



## **Notes on Wildfire and Evacuation**

Fort Good Hope, NT

June-August, 2024

**November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

Testimony Provided by Chief Collin Pierrot and Darcy Edgi

### **Introduction and Who, and Where, are K'asho Got'ine**

My name is Chief Collin Pierrot. I was born in Fort Good Hope, NWT, and have been Chief of my community since 2023. I am here with my fellow K'asho Got'ine community member Darcy Edgi; Darcy is the president of the K'ahsho Got'ine Foundation (KGF), and I am the Vice-president. KGF is the administrative and operational arm of the T'sude Niline Tuyeta Indigenous and Territorial Protected and Conserved Area; thanks to the funding received primarily from the Government of Canada, we have a full-time Guardians program, and KGF provides a wide variety of programs and services to our community.

We thank you for the invitation to the Canadian Senate that was issued to KGF, and appreciate the opportunity to tell you, face to face, how Wildfire has affected our Land and our people.

I want to take a moment to help you all to know where Fort Good Hope is, and to know what I mean when I say I am K'ahsho Got'ine.

Fort Good Hope is on the east short of the great Mackenzie River, the Dehcho (big river), which flows north from Great Slave Lake all the way to the Arctic Ocean. Our community of Fort Good Hope is about 40 km south of the Arctic Circle. We call ourselves K'ahsho Got'ine in our language, Dene Kede. This means Big Willow (k'ah-sho) People (Got'ine). We have our own dialect of Dene Kede. We have lived on our lands since time immemorial. We are part of the Sahtu Dene Metis Comprehensive Land Claim, signed in 1993, and of Treaty 11, signed in Fort Good Hope on July 21, 1921. We are on our way to self-government, and look forward to when our K'ahsho Got'ine Laws and authority are re-established. In the meantime, our people continue our traditional way of life, and rely on our Land, and the Animals, birds and fish as part of our Dene Way – we are all connected.

## Some Context and Challenges

Our drinking water comes from the Mackenzie River, and many of our people still rely on harvesting – hunting and fishing – for nutritious food. Our cost of living is extremely high -and getting higher all the time. We have road access to our neighbouring Sahtu communities, and to the south from mid-December to mid-March – this window is shrinking as Climate Change becomes more extreme. We rely on the river to travel to hunt and fish, to get to our camps, and for travel up to Gwich'in territory and south to Norman Wells, Tulita and to the Dehcho, to the beginning of the all-year road. Otherwise, ours is a fly-in community.

Climate Change is having a massive, widespread impact on us K'ahsho Got'ine. The last two summers have brought huge wildfire seasons to NWT. In 2023, we counted ourselves lucky as one of the few communities NOT as impacted by wildfire, although due to the evacuations in Inuvik and in Yellowknife, our flights and freight were cut off. But we knew it was just a matter of time. In October of 2023, we invited the Yukon First Nations Wildfire team to come to our community to do an 8-day training called "Beat the Heat" for 30 community members from Fort Good Hope and our neighbours Colville Lake. It was very successful – all 30 participants received certificates, and those over 18 were later certified by the GNWT to fight fire pending a physical examination/test.

In 2024, the fire season started early throughout the NWT.

### 2024 Wildfire in Fort Good Hope

On June 15<sup>th</sup>, the community of Fort Good Hope noticed a large plume of smoke rising from a nearby fire in the boreal forest. That fire moved incredibly quickly, and by the afternoon, sub-chief Joseph Tobac, in consultation with the council and the fire chief Mitchell Shae, called for a state of emergency and an evacuation of the town. While myself and my brother Harvey, who is an experienced fire fighter and incident commander, raced back to town, a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members came together to coordinate a whole-town evacuation.

During this presentation, I want to stress to you how important it was for the survival of our town and of our people that we had local team members who were experienced both with fighting fire and with emergency response coordination.

Fort Good Hope created our own Community Fire Brigade. In the first 36 hours, a handful of community members saved our town. The fire came to within 100 meters of the houses; our community members fought that fire with the two community water trucks, the community fire truck, a hand full of old-timers who fought fire in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and some community members and some of the Guardians.

In those first 2 days, the GNWT sent 4 inexperienced fire fighters and no hoses or equipment.

When we asked for PPE for our Brigade, the GNWT refused to provide it.

We want to formally thank the Yukon First Nations Wildfire team for lending us PPE when their team arrived (at our request). The incident relationship with the GNWT was very tense, with lots of frustration all around regarding capacity and authority, and credit. But when the Yukon First Nations Wildfire team arrived, the way they interacted with our people, and our Fire Brigade, broke the tension. They showed the way forward in terms of cooperation and leadership – this made every firefighter safer in that environment.

## Evacuation Effort

Another important part of this story is the evacuation effort. Thanks again to a handful of community members, both K'ahsho Got'ine and non, and the leaders, we managed to evacuate non-essential personnel out of our town very quickly and safely.

There were three evacuation points: Norman Wells, the community 150 kms by river to our south, Deline, on the shores of Great Bear Lake, and the traditional Fish Camp that had been set up by our K'ahsho Got'ine Guardians through the K'ahsho Got'ine Foundation (KGF). Some of the Guardians helped to fight the fire, and over 100 people were evacuated from town to the Fish camp. Thanks to our funding and partners, the Guardians had the training and the equipment to do both fire response, evacuation (boats), and were able to run a huge camp for weeks with equipment from our stock and from other community programs. Massive thanks to our cooks, the attendants and the Guardians for managing an evacuation situation that had no end in sight for weeks. Early on in the incident, we were informed that having a camp set up for local evacuations is a recommendation of the Arctic Circumpolar Council – how lucky that we had already set up the fish camp and that it was up and running already in time for the evacuation.

In Norman Wells and in Deline, FGH and local community members worked tirelessly to manage the large influx of people, many of whom have no resources at all. Meals, accommodation and other supports were provided. This placed a huge strain on local resources, and coordinators. The stress of the situation impacted many people.

Back in Fort Good Hope, the Fort Good Hope Fire Brigade, and the Yukon First Nations Wildfire team worked night and day to hold off the fire from our community. There were many points in the subsequent weeks where we thought we would lose everything.

We are so grateful for the hard work of the people who supported our people through this difficult time.

## Recommendations and Ways Forward

We want other communities to learn from what we went through -and we need to learn ourselves.

- It is critically important that remote communities have LOCAL equipment and capacity to respond to wildfire threats. Our town would have burnt to the ground if it was not for our local people, and we have spent a huge amount of time and resources since this fire making firebreaks, and procuring equipment for the next incident.
- It should not be possible for a public government to refuse to distribute equipment and PPE in an emergency situation.
- In this new age brought about by Climate Change, ongoing measures need to be taken by the communities on training, fire breaks, Fire Smarting, and procuring and caring for equipment.
- Funding should be available to help support all community fire departments to ensure that all communities can supply their own wildfire equipment, training, and PPE.