

## **Improving Cooperation and Reducing Conflict in First Nations Wildfire Management**

**Principal Investigator (PI): Jocelyn Stacey, Assistant Professor, Allard School of Law, UBC**

**Research Assistant (RA): Emma Feltes, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, UBC**

### **Introduction**

This project looks at First Nations Wildfire Management in Yunesit'in, one of six Tsilhqot'in communities, and a community that was at the heart of the British Columbia wildfires in the summer of 2017. The project began through relationship building with Chief Russell Myers Ross of the Yunesit'in Nation. Chief Myers Ross and the principal investigator (PI) over the course of several months explored opportunities for supporting Yunesit'in in documenting the challenges that the community faced during the wildfire response and recovery. Over the course of five days, the research assistant (RA) interviewed 16 people, representing a cross-section of perspectives. Project and progress outcomes were also discussed in meetings with the Wildfire Team Lead and with Chief Myers Ross.

### **Research Questions**

The three principal research aims of this project were:

1. To assess how the governments of Canada and British Columbia currently support First Nations communities in wildfire prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.
2. To identify causes of conflict and confusion over jurisdictional responsibility between government and First Nations communities.
3. To provide recommendations on how to improve co-ordination between government and First Nations communities around wildfire prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

### **Methods**

The research project involved 16 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted by the RA over a five-day period. The interviews took place in Williams Lake and Yunesit'in in July 2018. Those who were interviewed included the Chief, band councilors, band staff, forestry experts, members of the community's fire crews, Elders, and other community members. The PI and RA also attended interviews that were carried out by the Wildfire Project Team lead. This ensured consistency in the interview style across communities and allowed the researchers to revise interview questions to better elicit information about jurisdictional conflict, confusion and coordination.

## **Preliminary Findings**

The findings of this research pertain to Yunesit'in's experience of the wildfire, focusing on community members' interactions with regional, provincial and federal authorities, and the jurisdictional gaps, conflicts and ambiguities that were revealed in the wildfire response.

The initial findings related to Yunesit'in Nation include: 1) a successful operation of Yunesit'in emergency response, despite many complex challenges 2) challenges in supporting Elders and community members who chose not to evacuate during the wildfire, 3) disrespectful conduct by the RCMP throughout the process of evacuation, 4) the reimbursement model of emergency response funding created uncertainty and stress for the community and 5) the need for consistent relationships with regional, provincial and federal authorities to adequately prepare for emergencies.

The initial findings pertaining to jurisdictional issues include: 1) the 2017 wildfires revealed an assumption on the part of regional, provincial and federal authorities that First Nations play a passive and deferential role in emergency management, 2) Tsilhqot'in leaders actively exercised their inherent jurisdiction with respect to their citizens and territory during and after the wildfires, 3) regional, provincial and federal authorities lack basic information on BC First Nations such as: their geography, legal authority and governance structure, 4) provincial and federal authorities threatened to use legal powers within provincial jurisdiction to coerce community leaders into following provincial orders rather than following Tsilhqot'in authority, 5) existing inter-governmental mechanisms for disaster compensation creates a cumbersome process for First Nations in need of disaster relief funds and 6) provincial and federal enforcement agencies have played a supportive and collaborative role in implementing Tsilhqot'in laws over mushroom harvesting in Tsilhqot'in territory.

## **Conclusion**

One of the key recommendations of the Yunesit'in Elders and other community members that came out of the 2017 wildfires is the need for ongoing, consistent relationships with all regional, provincial and federal authorities to ensure that communities are prepared for future emergencies. Further, the researchers recommend an establishment of clear protocols, policies, memoranda of understandings, as well as a harmonization of decision-making processes that recognize the inherent authority of the Tsilhqot'in communities will be vital in bridging many of the existing gaps and sources of conflict ahead of future emergencies.