, the Horse River fire started, which spread towards Fort McMurray and neighbouring communities, causing the evacuation of more than 88,000 residents. Residents were away from their homes for several weeks or longer, with the first residents allowed back on June 1<sup>st</sup>. The purpose of the study was to examine the evacuation of residents from Wood Buffalo during the May 2016 wildfire, from the perspectives of community leaders and residents. Community leaders were interviewed in person in Wood Buffalo or by phone, and residents completed an online survey that was advertised through social media. The results of this study identify factors that helped the evacuation process, and challenges that hindered the evacuation.

### **Research Questions**

The study aimed to investigate the evacuation of residents from Wood Buffalo, from the perspectives of community leaders and residents. The research questions were: (1) How was the wildfire evacuation completed? (2) What helped and hindered the evacuation, from the perspective of community leaders and residents? And (3) What were evacuees' experiences leaving their home community and staying elsewhere during the evacuation?

### **Methods**

The study conducted two field visits to the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in July and October of 2016. Interviews were completed with five contacts in Wood Buffalo with leadership roles in the community, which were selected using purposive sampling. Due to the small number of community leaders who were able to be interviewed, the study also reviewed media coverage of the event for additional information. An online survey was developed, and advertised through social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, and a total of 447 respondents completed the survey. Initial analysis of findings from the interviews with community leaders and online survey of participants are reported here. A more detailed analysis of the findings will be completed over the coming months.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The community had an emergency plan in place that initially identified MacDonald Island Park as an evacuation centre, however, it had not been designed for a wildfire of this magnitude. The evacuation of the whole population of Fort McMurray and nearby communities was not expected, and this meant that a lot of the decisions about how to evacuate the population were being made during the evacuation.

More than half of the survey respondents had very little or no time at all to prepare to evacuate. Many had difficulty leaving their neighbourhoods, and then faced traffic delays on Highway 63, the one highway that services Fort McMurray and nearby communities. As a result of traffic delays, many cars ran out of gasoline and were abandoned. Some survey respondents were separated from family members and friends, others did not have enough food or water during the drive. Many described the fear they experienced as they were leaving, making a challenging situation even more stressful.

Social media served as a very important source of information for survey respondents throughout the evacuation. Evacuees were able to obtain updates through social media outlets on the progress of the evacuation and share this information. Facebook groups set up for evacuees had a large following, but despite the information being shared online, many survey respondents said that they did not receive enough information during and after the evacuation and were frustrated waiting for news about returning to their homes.

## **Conclusion**

The initial results presented in this report highlight the need for all municipalities to have well developed emergency plans and adequate emergency access within and outside communities. The Horse River fire quickly exceeded the scope of the Regional Municipality's emergency plan, which led to a lack of organisation when it came to the relocation of evacuees. Going forward, emergency plans must be developed in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders and incorporate a 'worst case' scenario.

Lastly, it is imperative that all municipalities have adequate emergency access routes, which was proven to be a major obstacle for the evacuation of communities in Wood Buffalo. There is a need to develop more roads within Wood Buffalo to avoid traffic congestion in the event that another evacuation occurs.

Further study is needed to examine the experiences of evacuees during the recovery phase and to examine information needs of evacuees.