



***Giving Voice to Cultural Safety of Indigenous Wildland
Firefighters in Canada***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Prepared by:
Turtle Island Consulting Services Inc.**

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Overview

In Canada, the voices of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel¹ need to be heard, valued, and recognized.

For decades, Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) firefighters and fire operations staff have been engaged in wildland fire suppression activities, formally and informally. They are increasingly being called upon by their communities and the broader wildfire management agency community in Canada to engage and deploy in various wildfire suppression and related duties. In the past decade, we have seen an increase in wildfire activity and the number of communities put at risk or impacted by high-intensity wildfire events. Due to the nature of this work, Indigenous Peoples engaged in wildland fire suppression activities routinely work in hazardous situations and stressful environments – impacting their physical, mental, and spiritual/cultural well-being.

Little is known or understood about the *experiences of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel*. To address this deficit, we developed an online survey and virtual circles were conducted specifically for individuals who self-identified as Indigenous and worked in wildland firefighting and/or fire operations for at least one fire season in Canada. These participant selection criteria supported the sharing of Indigenous Peoples’ voices in culturally safe spaces to help (i) increase the understanding of their jobs, (ii) enhance overall satisfaction from a cross-cultural perspective during this important work, and (iii) aid in making the future of wildland firefighting more enjoyable, safer, and culturally inviting.

What does this project contribute to the mandate of Natural Resources Canada?

The *Giving Voice to Cultural Safety of Indigenous Wildland Firefighters in Canada* Project is the first study of its kind! This project provides preliminary data on cultural safety and occupational health and safety that is necessary to improve the understanding of Indigenous perspectives on wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations across what is now called Canada.

From January – July 2021, Turtle Island Consulting Services Inc. (TICS Inc.) Project Team explored the following set of questions:

- *What are Indigenous wildland firefighters' and wildland fire operations staff's experiences regarding accident/injury rates, sickness presenteeism/absenteeism, chronic illness (cancer, respiratory illness, etc.), close calls, racism/discrimination/harassment?*
- *What is currently working on the fireline and fire operation centres to promote cultural safety of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel?*
- *What are the priority needs/issues and recommendations for enhancing cultural safety for Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel?*

This project was intended to create a better understanding of occupational resiliency from the perspectives of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel and to promote cultural safety as part of understanding occupational health and safety - based on workers’ stories and supported by relevant literature.

¹ The term “wildland firefighting personnel” is used to reference wildland firefighters and other wildland fire operations staff, including support personnel.

Methods

The TICS Inc. Project Team used the Etuaptmunk/Two-Eyed Seeing approach² and mixed methods approach of qualitative and quantitative data collection. This involved reviewing the literature which then informed the design and administration of a customized online survey and the facilitation of virtual circles. Specifically, an anonymous online questionnaire (via *Simple Survey*)³ on cultural safety and occupational health and safety⁴ was shared with prospective survey participants through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), provincial/territorial/national wildfire organizational key contacts, and personal direct contacts across Canada. In total, 191 individuals answered most of the online survey. Guided by the Talking Circle which draws on the collective wisdom of the group, we facilitated four virtual circle sessions that were hosted on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. In total, six people who self-identified as Indigenous and worked in wildland firefighting and/or fire operations for at least one fire season in Canada participated in the virtual circles.

Adapting the occupational resiliency conceptual framework from the 2012 work of Langlois, Caverley, Krishnaswamy, MacGregor, Cunningham, Carlson, Eustache, & Strobl,⁵ the TICS Inc. Project Team examined the cultural safety and occupational health and safety of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel in Canada based on multiple dimensions:

- Self-identification (i.e., demographics);
- Organizational characteristics (e.g., leadership and management commitment, communications and reporting – including close calls, supportive environment, support for unique and diverse identities, involvement, training and development, productivity);
- Work-related illnesses/injuries (e.g., physical health, mental health, general health, COVID-19 pandemic);
- Work experiences (e.g., perceived safety of overall work environment, career-life experiences, and job satisfaction); and
- (Personal) values (e.g., responsibility for one’s health, Indigenous cultural teachings and practices).

The relationship among these dimensions has significant implications for Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel across Canada where there is an increasing need to enhance recruiting and selecting, rewarding and retaining, developing and coaching, and managing (worker-supervisor) relations – as a means of creating an inclusive, welcoming, healthier, and safer work environment.

² For more information about Etuaptmunk/Two-Eyed Seeing, visit <http://www.integrativescience.ca/Principles/TwoEyedSeeing/>.

³ For more information on *Simple Survey*, visit <https://simplesurvey.com/>.

⁴ The questionnaire was structured based on scholar-practitioner literature and related works, notably - Langlois, B., Caverley, N., Krishnaswamy, A., MacGregor, J.N., Cunningham, J.B., Carlson, M., Eustache, J., & Strobl, K. (2012) *Final report – Safeguarding our Indigenous communities: Measuring the health and safety culture of Aboriginal fire crews and emergency service personnel in British Columbia*. Also, we adapted survey instruments to the context of Indigenous Peoples and wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations. They included, but were not limited to, Cox and Cheyne’s (2000) *Safety climate checklist*; Janssens, Brett and Smith’s (1995) *Perceptions of safety level survey*; Mueller, DaSilva, Townsend and Tetric’s (1999) *Safety climate survey*; Ostrom, Wilhelmsen and Kaplan’s (1993) *EG&G Idaho safety norms survey*; and Yule, Flin and Murdy’s (2001) *Safety climate survey*.

⁵ Langlois, B., Caverley, N., Krishnaswamy, A., MacGregor, J.N., Cunningham, J.B., Carlson, M., Eustache, J., & Strobl, K. (2012). *Final report – Safeguarding our Indigenous communities: Measuring the health and safety culture of Aboriginal fire crews and emergency service personnel in British Columbia*. Kamloops, BC: First Nations’ Emergency Services Society.

*Notable Findings*Career-life experiences

- The top five reasons that respondents initially became wildland firefighters and/or wildland fire operations staff were: (1) they like challenging and exciting work environments; (2) they like helping people and communities in their time of need; (3) they like being close to the land; (4) they feel a responsibility to care for Mother Earth; and (5) they received a referral from a family member/friend.
- Key individuals who influenced respondents to become wildland firefighters and/or wildland fire operations staff were family members, friends, and/or wildland firefighters.
- Respondents were in general agreement that they are “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with their experience in wildland firefighting and/or other aspects of wildland fire operations.
- The top five reasons respondents like being wildland firefighters and/or wildland fire operations staff were: (1) opportunity to work outdoors; (2) excitement associated with wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations tasks; (3) opportunities for professional training and skills development; (4) enjoyment of physical tasks associated with wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations; and (5) camaraderie with crew/co-workers (team atmosphere).
- Regarding career advancement, respondents who stated that they received a promotion indicated that it was based on leadership skills, job performance, and education or training. Seniority and willingness to relocate were cited less frequently.
- The top five work concerns for respondents were: (1) lack of future career advancement opportunities (e.g., opportunities to move from seasonal to permanent wildland fire protection positions); (2) cultural safety and work-related discrimination in the workplace; (3) long-term impacts on physical health from work-related exposure to hazardous and stressful conditions; (4) long term impacts on mental health from work-related exposure to hazardous and stressful conditions; and (5) illness and/or injury on the job.
- The top five occupational health and safety concerns for respondents were: (1) COVID-19 pandemic in the fire camp; (2) more frequent extreme weather events (e.g., long, more intense fire seasons); (3) hazards on the fireline; (4) more frequent and more severe insect outbreaks⁶ affecting forest fuels and overall work conditions; and (5) living in fire camp conditions (e.g., group sleeping, eating, and bathing).
- Regarding career departure, for respondents who stopped being wildland firefighting personnel, the most frequent reasons were a change in career focus, lack of career advancement opportunities, and low pay.

Accident/injury rates (includes chronic illness)

- Respondents who indicated they experienced a mild to extreme illness/injury event reported physical health-related illnesses/injuries more often than mental health-related illnesses/injuries.

⁶ E.g., mountain pine beetle.

- There appeared to be a pattern where respondents who reported a given work-related illness/injury also felt supported by their employer.
- There were mixed results from respondents about whether they sought a diagnosis or not for a work-related illness/injury event (physical health or mental health-related).
- None of the respondents who indicated they experienced a mild to moderate illness/injury received workers' compensation.
- The top three individuals that respondents typically sought mental health help/support from were: (1) counsellor; (2) Elder and physician; and (3) family (includes parent), friend, spouse/partner. Respondents' mental health counselling services were typically provided by their employer benefits plan or they paid out of their own pocket.
- Reported work-related mental health incidents (experienced by crews/co-workers) focused on mental health crises, workplace hazards (included close calls), and family/relationship issues.
- For respondents who reported a crew/co-worker work-related serious illness/injury or fatality, the events were caused by being struck by an object (e.g., falling tree), transportation accident (e.g., helicopter crash) or a heart attack. Respondents indicated that their crew/wildland fire operations co-workers experienced the work-related serious illness/injury or fatality on the fire line which were typically reported to leadership/management (includes supervisors).

Sickness presenteeism/absenteeism

- The top three reasons for respondents to go to work despite being ill and/or injured were team involvement and engagement, livelihood, and work ethic.
- Similar questions on sickness presenteeism and sickness absenteeism were posed in the Langlois et al. 2012 report on Indigenous fire crews and emergency service personnel in British Columbia. Respondents in this study self-reported an average sickness absenteeism rate of 1.48 days and an average sickness presenteeism rate of 3.30 days.⁷ Therefore, as a comparison to the TICS Inc. 2021 study, the sickness absenteeism rate was slightly lower for the TICS Inc. 2021 study (1.49 days for the Langlois et al. 2012 cohort vs. 0 days for the TICS Inc. 2021 Project Team cohort). The same can be said for the sickness presenteeism rate between cohorts (Langlois et al. 2012 cohort at 3.30 days vs. the TICS Inc. 2021 Project Team cohort at 0 days).
- The top five ways that respondents coped with stress during their experience in wildland firefighting and/or other aspects of wildland fire operations were: (1) socializing with supportive friends and family; (2) participating in a hobby (e.g., reading a book, playing games); (3) getting proper exercise, eating nutritious foods, practicing good sleep (between 7 – 9 hours of sleep per night); (4) talking out the stressful issue with a crew member/co-worker; and (5) practicing cultural activities (e.g., traditional teachings, healing ceremonies).

⁷ Langlois, B., Caverley, N., Krishnaswamy, A., MacGregor, J.N., Cunningham, J.B., Carlson, M., Eustache, J., & Strobl, K. (2012). *Final report – Safeguarding our indigenous communities: Measuring the health and safety culture of Aboriginal fire crews and emergency service personnel in British Columbia*. Kamloops, BC: First Nations' Emergency Services Society.

- Respondents who worked as wildland firefighting personnel felt they were in an unsafe work environment twice (median) during the 2020 wildland fire season and COVID-19 pandemic. This was similar to respondents who felt they were in an unsafe work environment the same amount of times (during their experience in wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations) before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Close calls

- Fifty-one out of 102 respondents (50%) reported that they had experienced a close call.
- The top three close call types (e.g., unexpected fire behaviour, helicopter-related and falling tree/snag) accounted for approximately 70% of the incidents reported in the survey.

Racism/discrimination/harassment

- During their time in wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations, 60 out of 113 respondents (53%) indicated they experienced work-related discrimination, while the remaining respondents stated they either did not experience work-related discrimination (41 out of 113; 36%) or were “not sure/uncertain” if they experienced work-related discrimination (12 out of 113; 11%).
- 47 out of 58 respondents (81%) indicated that ancestry/race (e.g., nation/band/community/tribal affiliation) was the most frequent type of work-related discrimination encountered during their time in wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations. Other types of work-related discrimination experienced by respondents during their time in wildland firefighting and/or wildland fire operations were physical appearance (e.g., hair length, size, skin colour, piercings, tattoos); physical ability (e.g., fitness level, weight); religious beliefs (e.g., Christianity, Indigenous spiritual practices); age and education level.

The nature of the work-related discrimination was primarily: (1) intimidating, offensive or humiliating joke(s) or suggestions and workplace power struggles (e.g., misuse of authority, lateral violence-equal positions, not working as equal teammates); (2) gossiping; (3) false accusations, excluding potential employees during promotion/career advancement process; (4) actions of a derogatory nature (e.g., hand signs, mocking, mimicking); and (5) bullying (e.g., physically, verbally, or any other action).

- The main reasons respondents did not report their work-related discrimination experience(s) was due to: (1) fear of reprisal or retaliatory act and/or they didn't think it would matter; and/or (2) they were new to the organization, and unclear of the process to file a complaint and/or other.

Cultural safety and occupational health and safety – what works

- *With regards to occupational health and safety*, respondents reported very positive experiences with organizational characteristics such as leadership and management commitment, communications and reporting, supportive environment, and involvement.
- *With regards to cultural safety*, respondents reported more can be done to acknowledge and implement ways to create a respectful and safe work environment for Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel.

- Respondents felt there is a need to recognize the mission critical role of supervisors (crew leaders/wildland fire operations centre supervisors) in creating a welcoming and inclusive work environment – fierce and passionate leadership demonstrated through promoting team work and facilitating a sense of belonging, supporting diversity and inclusion – treating one another as equals, and motivating and supporting crew members and staff.
- Along with supervisors, crew members/co-workers are also instrumental in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel. Relevant competencies are recognizing and demonstrating mutual trust, honesty, fairness, and understanding (includes openness to the use of Indigenous cultural practices); participating in team work; and engaging in shared experiences (includes participating in cultural practices together).
- Strategic communications with crew leaders/supervisors and crew members/co-workers was deemed another important dimension to cultural safety in relation to occupational health and safety. Again, supervisors were viewed as pivotal in promoting two-way communications with their teams. Effective communication involved actively listening, reserving judgment, considering all ideas of the crew/staff to enhance decision-making and problem solving in wildland fire operations, and using clear and prompt top-down and horizontal communications (e.g., debriefings and fireside chats) in creating a respectful and safe work environment.
- Respondents shared stories about engaging in workplace safety training and practices (both formal and informal) which includes following safety policies and procedures (e.g., codes of conduct, occupational health and safety regulations) and participating in equity, diversity, and inclusion-related training (i.e., anti-harassment training, cultural awareness and sensitivity training).
- According to respondents, tangible actions for creating a culturally safe work environment include:

Recognize and use traditional ecological knowledge. This includes, but is not limited to, respecting and using Indigenous cultural protocols and practices; hiring Indigenous Peoples; participating in Indigenous engagement and relationship building; and retaining Indigenous-led/operated wildfire crews and contractors.

Have a respectful work environment. This includes, but is not limited to, maintaining a work ethic and professional conduct; participating in respectful workplace training; having equal treatment in the work environment; and having supportive leadership and management, particularly Indigenous leadership (e.g., supervisors) engaging in clear and respectful two-way communications.

Cultural safety and occupational health and safety – priority needs/issues and recommendations

- For respondents, “cultural safety” means:

Honouring traditional ecological knowledge, cultural practices, and customs. This includes, but is not limited to, protecting one’s cultural identity and way of life (e.g., embracing cultural beliefs and values) and having a sense of belonging to others, to the land, and to safeguard Mother Earth (e.g., protecting the land and artifacts); and

Having an inclusive and respectful work environment. This includes, but is not limited to, not having to worry about racism, discrimination, harassment, and stereotypes in one’s work environment; respecting people’s cultures, values, and beliefs; looking out for another as a crew/team; and educating others about one’s cultural identity/identities.

- For respondents, a “welcoming and inclusive work environment” means:

Being treated as an equal regardless of race, culture, religion. This includes, but is not limited to, having barrier-free employment, hiring, career promotion/advancement, and training; and treating one another with mutual respect, understanding, and openness.

Recognizing, celebrating, and honouring Indigenous cultural ways of knowing and methods. This includes, but is not limited to, utilizing Indigenous cultural practices, ceremonies, and traditional ecological knowledge (e.g., land acknowledgements, consultations with Indigenous communities); engaging in cultural training and learning; and protecting the land/Mother Earth.

Feeling comfortable to be how I am in the workplace without fear of reprisal. This includes, but is not limited to, having access to a fair and trusted grievance process; and having a good team and great supervision (e.g., open communications), particularly Indigenous leadership (e.g., Indigenous Peoples working from the top down and in all areas of the service).

- Respondents indicated that having a culturally safe work environment for Indigenous Peoples is important in the wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations professions in Canada.
- **It is important to explore cultural safety as an occupational health and safety issue.** For people to feel valued in the work environment and succeed in their jobs, employers have a role in recognizing and respecting people’s unique and diverse identities (e.g., race, religion, gender, socio-economic status, physical and mental ability, age, and sexual orientation).

Implications for Scholars and Practitioners

- We acknowledge the breadth of the areas explored in this project that relate to cultural safety and occupational health and safety.
- The intent was to support the sharing of preliminary data on this emerging national topic in a timely, accessible, and culturally-relevant manner.
- We recommend a focus on depth for future research and analysis regarding Indigenous wildland firefighting and wildland fire management. In particular, in the areas of mental health needs and resources in Indigenous fire services; personal style of Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel; and giving voice to the experiences of new professionals - Indigenous wildland firefighting personnel with less than five years of experience.

- In terms of policy and program recommendations:
 - Co-develop an Indigenous wildfire research agenda
 - Co-create and fund culturally-relevant and customized career development programs
 - Promote access and funding by wildfire agencies and related employers to Indigenous cultural supports/resources (e.g., traditional teachings; healing ceremonies; Elder, Knowledge Keeper and Fire Keeper engagement)⁸ to aid workers in connecting (or reconnecting) to occupational health, safety, and well-being practices
 - Implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) across orders of government
 - (Re)define cultural safety and a welcoming and inclusive work environment in the context of wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations
- In general, the wildfire service has an organizational culture that developed primarily from Western values as a paramilitary organization. Therefore, understanding Indigenous knowledges, ways of knowing, and values in relation to Western-based wildfire service culture is important in identifying revised leadership and management competencies that recognize and respect current and emerging opportunities in the recruitment and selection, training and development, worker-supervisor relations, promotion and career advancement of Indigenous Peoples in wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations in Canada.

In particular, it should be recognized that what often draws Indigenous Peoples to the field of wildland firefighting and wildland fire operations is not necessarily what employers are advertising from a recruitment perspective (e.g., adrenaline rush, paramilitary). Rather, career motivators include, but are not limited to, being in challenging and exciting work environments, helping people and communities in their time of need, being close to the land, feeling a responsibility to care for Mother Earth, receiving a referral from a family member/friend, and being in a team-based work environment.

Conclusion

- This project is intended to identify cultural safety and related performance measures that are relevant for Indigenous wildland firefighting in Canada; inform and recommend methods, strategies, and proposed next steps in creating a culturally and mentally safe work environment for Indigenous wildland firefighters, and enhance capacity building in Indigenous communities with regards to wildland fire protection.

The *Giving Voice to Cultural Safety of Indigenous Wildland Firefighters in Canada* Project was funded by Natural Resources Canada – Emergency Management Strategy – Wildland Fire Resilience Initiative.

⁸ Includes, but is not limited to, using a sweat lodge as a prevention and treatment strategy; integrating Indigenous recruitment and retention practices such as Talking Circles as a tool for decision-making and debriefings related to cultural safety and occupational health and safety issues; and increasing the awareness, recognition, and use of cultural burning techniques as a community protection and ecosystem stewardship tool.