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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (1140)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody. We are convening our 86th meeting.

We're talking about fire, emergency measures, fire protection, and fire safety in communities. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are conducting a study on fire safety and emergency management in indigenous communities.

Today we have one presenter from the Ashcroft Indian Band.

We're very glad you're here. Our apologies that we had a vote in our normal time, and that we weren't able to make it. I'm glad you waited. We will extend our time. I understand that we have agreement to have three questioners, each for seven minutes.

First of all, you're going to do your presentation for up to 10 minutes, and then we'll have questions.

I also want to recognize that we're on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. It's important for us to recognize that we're in a process of truth and reconciliation, and we make that acknowledgement wherever we go.

Thank you for coming, and it's over to you.

Ms. Jodene Blain (Band Administrator, Ashcroft Indian Band): Hello. I'm Jodene Blain, as you can see. I'm the band administrator for the Ashcroft Indian Band. I've also been the spokesperson throughout this whole fire. We are a small band in the interior of British Columbia. We have only 276 members.

I thought it was important for me to come because we offer a different perspective. We were the first and hardest hit first nation in B.C. The fire started on our plateau, so we had no chance. I know you've talked to other first nations. They had a chance to be proactive and did some amazing work. We had 30 minutes, from the time the fire started until it went through our community, to get people out. Half of our community was wiped out. We lost houses. We lost all our maintenance shops. Our maintenance manager had a shovel; that's all he had. Everything else was wiped out: our historical documents, our maps, our graveyard. All our hydro was just hanging. Septic tanks were just holes in the ground. I think it is important to give our perspective.

After the fire, the power was out in our community and in surrounding communities. Our cellphone tower burnt. I was a point of contact. I was on vacation at the time. I made a home base at the

picnic table. I was the only person they could contact because the chief and council were out of cell service.

After that it was chaos. We were thrown into a pit of acronyms: EOC, ESS, EMBC. I'd never heard of any of those before. After failed attempts to open our EOC with no power, we finally got it up and running and we started the response process. I want to just highlight our experiences for this committee because it was chaos. Our members were scattered throughout all of B.C.

The first thing I want to point out is with regard to the Red Cross. I know the Red Cross has been here. We had no Red Cross presence in our community for weeks. We had to beg and plead and scream to get the Red Cross there. Our members needed to see the Red Cross as a sign that somebody cared. Because there was no Red Cross presence, because we had no power and were under an evacuation order, we had to create a makeshift office in my basement by my washer and dryer to print cheques to get money to our members. We were dealing with a population that has no ID, low literacy skills, and no email, so electronic transfers don't work. There was just obstacle after obstacle. Just how things work has to be looked at differently with regard to first nations communities. We can't just set up emails. People have never even had an email before.

ESS was also a nightmare. Our regional district, the TNRD, as Cathy would know, did not set up an ESS, so we were the only game in town. Our staff were thrown into dealing with the surrounding communities that were also completely wiped out: Loon Lake and Boston Flats. We quickly trained our staff. These were staff who also lost their homes so they were evacuated, but they worked, I think, 21 days in a row before I finally made them have a day off. We were servicing our first nation, as well as surrounding communities.

We kept begging and pleading for the regional district to send ESS people to help, to relieve us, but nobody came. We didn't want to turn anyone away. We knew what they had gone through. We were the only ones servicing all these other communities. You can imagine the toll of dealing with people who have just lost everything. They didn't know us. They weren't from our community, but we dealt with them. We begged the province, EMBC, to help as well, "Send us some people; send us some bodies." That didn't happen. That was one of the biggest frustrations of this whole process.

• (1145)

Another one was wages. We all just started on the emergency right after the fire. We learned after the fact that our staff wages would not be covered. Base wages are not covered, only overtime. If we hire contractors to come in, their wages were 100% covered but ours weren't. If we had laid everybody off and then rehired them, they would have been covered, which is silly. We had no band office. We were under evacuation and we didn't even have a computer.

We're talking a substantial.... I mean, I think it was \$60,000 to \$70,000 after a few weeks of staff wages and overtime. The response we got from EMBC was to backfill, which sounds great in la-la land, but we were in chaos. How do you find another band administrator or finance person? You can't backfill. That was a huge learning curve. We're still trying to get the money back from INAC. They made big promises when they came to our reserve, but we still haven't seen a penny of that. That's a huge issue that we're still fighting for.

In terms of this, we've learned a lot. We want to share with other first nation communities what we've learned.

Number one is insurance. We increased our insurance every year. We thought we were insured really well. We weren't. When they came in and did the assessments, they assessed our homes very, very low, so the amount.... They came in at this level, to rebuild us up to a much higher level, so we're looking for the federal government to fill that gap. I would tell other first nations to look at that, make sure you know what's insured and how much it's insured for.

Also our emergency plan.... You have probably heard this throughout your sessions. We needed to have a living emergency plan. We had one on the shelf, like other first nation communities, that was collecting dust. Nobody knew where it was or what it looked like. We want to train our staff to be proactive and help other first nation communities when we deal with floods. Whether it's floods or fire, we want to make sure we're trained so we can help.

Right now we're in the rebuilding process, so we are looking at fire prevention measures when we rebuild, in terms of tin roofs, HardiePlank, and landscaping, because any house that had a little bit of lawn was spared. The fire kind of wove its way around. It's amazing how it chose what house to take.

We're also looking at irrigated agriculture fields on our plateau as part of a fire protection measure. I could basically write a book about what we learned this summer. I was sort of the main person and I was thrown into this position of being the face of our fire. But I just want to make sure that we're ready next time, that we're trained. We want to help other first nation communities, and any neighbouring

communities, not just first nation, because when the next emergency hits.... We get flooding every year in our area, but also for the next fire. I'm just happy to contribute.

I welcome any questions or comments.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll start our questioning with MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you so much, Jodene, for being here this morning. We really appreciate your making the trip and for sharing your experiences with us.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Thank you.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I'd like to delve a little further into that. When you say ready, trained, what do you feel that looks like?

Ms. Jodene Blain: EMBC offers training in terms of what the EOC should look like. When it first happened, people kept asking us who was going to be our ops person, our logistics person. I didn't even know what that meant. I didn't even know what an EOC was. ESS people were the gold of this thing. They were the main people to help. Kamloops is lucky enough to have volunteer ESS. We had none of that. Keep in mind the highways were all closed around us, so people couldn't come in and volunteer.

We simply want to make sure people are trained in these areas, and current staff as well, because of the turnover. We want to make sure this is a living document that everyone knows about and can go to, whether the staff changes or not, and that we know what it should look like. I didn't know what it should look like until I went to EMBC and saw the different departments working, and I want to make sure our staff know what that looks like as well.

Mr. Mike Bossio: How often would you say...? You said this is a living document. How often do you think it should be reviewed, and should there be annual drills conducted so that people are familiar?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Absolutely. I think at least yearly it should be on our agenda, because we're in an area...especially now that we are hit with fire. Flooding is now a big concern, because our landscape has completely changed. If we were to have heavy rain, it would wipe out our reserve, basically, because there's nothing stopping it.

Our neighbouring community, Cache Creek, gets hit hard with flooding every year. It's not if but when the next emergency is going to happen.

Mr. Mike Bossio: When you said you were begging and pleading, what were the different organizations you were begging and pleading with?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Red Cross was the main one.

EMBC had their own chaos going on, but they were really good. They were really good once they sort of got to know us and understood our needs and could address them.

As for the Red Cross, there was no presence. There was no presence. They were in neighbouring communities, we could see, but we had to sort of say, "Come, we need to see you."

Mr. Mike Bossio: Not only is there no plan locally within the community, there's no plan as to when an emergency happens between the communities and the Red Cross, the province, or INAC, or who ever it would be. How long was it before you actually....?

I have two points. First is that you had 30 minutes before you had to evacuate. That doesn't leave a lot of time in the first place, let alone not having a plan to address it. What do you feel you could have done differently within that 30 minutes that would have helped to prepare you for this situation? Second, how long was it before you actually heard from the Red Cross, the province, and others once you did figure out what to do?

Ms. Jodene Blain: The fire was really.... I mean, it's one thing for our reserve to burn, but then the fire continued for a month. This is just an anomaly for it to continue wiping out community after community.

Firefighters simply had to stand back and watch it burn, because it was so fast and so aggressive. I don't know if there was anything that we could have done differently. The main thing was having muster points, meeting points. People were spread all over. We didn't anticipate all the highways being closed around us, so where do you go?

I didn't know where anyone was. The community next to us has hotels. We couldn't get to them.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Are there fire prevention measures that you think you could have put in place that would have slowed down the impacts, so that you had more than 30 minutes to clear out?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. Clearly, our reserve is full of sage brush. They were just burning balls of fire, because the wind was just.... Now we're looking at that. We're going to start clearing. I mentioned agriculture fields are a big thing. We want to start with irrigation. Anybody who had a bit of a lawn was okay.

• (1155)

Mr. Mike Bossio: How long, once again, was it before you actually got a response from Red Cross and the province?

Ms. Jodene Blain: I got a response within a day or two, but for their actual presence, boots on the ground, it was weeks.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Really?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes.

Mr. Mike Bossio: You were left on your own just to figure out how to fend for yourself.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. We didn't know really what to do. I mean, people kept asking, "Where's your EOC?"

"What's an EOC?" I'd say to people. It was tough. I don't want another community to ever be in that position again, to not even know where to start.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Okay.

I'd like to thank you so much, Jodene.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Thank you.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I'd like to pass the rest of my time over to MP Amos.

The Chair: Okay. You have a minute and a half.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Bossio.

I'll be quick because it's only one question.

I want to go a bit further into the question around the insurance. I don't want this to sound insensitive; it's for lack of understanding.

If and when there is inadequate insurance to protect the homes on site, why does it become a federal responsibility? Is there a process whereby there's an analysis of why there wasn't sufficient insurance? I ask this because I would hope that communities across this country would learn they need to re-evaluate what they have covered, not only at an individual level but at a community level.

Ms. Jodene Blain: I wouldn't say inadequate insurance in terms of.... We increase it every year by 5% to cover inflation. We were proactive, we thought. But for the actual amount we were allowed to insure, we maxed everything out. When they came in to assess the rebuild value, they assessed all our houses low because they're old houses. They were built in the 1960s.

Say we had a house insured for \$250,000, they assessed it at \$114,000. That's what we're getting. It's not that our coverage wasn't up there, but when they came in to assess, they assessed it really low.

Mr. William Amos: It's a replacement versus actual value kind of scenario, which ought to inform other communities and private owners.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. Absolutely. Just know what it's actually insured for. We assumed outbuildings and that kind of thing were insured too. No, they are not.

The Chair: That's a good point.

Questioning now moves to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you.

You have brought up a number of issues. I really appreciate your coming. Certainly, it was a very difficult summer, and I know for your community it was really challenging.

The insurance piece is an interesting issue. I would have thought the band might have had insurance perhaps for their works yard and their band office. I never thought a band would actually have insurance for the community.

It would be interesting for me to know from officials if that is common, because I didn't think there was insurance available for communities. To hear you have that was something very interesting to me. I think as a committee we need to delve into that.

I can imagine the issue around historical documents is a new issue also. I think that's a huge loss—

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. It is.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: —especially if you have issues around a specific claim.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. Absolutely.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Was there no backup to these documents? There was no place anywhere that these documents—

Ms. Jodene Blain: We've asked the province to see what they have, and different agencies are collecting for us and trying to send as much over as they can, but no, a lot.... We had tried to save everything, but we lost our server a few years ago. We're trying to update everything. There were big, long maps of historical CPs on the community and that kind of thing. We lost huge amounts.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: We've heard some variations. In your case, there was no question. I'm not sure it was an evacuation order as much as a flee-for-your-life kind of situation that you experienced.

I know many communities require the band council resolution for an evacuation order. Were you able to do anything about that because no one was in range? It probably didn't matter. People just had to flee. Did you ever have to do an official order?

• (1200)

Ms. Jodene Blain: I did, which was tough because we had no band office. Again, in my basement I did our BCR on an old template. We did it just because people.... Number one, there were the looky-loos. Everyone wanted to drive by the first nation community that was wiped out. It's curiosity. We had to stop those and evacuate that local area where people could drive by and make it an order so that people couldn't be looky-loos.

Also there was so much damage to hydro poles we wanted to stop our community members from going back home. It was so unsafe, so we did an evacuation order and a state of emergency.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Certainly in order to get the support from Red Cross or from ESS in terms of accommodation, that evacuation order had to be in place.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. I took care of that right away.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Okay, so that was in place right away for the community members.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes. Somebody sent me a template from another neighbouring first nation, and I just....

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Was the money you have outstanding submitted through EMBC or was that money submitted directly to INAC?

Ms. Jodene Blain: It's both. If you heard the loops we had to jump through, it would make your head shake.

When we submit something through EMBC, we know it will be denied because it doesn't qualify. We still have to submit it, it has to be denied, and then it has to be resubmitted to INAC. The recovery

process is the same. We submit it to DFA, which is EMBC, it is denied, then we have to resubmit it, and it goes to INAC. We can't just submit it right to INAC.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Okay. Can you give me a couple of examples of what sorts of things would be denied and then approved by INAC?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Wages were one thing. They kept saying, "Submit it. We know it's going to be denied but submit it anyway." I couldn't just go directly. I had to go through this. The paperwork is tremendous. It's a whole position in itself, the administrative.

I'm trying to think of other examples. There are a lot of other examples in terms of equipment like tools and things like that. No capital assets are allowed to go through EMBC, but we needed tools to cover up holes in the ground. That was automatically denied. I had to put it through even though it was denied, and then INAC would come back and say, "Okay, we'll cover that." It was that kind of thing.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You obviously have a significant rebuild process. Have people, first of all, found accommodation? Is that rebuild process going as smoothly as a challenging rebuild could be?

Ms. Jodene Blain: It's been two steps forward and five steps back with the rebuild. It's been very challenging. We were close, and then we had to switch builders. We still haven't gotten any money from INAC yet. We're waiting to get that. I'm submitting budgets, but budgets keep changing. We're hoping to build throughout the winter. Our hope is, when I get back next week, we'll be doing foundations, and we're going to build throughout the winter.

People are in hotels, to answer your other question.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Has the insurance company paid you out?

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: So you have the ability to at least—

Ms. Jodene Blain: That's what we're working on, yes, so far.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I know that the Red Cross plays different roles in different disasters, depending on the kinds of circumstances. What role would you have perceived they would play that they didn't play for you?

Ms. Jodene Blain: It was just being a presence and a support. They were looking at me as the band administrator to answer every question and to do everything. Meanwhile, I'm sort of over here in response. I needed another third party or agency to help just with basic needs. I couldn't be running out and getting people clothes and toothbrushes. I was busy dealing with other things. We needed a presence there just to listen to assess their needs, to find out what their needs were, and to help figure out where to get that, whether it was medication, money for food, accommodations, or that kind of thing.

They've since been fantastic. After several months we formed a close relationship, and they've been really helpful since then. It was just hard because people knew they were in Kamloops, people knew they were in Cache Creek, but they did not come to our community.

• (1205)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Cathy.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You said you could write a book. If you have recommendations for the committee, please write them for us.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Okay, I will. Thank you.

The Chair: Good.

MP Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I know I welcomed Jodene already, but I want to start by thanking you for your offer to help other communities. It's always comforting to see communities that have gone through trying times learn from that experience. I want to thank you for that.

I also want to get your contacts, because we experience more and more fires where I'm from in north Quebec. I know it's a similar situation in northern Ontario as well, especially the fact that you have to deal with bureaucracy now, after such a trying experience. Thank you for your contribution here.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Thank you.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: You mentioned, when you talked about the insurance, that you're expecting the federal government to fill the gap for what the insurance didn't pay. How much money are you talking about? Have you had a response from INAC?

Ms. Jodene Blain: We're still trying to figure it out, and they're still trying to figure out what EMBC is going to cover and what they're going to cover. They're still kind of going back and forth with that. We're kind of in the middle of that. We're talking a couple of a million of dollars, at least.

We're not trying to build fancy, big houses. We're just trying to build solid houses that won't look like they're falling apart after five years. We tried to skip the modular trailers, and we can't afford stick-built homes, but we're trying to build nice homes for these people. It's somewhere between \$2 million and \$2.5 million.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Have they indicated how long it's going to take to get a final response?

Ms. Jodene Blain: No, and when we originally had a lot of INAC personnel coming it was, "Yes, yes, anything you need." Since then it's backed off a little bit to my now having to jump through hoops and stuff, which I will do. I don't mind. I know they have their different pots of money. They have to figure out where they're getting it from, too. I'm just waiting.

Our community is getting frustrated. They're over the shock now. Now the anger's set in, the frustration has set in. As the face of the band, it's directed at me a little bit. I'm trying to find an answer of when the money's coming.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I don't want to disappoint you, but in one experience a couple of years ago, there were forest fire evacuees from northern Ontario who were sent into my riding in Quebec to be lodged in the hotels in Val-d'Or. For a bill of \$21,000, it took over a year to get that reimbursed.

We also talked about the Red Cross and how you pleaded and begged them to come. Have you spoken to them since then? Did they give you any reason as to why it took so long?

Ms. Jodene Blain: They didn't give me reasons, but they just.... I don't know if they understood the need. I think people just needed to grab on, to see the Red Cross there, even if it was just in the parking lot. They just needed to see that somebody else cared, and I think that wasn't understood.

As I said, they didn't understand the obstacles or the barriers faced by our first nation community. You can't just send an e-transfer. There's no power. If you ask most of our elders, "What's your email?", they just.... Our staff were running here and there. They couldn't be sitting with our members to help them set up emails, although they ended up doing that because we worked long days.

It was just barrier after barrier. I kind of made a joke that EMBC and Red Cross needed a first nation 101 training on what it's really like, because the comments people were making suggested they had never set foot on a reserve before. It sounds good on paper, but it actually didn't really work.

• (1210)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I totally agree.

Talk to me a bit about the quality of houses in your first nation community. I know that in a lot of communities, the quality of houses is pretty poor because of the funding limits that are usually imposed. Is that situation similar in your community?

Ms. Jodene Blain: No. They were older homes, but through INAC's housing funding, we had done RRAPs and renovations on just about every home in our community within the last two or three years. They were nice, well-kept homes. It was a shame. I guess that's why we were so shocked when the value came in so low.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I asked the question because I saw the pictures this summer, and most of them were pretty wiped out—devastated.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Yes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I'm almost done here. I notice that you didn't manage to go through all of your notes. Is there additional information you would like to mention that would be relevant for this committee?

Ms. Jodene Blain: I think one of the frustrating things that we're facing right now is that, before the fire, we were set to log in our community, on our reserve, in our territory. Because of the fire, the province has halted that, and in the meantime, our forestry licence is expiring. It's a significant amount of money that our first nation is out. We're talking about half a million dollars. They've put a 60-day hold on it. Our forestry licence expires in a week, so that's huge. We need that money to rebuild. We need it for further economic opportunities. It has been a huge setback for us. That's frustrating.

I think I hit most of our things. We were disappointed with our local regional district. We still would like to bring that up with them and say where their gaps were. I don't even know if they realize how their lack of support affected our community. I don't even think it's on their radar.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you again. Don't be surprised if you get calls from Cree communities in northern Quebec, and thanks for that offer.

Ms. Jodene Blain: Absolutely, thank you.

The Chair: That concludes our meeting.

Thank you so much for sharing your story. You presented it in a way that we could all understand. You brought new information. On behalf of all MPs and those who work here, we want to thank you.

Please submit your full presentation and any additional notes to the clerk, and we'll be sure to include that as part of our evidence for the study.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Madam Chair, could I bring my notice of motion forward, if you don't mind?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I think everybody has it. It's on education.

Do you need me to read it out or not?

The Chair: Kevin, do you want to do it now or in the committee business portion?

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Now, please, if you don't mind.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: It's a notice of motion that says:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee undertake a comprehensive study of Indigenous education and graduation rates from secondary schools; that the scope of the study include, standards for high school graduation, standard curricula, standard qualifications for educators and statistics for national graduation rates from reserve schools in comparison to Indigenous students off-reserve and also to non-Indigenous students; that the witness list include responsible Indigenous Services department officials, band councils, band members, Statistics Canada officials, First Nation organizations responsible for delivering education services such as the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), and community groups; and that the Committee report its findings to the House within twelve months of the adoption of this motion.

A voice: There's a fire alarm.

● (1215)

The Chair: No one can say this is a boring committee. Is that saved by the bell, or disrupted?

The meeting is adjourned.

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