

# **Wildfire evacuation and emergency management in remote First Nations: The case of Sandy Lake First Nation, Far North Ontario**

---

**Henok W. Asfaw<sup>a</sup> and Tara K. McGee<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> *Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Human Geography, University of Alberta, AB, Canada*

Although many decades of successful wildfire suppression resulted in very few losses of life or property in Ontario, frequent evacuation incidents has continued to disrupt many remote First Nations in Ontario including Sandy Lake First Nation. In 2011, the entire community of Sandy Lake was forced to evacuate due to increasing proximity of wildfire Red Lake #58, which came within 9 kilometers of the community. Residents were airlifted and scattered to eleven cities/towns throughout Ontario and into Manitoba. Using qualitative community based research approach, this research explored how residents of Sandy Lake First Nation were prepared for and affected by the community-wide evacuation. A total of 56 interviews and two focus group discussion were completed with the evacuated band members, those who stayed behind, and people who had a management role during the evacuation including Chief and council, health workers, and community evacuation liaisons. The results from the interviews and focus group illustrated that evacuation experience of residents were affected by a range of factors. First, the lack of pre-event preparedness at community level and beyond has resulted in confusion, delays and resulted in the hosting of band members to multiple locations. Second, the hosting of evacuees to multiple locations (which resulted in family separation and weakening of community cohesion, among others) coupled with the intrinsic characteristics of the community as it relates to indigenous social context, cultural values of family role, and the lack of social support has influenced evacuation experiences. Third, pre-existing vulnerability conditions of evacuees (such as age, income and health conditions; and those vulnerabilities induced through cultural and/or social barriers) has influenced evacuation experiences. Pre-event evacuation preparedness that takes into account the unique socio-cultural characteristics and various vulnerabilities of Aboriginal residents can minimize the adverse consequences of evacuation in the future.

Corresponding author: [henok@ualberta.ca](mailto:henok@ualberta.ca)