

2023 Territorial Wildfire Emergency Response

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak about this summer's devastating wildfire season that affected a majority of Northwest Territories residents. Territorial emergencies began in May and ended in September and saw a total of 12 communities impacted and roughly 70% of all NWT residents evacuated from their communities.

I understand how stressful these emergency events must have been for residents. I was an evacuee myself in the spring of 2021 and understand the challenges and the anxiety that these situations bring. There are also challenging days ahead as many of you now have to repair the damage and help rebuild your homes and communities.

This has been the worst wildfire season in our recorded history and for many of us; one that we will never forget. To preserve the record, I will be tabling MACA's detailed chronology of the events of this summer later today. It is important for us to remember the events that occurred in a short period of time and the environment that was in place that led to the declaration of a Territorial State of Emergency.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to being our worst wildfire season, it was also the first time any of us ever experienced an out-of-territory evacuation. To guide this historic undertaking, the GNWT used its Territorial Emergency Plan and that plan worked.

The Emergency Plan provided for the activation of a Territorial Emergency Management Organization, or TEMO, to act as the lead authority for the government's emergency management response. TEMO includes representation from all GNWT departments and agencies, applicable community governments, and emergency response-related agencies. The Emergency Plan outlines that community governments are the lead on community emergency events, but when they need assistance, they ask the GNWT. When the GNWT needs assistance, we ask for help from Canada and other partners, which is exactly what we did.

Through the TEMO, we supported community governments by calling for assistance from partners like the United Way, and the governments of Alberta, Manitoba, and Yukon when our capacity was exceeded. I am the first person to say that we had to make several adjustments over the past few weeks as situations changed, and as new information emerged.

It is a standard process after a disaster to conduct an after-action review using external contractors. The after-action review for this event is expected to be extensive and will involve the public and all partners. However, we are not waiting for recommendations from this review to make improvements. There are things we know we can start right away. This includes updating the NWT Emergency Plan, enhancing GNWT coordination and community government training, and increasing capacity for emergency response and evacuations across communities. We have also started the most important matter of all, which is helping community governments recover from this wildfire season as we work to rebuild Enterprise and all other affected communities.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I am so impressed by the tremendous amount of work undertaken by so many since May to protect residents and communities. The collective work done by hundreds of people over such an extended period of time deserves our gratitude and our thanks.

To the brave firefighters, as well as the frontline staff and contractors who worked so hard on wildfire prevention and emergency response, thank you. To residents who displayed such resilience in the face of so many challenges, and showed such kindness to their fellow evacuees, thank you.

To the GNWT departments and agencies that supported all our efforts, thank you and to our federal, provincial, and territorial partners who came to our help when we needed it most, thank you. We are in your debt for the kindness and compassion you have shown our residents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.