

Reports of the Auditor General of Canada
to the Parliament of Canada

Emergency Management in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada

Report 8



Independent Auditor's Report | 2022



Office of the
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of Canada

Bureau du
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Introduction

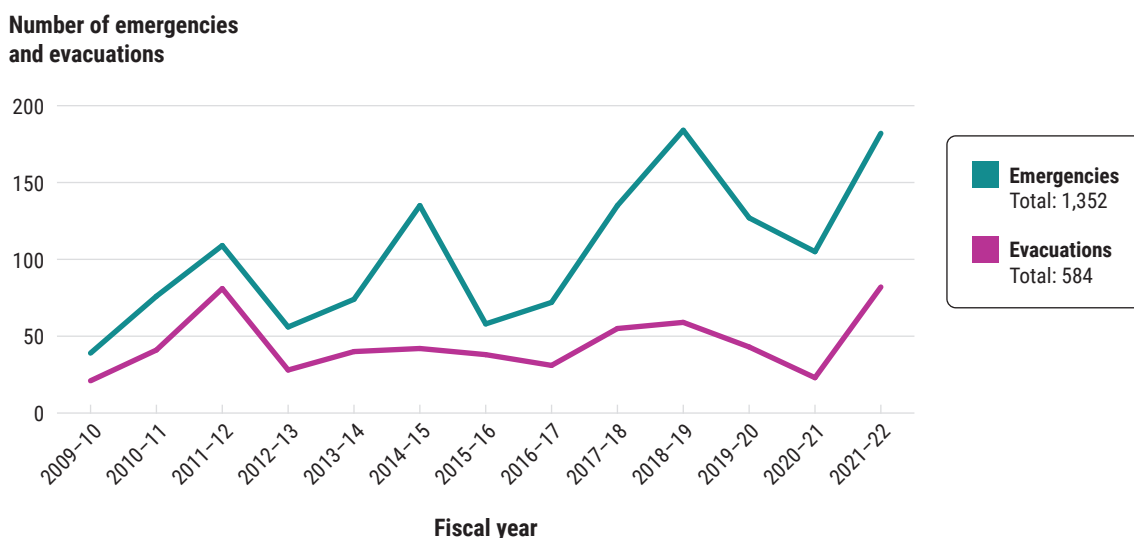
Background

Growing number of emergencies in First Nations communities

8.1 Emergencies such as floods, wildfires, landslides, and severe weather events are happening more often and with greater intensity throughout Canada. These emergencies disproportionately affect First Nations communities—groups of First Nations people living on **reserves**¹—because of their relative remoteness and socio-economic circumstances. In addition, many First Nations communities were relocated from their traditional lands to flood- and wildfire-prone areas. First Nations communities are also more likely to be evacuated than non-Indigenous communities.

8.2 Over the last 13 years, First Nations communities experienced more than 1,300 emergencies leading to more than 580 evacuations affecting more than 130,000 people. Some of these people were evacuated more than once for different emergencies (Exhibit 8.1).

Exhibit 8.1—The number of emergencies and evacuations in First Nations communities (2009–10 to 2021–22 fiscal years)



Note: The data for emergencies covers floods, wildfires, landslides, and severe weather events.

Source: Indigenous Services Canada’s Incident Database

¹ **Reserve**—Based on the definition in the *Indian Act*, a tract of land that is vested in His Majesty and has been set apart for the use and benefit of a First Nation.

8.3 The number of emergencies and evacuations is expected to keep growing across Canada because of the effects of climate change. In *An Emergency Management Framework for Canada (2007)*, the federal government committed to improving its understanding of risk and to taking more actions to help all communities across Canada prepare for and mitigate the impact of emergencies.

**Roles and
responsibilities**

8.4 **First Nations communities.** First Nations communities are responsible for using local resources to prepare for and respond to emergencies. If the situation is beyond the community's capacity to respond, it can ask for help from the federal government, provincial governments, and non-governmental organizations, such as the Canadian Red Cross.

8.5 **Indigenous Services Canada.** The department is responsible for ensuring that First Nations communities receive emergency management services, including emergency planning, flooding prevention (such as sandbagging), and wildfire suppression. During an emergency, the department is also responsible for providing advice and support as requested by the affected First Nation and province.

8.6 The department does not provide direct emergency response services to First Nations communities. The department negotiates emergency management service agreements with provinces or other service providers, such as the Canadian Red Cross, to provide emergency services in First Nations communities. These agreements are intended to clarify roles and responsibilities, support preparedness training and capacity building, and ensure that First Nations receive coordinated emergency response and recovery services.

8.7 Over the last 4 fiscal years (2018–19 to 2021–22), Indigenous Services Canada spent about \$828 million on emergency management supports for First Nations communities:

- About \$754 million was provided through the Emergency Management Assistance Program, which reimburses First Nations, provinces, and other service providers for the costs of responding to emergencies in First Nations communities. The program also funds First Nations to help them prepare for and mitigate emergencies through activities such as developing community risk assessments and community emergency management plans, flood mapping, and training.
- About \$74 million was provided through the First Nation Infrastructure Fund, which funds infrastructure projects in First Nations communities, including mitigation projects, such as building culverts and dikes, to reduce the impact of emergencies.

8.8 The federal government has emphasized the importance of reconciliation and the renewal of a nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and Indigenous communities that is based on the recognition of Indigenous rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. As part of the reconciliation process that the federal government has begun with Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Services Canada has committed to working in partnership with First Nations to transfer services to them.

Focus of the audit

8.9 This audit focused on whether Indigenous Services Canada provided the emergency management support needed by First Nations communities. We examined the department's activities related to floods, wildfires, landslides, and severe weather events because these are the most prevalent types of emergencies affecting First Nations communities. Our audit looked at First Nations communities in the provinces and not in the territories because almost all on-reserve First Nations communities are located in the provinces.

8.10 This audit is important because emergencies have significant health, environmental, and economic effects on the people affected, ranging from psychosocial trauma to lost economic opportunities. Once emergencies and evacuations are over, their effects continue to be felt by communities because it can take years to fully restore services and infrastructure.

8.11 More details about the audit objective, scope, approach, and criteria are in **About the Audit** at the end of this report.

Findings and Recommendations

Overall message

8.12 Overall, Indigenous Services Canada did not provide the support First Nations communities needed to manage emergencies such as floods and wildfires, which are happening more often and with greater intensity.

8.13 We found that the department's actions were more reactive than preventative, despite First Nations communities identifying many infrastructure projects to mitigate the impact of emergencies. The department had a backlog of 112 of these infrastructure projects that it had determined were eligible but that it had not funded. The department is also spending 3.5 times more money on responding to and recovering from emergencies than on supporting the communities to prevent or prepare for them. Until these projects are completed, First Nations

communities are likely to continue to experience emergencies that could be averted by investing in the right infrastructure.

8.14 Many issues have not improved since we first identified them in our 2013 audit of emergency management on reserves. For example, Indigenous Services Canada still had not identified which First Nations communities were the least likely to be able to manage emergencies. Doing so would allow the department to target investments in these communities, such as building culverts and dikes to prevent seasonal floods, and to help avoid some of the costs of responding to and recovering from emergencies.

8.15 The department also did not know whether First Nations received services that were culturally appropriate and comparable to emergency services provided in municipalities of similar size and circumstance because it did not identify or consistently monitor the services or level of services to be provided to First Nations.

Preparing for and mitigating emergencies

Indigenous Services Canada did not meet First Nations' needs in preparing for and mitigating emergencies

What we found

8.16 We found that Indigenous Services Canada spent 3.5 times more on responding to emergencies than on supporting First Nations communities to prepare for them. We also found that the department had not addressed problems with preparedness and mitigation that we identified almost a decade ago, when we audited this topic in 2013. For example, the department did not conduct a risk assessment to identify the First Nations communities most vulnerable to emergencies. The department did not update outdated departmental and regional emergency management plans or develop regional emergency management plans in 3 of its regions.

8.17 We found that funding for structural mitigation projects identified by First Nations did not meet First Nations' needs. The department determined that there were 112 projects eligible for funding, but they were still unfunded. The department told us that it had insufficient funding to cover all eligible structural mitigation projects. First Nations communities are likely to continue to experience emergencies that could be prevented or mitigated by building the infrastructure.

8.18 We also found that capacity needs of First Nations communities were not identified. For example, although the department provided funding to First Nations for about 190 full-time or part-time

emergency management coordinators,² it did not know how many more were needed for First Nations to have the capacity to manage emergencies.

8.19 The analysis supporting this finding discusses the following topics:

- Highest-risk First Nations communities not identified or prioritized for resources
- First Nations' structural mitigation needs not met
- Non-existent or out-of-date departmental emergency management plans
- First Nations' emergency management coordinator needs not identified

Why this finding matters

8.20 This finding matters because it is likely that Indigenous Services Canada is incurring significant costs to respond to—and help First Nations communities recover from—emergencies that could have been mitigated or avoided. First Nations will continue to be more vulnerable to emergencies if they are not adequately supported to prepare for and mitigate emergencies.

8.21 First Nations are the first line of defence until help can come from provincial or other service providers, and so addressing capacity gaps is critical. Local community members are also well positioned to manage emergencies in their communities because of their familiarity with the land and knowledge of traditional practices. Building local capacity should improve preparedness, reduce the impact of emergencies, and enhance the long-term resilience of communities.

Context

8.22 Preparedness and mitigation activities are proactive actions that can prevent or reduce the impact of emergencies. For example, clearing vegetation by removing branches and trees can prevent or reduce the intensity and spread of wildfires. Studies point to the fact that it is more cost-effective to spend money on mitigation and preparedness efforts than to respond to emergencies when they occur. Indigenous Services Canada supports First Nations in implementing both infrastructure and non-infrastructure mitigation projects.

8.23 Under the *Emergency Management Act* (2007), the Minister of Indigenous Services is responsible for identifying risks that are within or related to the Minister's area of responsibility, including those related

² **Emergency management coordinators**—Staff who develop and maintain emergency management plans, manage and coordinate emergency management training, provide support in response and recovery after an incident, and maintain relationships with the community, tribal councils, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

to critical infrastructure. Under the act and the 2009 Federal Policy for Emergency Management, ministers are required to prepare emergency management plans with regard to those risks and to maintain, test, and implement the plans.

8.24 To meet this requirement, Indigenous Services Canada developed the 2017 National On-Reserve Emergency Management Plan. This departmental plan requires its regional offices to develop, update, test, and implement regional emergency management plans. According to the department, these regional plans are important for a number of reasons, including because they are intended to reflect regional variations in approaches to emergency management and specific risks related to the type of emergencies in the region.

8.25 Our 2013 audit of emergency management on reserves, and Indigenous Services Canada's 2013 and 2017 internal audits of the Emergency Management Assistance Program, identified problems with how the department manages preparedness and mitigation activities. These audits found that the department's failure to implement a risk-based approach limited its ability to plan and strategically invest in First Nations mitigation and preparedness activities. These earlier audits also found that the department's regional emergency management plans either did not exist or were out of date.

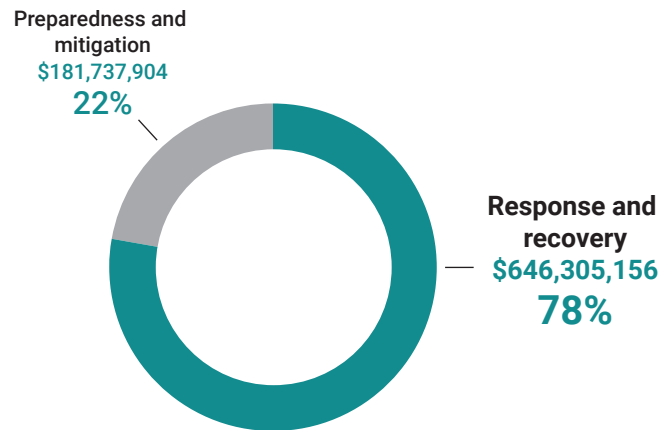
**Analysis to support
this finding**

Highest-risk First Nations communities not identified or prioritized for resources

8.26 According to Public Safety Canada's 2019 Emergency Management Strategy for Canada, for every \$1 invested in preparedness and mitigation, \$6 can be saved in emergency response and recovery costs. Indigenous Services Canada recognizes that greater investments in preparedness and mitigation initiatives reduce the impact of emergencies for First Nations communities.

8.27 While Indigenous Services Canada's spending on preparedness and mitigation increased from the 2018–19 to 2021–22 fiscal years, we found that its total spending on response and recovery activities in that period (\$646 million) was 3.5 times its spending on preparedness and mitigation activities (\$182 million) (Exhibit 8.2).

Exhibit 8.2—Indigenous Services Canada spent 3.5 times more on response and recovery activities than on preparedness and mitigation activities (2018–19 to 2021–22 fiscal years)



Source: Based on financial data provided by Indigenous Services Canada

8.28 To target funding effectively, Indigenous Services Canada must understand the risks facing First Nations communities. We found that the department did not implement a risk-based approach to manage emergencies as required under the *Emergency Management Act* and the 2009 Federal Policy for Emergency Management. This finding was identified in our 2013 audit and in the department’s 2013 and 2017 internal audits. A risk-based approach involves identifying, analyzing, and evaluating risks in First Nations communities, as well as determining the actions needed to address these risks. A comprehensive understanding of risks can help reduce the likelihood and impact of emergencies by allowing the department to make informed decisions on program planning and where to invest in preparedness and mitigation activities.

8.29 We found that Indigenous Services Canada did not use information about the risks faced by First Nations and the capacity of First Nations to respond to emergencies. The department provides funding for First Nations communities to develop community vulnerability assessments and emergency management plans. These assessments and plans are important because they help First Nations prepare for and mitigate emergencies by identifying risks and outlining how they will be managed. Department officials told us that, in the spirit of supporting First Nations self-governance, they did not require First Nations to provide this information to the department. In our view, this information would allow the department to target its preparedness and mitigation funds to the communities with the greatest need.

8.30 We also found that Indigenous Services Canada did not make use of data or information from other sources to identify First Nations communities at the highest risk of not being able to manage emergencies, such as

- the Indigenous Emergency Management Capability Inventory, led by Public Safety Canada and the Assembly of First Nations
- Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada’s climate vulnerability assessments

8.31 The department’s preparedness and mitigation programs are proposal-based. This approach allows First Nations to identify the activities that they believe are the most impactful. However, this approach does not ensure that First Nations at the highest risk of experiencing emergencies receive funding, since not all First Nations communities have the capacity to apply for funding. For example, between the 2018–19 and 2021–22 fiscal years, 13 First Nations communities were evacuated 3 or more times. We found that 4 of these 13 communities did not apply for funding for non-structural mitigation and preparedness—such as flood mapping and emergency management training. It was unclear to us why these communities did not apply for funding despite being highly affected by emergencies. As a result, the department may not have been funding the communities that needed it the most.

8.32 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should work with First Nations to implement a risk-based approach to inform program planning and decisions on where to invest in preparedness and mitigation activities to maximize support to communities at highest risk of being affected by emergencies.

The department’s response. *Agreed.*

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

First Nations’ structural mitigation needs not met

8.33 The First Nation Infrastructure Fund has, until March 2024, a dedicated annual budget of \$12 million to fund structural mitigation projects. These projects are aimed at preventing or reducing the impact of emergencies, such as by building culverts and dikes to prevent seasonal floods. In addition, the department can use infrastructure funds outside this dedicated budget when these funds are available. We found that from the 2018–19 to 2021–22 fiscal years, Indigenous Services Canada spent \$73.9 million on structural mitigation projects in First Nations communities.

8.34 We found that 102 structural mitigation projects were either completed (58) or in progress (44). We also examined the department’s database to determine the status of project proposals submitted by

First Nations to mitigate the impact of emergencies. We found that the department had a backlog of 72 structural mitigation project proposals that it had not yet reviewed to determine whether they were eligible for funding. The majority (65%, or 47 of the 72) of these unreviewed project proposals were submitted between the 2018–19 and 2021–22 fiscal years.

8.35 Furthermore, the department determined that an additional 112 projects were eligible but did not fund them. As of April 2022, 74 of the 112 eligible projects had been in the department’s backlog for more than 5 years, and 4 had been eligible and in the backlog for nearly a decade (Exhibit 8.3 and Exhibit 8.4). The department estimated that these 112 projects had a total cost of at least \$291 million. We noted that this was an underestimate because 43 of the 112 projects did not have an associated cost. According to the department, no action was taken on these projects because of funding shortfalls. With the current First Nation Infrastructure Fund annual budget of \$12 million, it would take over 24 years for the department to fund these projects—setting aside the projects that had not been costed and any new proposals. As a result, First Nations communities are likely to continue to experience emergencies that could be prevented or mitigated by building the infrastructure. Exhibit 8.5 provides an example of an affected community.

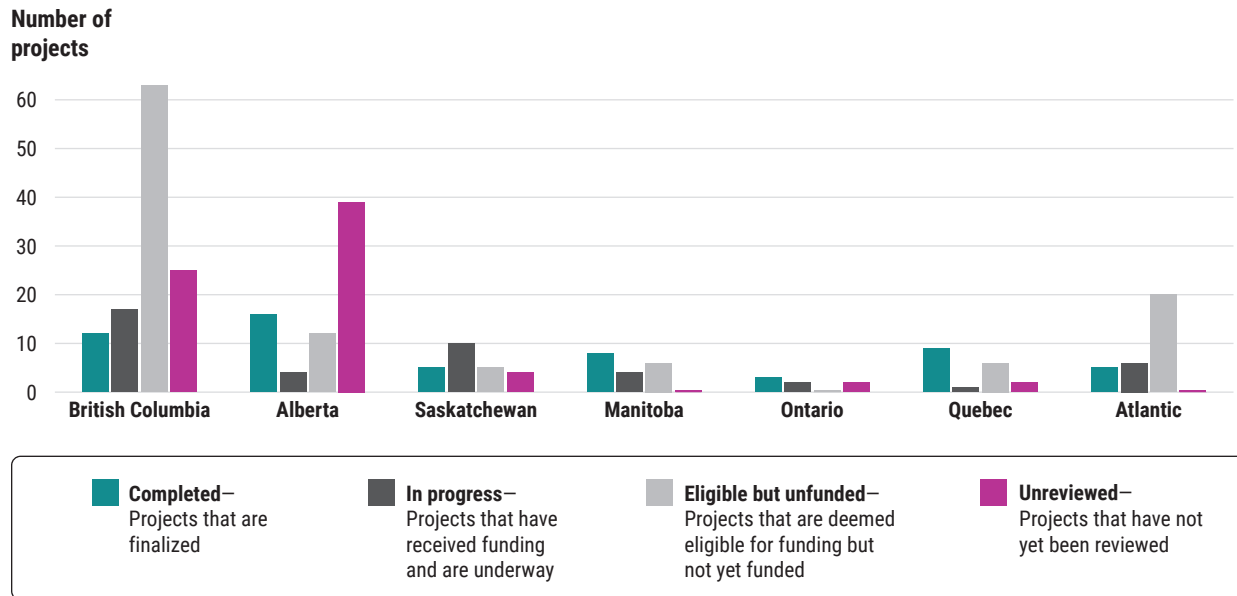
Exhibit 8.3—As of April 2022, 39% of structural mitigation projects were eligible but waiting for funding

Project status	Number (percentage*) of structural mitigation projects
Completed	58 (20%)
In progress	44 (15%)
Eligible but unfunded	112 (39%)
Unreviewed	72 (25%)
Total	286

* Because of rounding, percentages do not total 100.

Source: Based on information provided by Indigenous Services Canada

Exhibit 8.4—The greatest unmet structural mitigation needs were in British Columbia and Alberta



Source: Based on information provided by Indigenous Services Canada

Exhibit 8.5—First Nations homes were damaged while a community waited for funding for a project to address flooding risk

Indian Island First Nation in New Brunswick experienced 9 floods, 2 severe weather events, and 1 wildfire between the 2009–10 and 2021–22 fiscal years.

In 2015, the community submitted a proposal to Indigenous Services Canada to raise 9 homes above flood levels to mitigate the impact of flooding in the community. While Indigenous Services Canada determined that this proposal was eligible for funding in 2015, according to the department, it could not fund the proposal because of funding shortfalls. The department was unable to provide us with the estimated cost of this proposal.

In April 2018, the community experienced flooding that damaged homes and led to a partial evacuation. As a result of this flood, the department estimated it would cost about \$1.7 million in recovery funding for the First Nation to repair, rebuild, and raise about 15 homes. According to the department, as of April 2022, the work on these homes was still underway. The damage to people’s homes and the disruption to their lives caused by this emergency might have been mitigated or averted had the department funded the community’s proposal.

8.36 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should work with First Nations communities to address the backlogs of eligible but unfunded structural mitigation projects and of unreviewed structural mitigation projects to effectively allocate resources to reduce the impact of emergencies on First Nations communities.

The department’s response. *Agreed.*

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Non-existent or out-of-date departmental emergency management plans

8.37 We found that Indigenous Services Canada did not have an updated emergency management plan as required under the *Emergency Management Act*. Public Safety Canada's guidance recommends that departments update their emergency management plans every 2 years or following important changes to mandates or roles and responsibilities. The department's current emergency management plan, finalized in June 2017, had not been updated to reflect the department's current mandate and approach to working with First Nations. Departmental plans are important for clarifying roles and responsibilities and setting the course of action for helping First Nations manage the growing risks related to emergencies.

8.38 The department also requires each of its regions to develop a region-specific emergency management plan and update it at least every 2 to 5 years depending on the region. We found that only 4 of the 7 regions developed regional emergency management plans. Of these 4 regional plans, all were outdated, and none aligned with the department's emergency management plan. Similar findings were identified in our 2013 audit and in the department's 2013 and 2017 internal audits.

8.39 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should, on the basis of an assessment of risks, regularly update outdated departmental and regional emergency management plans and take immediate action to develop regional emergency management plans for the 3 regions that do not have them. These plans should be used to make informed decisions and take concrete actions to assist First Nations communities with managing the risks related to emergencies.

The department's response. *Agreed.*

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

First Nations' emergency management coordinator needs not identified

8.40 Indigenous Services Canada received \$43.6 million over 5 fiscal years (2019–20 to 2023–24) to build emergency management capacity in First Nations and will receive \$13 million annually starting in the 2024–25 fiscal year. Since 2019, the Emergency Management Assistance Program has focused on addressing capacity gaps in First Nations communities by providing funding to First Nations to hire emergency management coordinators. The department does not directly hire these individuals. Emergency management coordinators work in First Nations communities, for tribal councils representing several First Nations communities, or for First Nations organizations.

8.41 We found that from the 2019–20 to 2021–22 fiscal years, Indigenous Services Canada provided a total of \$26.9 million to First Nations communities and organizations for about 190 full-time or part-time emergency management coordinators. However, the department did not identify how many additional emergency management coordinators were needed by First Nations.

8.42 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada, in collaboration with First Nations, should determine how many emergency management coordinator positions are required and allocate funding for these positions on the basis of risk and need to ensure that First Nations have sustained capacity to manage emergencies.

The department's response. *Agreed.*

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Responding to emergencies

Indigenous Services Canada did not ensure response services met the needs of First Nations communities

What we found

8.43 We found that Indigenous Services Canada did not ensure that emergency services met the needs of First Nations communities. The department did not establish emergency service agreements that covered all First Nations communities. We also found that the department did not know whether First Nations received services that were culturally appropriate and comparable to services provided in municipalities of similar size and circumstance because it did not define or consistently monitor the services or level of services to be provided to First Nations. In addition, the department had not established multilateral emergency management service agreements between it, First Nations, and provinces or other service providers.

8.44 We also found that the department did not address issues identified after evacuations, including improving access to essential services like mental health supports and health care. The department also did not integrate the impact on marginalized groups, including Indigenous elders, women, and youth, into how emergency services were planned and delivered in First Nations communities.

8.45 The analysis supporting this finding discusses the following topics:

- Not all First Nations communities covered by emergency management service agreements
- Some evacuation needs not met
- Lack of knowledge of whether emergency management commitments are being met
- Impact on marginalized groups not integrated into program delivery

Why this finding matters

8.46 This finding matters because the lack of service agreements in provinces increases the risk that some First Nations communities will not receive emergency services when they need them the most. Not having service agreements can also create ambiguity and confusion between the various stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities and can lead to delays in First Nations receiving supports during an emergency. Timely response is critical during emergencies because human lives and infrastructure are at risk.

8.47 Agreements need to clearly identify the services and the level of services to be provided, so that First Nations communities receive emergency services that are comparable to non-Indigenous communities and are culturally appropriate. Evacuees need access to essential services, such as mental health supports, health care, security services, and child and family services, for their safety and well-being.

Context

8.48 Indigenous Services Canada's objective is to ensure that First Nations communities have access to emergency services that are comparable to those available to non-Indigenous communities. The department does this by negotiating emergency management service agreements with provincial governments and other service providers, like the Canadian Red Cross. According to the department, comparable service means comparable to municipalities of similar size and circumstance. In addition, Indigenous Services Canada has committed to providing services in a culturally appropriate manner. Culturally appropriate emergency management services include access to traditional foods, traditional counselling and healing services, and translation services.

8.49 During an emergency, it may become dangerous to stay in the community because of conditions such as rising flood waters or smoke from wildfires. In these situations, the First Nation Chief and Council may decide that it is necessary to evacuate some or all members of the community to protect their health and well-being.

8.50 Evacuations are a critical emergency response service in First Nations communities. According to a 2017 study by Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations communities are about 18 times more likely than non-Indigenous communities to be evacuated during an emergency because of their remoteness, location in fire- and flood-prone areas, aging infrastructure, and challenging socio-economic situations.

8.51 Evacuations involve coordination among a number of parties, including Indigenous Services Canada, provincial or other service providers, First Nations, and the municipalities that often host evacuees. Host communities play an essential role by providing accommodations and services to First Nations evacuees. Evacuees require a range of services, including transportation, food, and health care. Indigenous Services Canada reimburses the costs of evacuations if there is consensus among the department, First Nation, and service provider about the need to evacuate.

Analysis to support
this finding

Not all First Nations communities covered by emergency management service agreements

8.52 We found that Indigenous Services Canada did not have service agreements across all jurisdictions with provinces or other service providers to provide emergency services in First Nations communities. The department signed emergency management service agreements in 6 provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island) and wildfire agreements in 6 provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec). The lack of service agreements in certain provinces increases the risk that some First Nations communities will not receive emergency services when they are most needed. In addition, the lack of agreements can create ambiguity and confusion between the various stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities and lead to delays in First Nations receiving services during an emergency. This issue was identified in our 2013 audit and in the department's 2013 and 2017 internal audits. After almost a decade, many jurisdictions still did not have the emergency management service agreements needed to protect the health and safety of First Nations communities.

8.53 We found that 1 of the 6 wildfire agreements was signed more than 30 years ago and had not been updated since. This agreement may not have reflected changes, such as the increasing costs to deliver services. We also found that 4 of the 6 wildfire agreements did not include all First Nations communities in the relevant province. In some cases, communities were not included in the agreements because of their distance from wildfire suppression resources, such as fire stations. For example, the wildfire agreement between Indigenous Services Canada and Saskatchewan did not include more than half (38 of 70)

of the First Nations communities in the province. Consequently, communities that were not included in agreements may not have had access to such services as wildfire suppression.

8.54 We examined the department's progress in establishing multilateral emergency management service agreements. According to Indigenous Services Canada, in recognition of Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, the department's approach was shifting from bilateral emergency management service agreements between the department and provinces to multilateral agreements that included First Nations. The intent of these multilateral agreements is to ensure that First Nations are included as full and equal partners in emergency management activities and decisions that affect their communities.

8.55 In Budget 2019, the department was allocated about \$1.4 million over 3 years to support First Nations-led engagement on multilateral emergency management service agreements between Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations communities, and provinces or other service providers. As of April 2022, although the department had spent almost \$790,000, we found that no multilateral agreements were established. The department told us the lack of progress in establishing these agreements was because the **coronavirus disease (COVID-19)**³ pandemic made it difficult to engage with First Nations communities, provinces, and other service providers. Our recommendation regarding emergency management service agreements appears at paragraph 8.62.

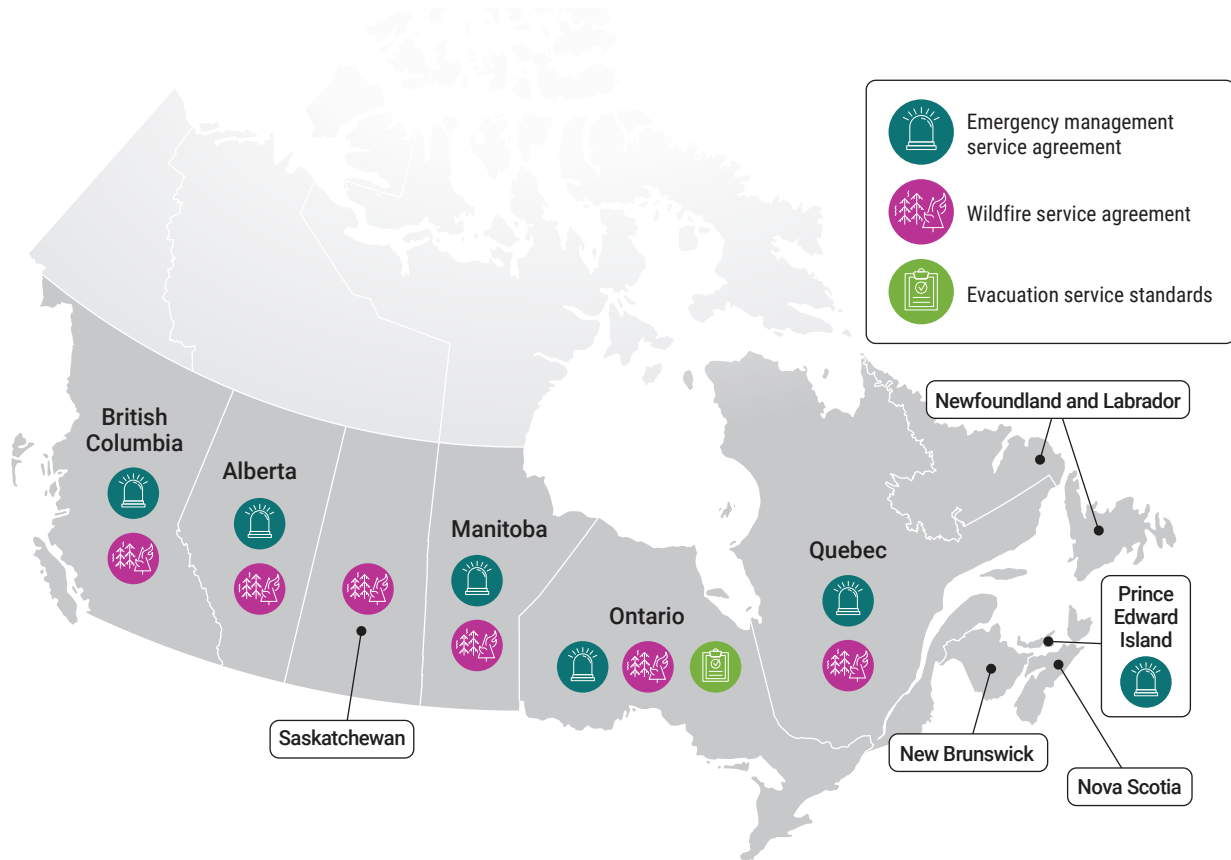
8.56 While no multilateral emergency service agreements had been established, the department signed 2 arrangements in British Columbia between First Nations, the province, and the department. While these arrangements outlined shared goals and priorities for collaboration, they did not contain provisions for emergency services, which should be in multilateral emergency management service agreements.

Some evacuation needs not met

8.57 We found that Indigenous Services Canada established mutually agreed-upon evacuation service standards with service providers in only 1 province (Exhibit 8.6). These standards provided details not included in the emergency management service agreement between the department and the province. The department and the province of Ontario developed standards for services to First Nations evacuees, including security services, food, child and family services, mental health and health care, emergency clothing, and transportation. The standards also included direction about how to handle specific situations, such as how to evacuate individuals in health-care facilities and long-term care facilities, and the enforcement of court orders.

³ **Coronavirus disease (COVID 19)**—The disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Exhibit 8.6—Indigenous Services Canada did not establish emergency management service agreements and standards in all provinces



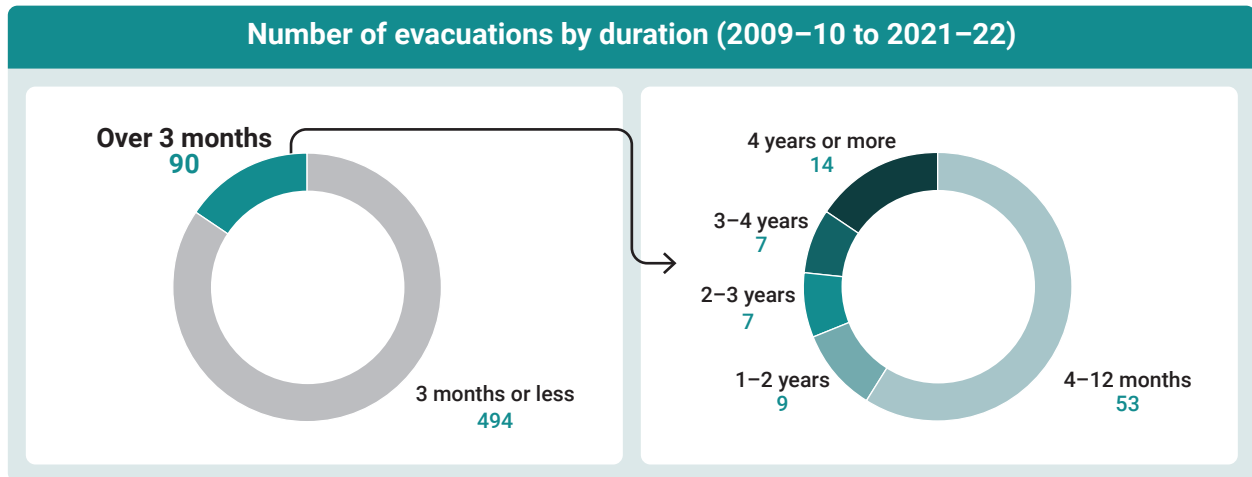
8.58 We found that the department did not address issues identified after evacuations, including access during evacuations to essential services, such as mental health, health care, education, and child and family services.

8.59 We found that only 2 of the department’s 7 regions had determined the number of evacuees that host communities could accommodate. Not having space available in host communities increases the risk that evacuees will be sent to host communities farther away or in another province, potentially separating families and communities.

8.60 As a result of a number of factors, including the effects of climate change and aging infrastructure, evacuations of First Nations communities are becoming more frequent and longer. We found that between the 2009–10 and 2021–22 fiscal years, 268 communities were evacuated a total of 584 times. While the majority of these evacuations lasted less than a month, about 15% (90) of evacuations were over 3 months long, and some lasted multiple years. Indigenous Services Canada considers an evacuation of more than 3 months to be long-term. The longest evacuation affects members of the Peguis

First Nation in Manitoba. In 2011, this community was evacuated because of flooding. Over 10 years later, 86 residents were still unable to return home because of insufficient housing. The longer evacuations lasted, the greater the impact on individuals, families, and the community (Exhibit 8.7).

Exhibit 8.7—Between the 2009–10 and 2021–22 fiscal years, 90 evacuations of First Nations communities lasted longer than 3 months



Note: Indigenous Services Canada considers an evacuation of more than 3 months to be long-term.

Source: Indigenous Services Canada’s Incident Database

8.61 We found that in April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous Services Canada provided Emergency Management Assistance Program funding for First Nations to remain on their land during emergencies rather than evacuate to a host community. This initiative had the dual objective of reducing the negative impact of evacuations and of reducing potential exposure to the coronavirus. According to the department, funding First Nations to stay on their land is also more cost-effective than evacuating to a host community. This initiative also reduced the need for space in host communities to accommodate evacuees. Exhibit 8.8 provides an example of how a department-funded initiative improved outcomes for members of a community in northern Ontario.

Exhibit 8.8—Indigenous Services Canada funded a cost-effective community-driven initiative for evacuations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Kashechewan First Nation is in northern Ontario on the western coast of James Bay. The on-reserve population in 2019 was 1,825 band members. Kashechewan is a fly-in community without an all-season road. The closest urban community is Timmins, about 460 kilometres away.

Every year since 2012, the community has been evacuated because of flooding or as a precaution because of the risk of spring flooding. Typically, the community was evacuated to host communities in northern Ontario.

In both 2020 and 2021, community members were evacuated because of the risk of flooding. Rather than staying in a host community, the First Nation requested and received funding from Indigenous Services Canada to remain on their land and move to higher ground on their traditional hunting camps. Each of these evacuations lasted about 6 weeks. While they were living on their land, members participated in safe and culturally relevant activities, such as traditional community food harvesting and gathering, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and Indigenous language education.

The cost of the 2 evacuations in 2020 and 2021 was about \$140 per person per day compared with about \$235 per person per day to evacuate to host communities in 2018 and 2019.

8.62 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should, in collaboration with First Nations, provincial governments, and other service providers, ensure that First Nations communities receive the emergency management services they need by

- establishing emergency management service agreements and wildfire agreements in all jurisdictions that include all First Nations
- establishing mutually agreed-upon evacuation service standards in the jurisdictions that lack such standards
- increasing support for First Nations-led approaches to emergency management

The department's response. *Agreed.*

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Lack of knowledge of whether emergency management commitments are being met

8.63 One of Indigenous Services Canada's objectives is to ensure that First Nations have access to emergency services comparable to those available in municipalities of similar size and circumstance in their respective province. The department also aims to provide services that are culturally appropriate. We found that, despite these commitments, the department did not define what comparable meant or include provisions for culturally appropriate services in service agreements. As a result, the department did not know whether it was meeting its commitment to ensure that First Nations communities had access to comparable emergency services and culturally appropriate services.

8.64 We also found that the department did not receive reports on the services provided to First Nations communities for 5 of the 12 service agreements. These reports would inform the department about the services provided to First Nations. The department could also monitor performance through lessons-learned exercises conducted following emergencies to identify areas for improvement. We found that lessons-learned exercises were not completed after each emergency. When they were completed, it was not clear how recommendations were addressed to improve service delivery. Completing lessons-learned exercises following emergencies and addressing deficiencies was a long-standing issue identified in our 2013 audit and the department’s 2013 and 2017 internal audits.

8.65 In addition, we found that the department could not assess the contribution of its emergency management responsibilities to achieve the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (Exhibit 8.9).

Exhibit 8.9—Performance indicators did not measure progress against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals



End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Source: United Nations



Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Source: United Nations



Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Source: United Nations



Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Source: United Nations

In September 2015, Canada committed to achieving the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We examined the actions of Indigenous Services Canada in support of 5 of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals that are relevant to emergency management. Indigenous Services Canada indicated that its emergency management activities were related to or aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 1, 3, 9, 11, and 13:

- Goal 1—End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- Goal 3—Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 9—Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
- Goal 11—Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
- Goal 13—Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

We found that most of the department’s performance indicators tracked spending to measure its progress against the goals. (An indicator is a measure that provides information to monitor, track, and report on performance and progress toward targets. An indicator relies on consistent data collection and is used to measure progress over time against benchmarks or baselines.) Spending is not a good measure because it does not mean that results are being achieved. Without better performance indicators, the department could not assess progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals



Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Source: United Nations

8.66 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should develop performance indicators to allow the department to measure progress against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and use these indicators to track and report publicly on progress.

The department's response. Agreed.

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Impact on marginalized groups not integrated into program delivery

8.67 First Nations communities and populations are often particularly vulnerable to emergencies because of their geographic remoteness, low population density, infrastructure, and socio-economic gaps. Indigenous Services Canada's **gender-based analysis plus**⁴ determined that Indigenous elders, women, and youth were even more likely to be negatively affected by emergencies. For example, Indigenous Services Canada identified an increased risk of physical and sexual violence against women during emergencies. We found that the department did not address gender-based analysis plus considerations in how emergency services were planned for and delivered in First Nations communities.

8.68 **Recommendation.** Indigenous Services Canada should, in collaboration with First Nations, provincial governments, and other service providers, ensure that First Nations communities receive the emergency management services they need by

- defining what is meant by comparable services for First Nations in relation to those available to municipalities of similar size and circumstance in each jurisdiction
- monitoring the services provided to First Nations to ensure that they are comparable to services provided to non-Indigenous communities, are culturally appropriate, and address the needs of marginalized groups
- identifying and addressing shortcomings by monitoring emergency management service agreements and conducting lessons-learned exercises

The department's response. Agreed.

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

4 **Gender-based analysis plus**—An analytical process that provides a rigorous method to assess systemic inequalities, as well as a way to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender-diverse people may experience policies, programs, and initiatives. The "plus" acknowledges that gender-based analysis goes beyond biological (sex) and socio-cultural (gender) differences and considers other identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, religion, age, and mental or physical ability.

Source: Adapted from Women and Gender Equality Canada

Conclusion

8.69 We concluded that Indigenous Services Canada did not provide the support First Nations communities needed to manage emergencies such as floods and wildfires. The department did not identify the First Nations communities at the highest risk of not being able to manage emergencies so it could better target funding to build local capacity. It spent 3.5 times more on responding to and recovering from emergencies than on supporting First Nations communities to prevent and prepare for them.

8.70 Indigenous Services Canada did not have service agreements across all jurisdictions with provinces or other service providers to provide emergency services in First Nations communities. Without agreements that cover all First Nations, there is a risk that some communities will not receive the emergency response services they need. In particular, the lack of detailed service standards for evacuations in most provinces increased the risk that essential services, such as mental health supports and health care, were not available during evacuations. Many of our findings were identified almost a decade ago, when we audited this topic in 2013.

About the Audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on the support Indigenous Services Canada provided to First Nations communities to manage emergencies. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist Parliament in its scrutiny of the government's management of resources and programs, and to conclude on whether Indigenous Services Canada's emergency management support for First Nations communities complied in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements, set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada applies the Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1 and, accordingly, maintains a comprehensive system of quality control, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the relevant rules of professional conduct applicable to the practice of public accounting in Canada, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from entity management:

- confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject under audit
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided
- confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate

Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine whether Indigenous Services Canada provided the support First Nations communities needed to manage emergencies.

Scope and approach

This audit examined Indigenous Services Canada's supports to First Nations to manage emergencies related to floods, wildfires, landslides, and severe weather events, as these are the most prevalent types of emergencies affecting First Nations communities. Our audit looked at First Nations communities in the provinces, and not in the territories, because almost all on-reserve First Nations communities are located in the provinces.

The audit focused on Indigenous Services Canada's Emergency Management Assistance Program and the First Nation Infrastructure Fund.

The audit team interviewed responsible Indigenous Services Canada officials at national headquarters and in regional offices and analyzed documents and relevant databases. The audit team met with selected stakeholders, including representatives from First Nations communities and organizations, as well as representatives of provincial governments that act as emergency service providers through agreements with Indigenous Services Canada.

We did not examine the department’s supports to help First Nations recover from emergencies through its building back better strategy. As well, we did not examine Indigenous Services Canada’s supports to First Nations to manage health emergencies. We also did not audit the performance of non-federal organizations, including provincial governments, First Nations communities and organizations, and non-governmental organizations.

Criteria

We used the following criteria to determine whether Indigenous Services Canada provided the support First Nations communities needed to manage emergencies:

Criteria	Sources
<p>Indigenous Services Canada provides support to First Nations to prepare for and mitigate emergencies affecting First Nations communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emergency Management Act</i> • <i>Department of Indigenous Services Act</i> • National On-Reserve Emergency Management Plan, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017 • All Hazards Risk Assessment Methodology Guidelines 2012–2013, Public Safety Canada • Contributions for Emergency Management Assistance for Activities on Reserve, Indigenous Services Canada • Transfer Payment Program Terms and Conditions: Contributions to Support the Construction and Maintenance of Community Infrastructure, Indigenous Services Canada • First Nation Infrastructure Fund Program Guide, Indigenous Services Canada, 2021 • Federal Policy for Emergency Management: Building a Safe and Resilient Canada, Public Safety Canada • Emergency Management Strategy for Canada: Toward a Resilient 2030, Public Safety Canada • Emergency Management Planning Guide 2010–2011, Public Safety Canada • Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations

Criteria	Sources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canada’s Federal Implementation Plan for the 2030 Agenda • <i>Canadian Gender Budgeting Act</i> • Guidance for Drafters of Treasury Board Submissions, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat
<p>Indigenous Services Canada provides support to First Nations communities to build their capacity to manage emergencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Department of Indigenous Services Act</i> • National On-Reserve Emergency Management Plan, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada • Contributions for Emergency Management Assistance for Activities on Reserve, Indigenous Services Canada • <i>Canadian Gender Budgeting Act</i> • Guidance for Drafters of Treasury Board Submissions, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat
<p>Indigenous Services Canada ensures that First Nations communities have access to emergency services that are comparable to those of non-Indigenous communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emergency Management Act</i> • <i>Department of Indigenous Services Act</i> • National On-Reserve Emergency Management Plan, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada • Contributions for Emergency Management Assistance for Activities on Reserve, Indigenous Services Canada • Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations • Canada’s Federal Implementation Plan for the 2030 Agenda • <i>Canadian Gender Budgeting Act</i> • Guidance for Drafters of Treasury Board Submissions, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat
<p>Indigenous Services Canada has made progress in establishing multilateral emergency management service agreements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emergency Management Act</i> • <i>Department of Indigenous Services Act</i> • Government of Canada Response to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs: From the Ashes: Reimagining Fire Safety and Emergency Management in Indigenous Communities • Departmental Plan 2020–21, Indigenous Services Canada

Criteria	Sources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations • Canada’s Federal Implementation Plan for the 2030 Agenda • <i>Canadian Gender Budgeting Act</i> • Guidance for Drafters of Treasury Board Submissions, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat
<p>Indigenous Services Canada ensures that evacuation services provided to First Nations communities are adequate and that evacuees are returned to their home communities in a timely manner.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Department of Indigenous Services Act</i> • Contributions for Emergency Management Assistance for Activities on Reserve, Indigenous Services Canada • National On-Reserve Emergency Management Plan, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada • Building Back Better: Emergency Management Assistance Program Strategy Guide, Indigenous Services Canada • Departmental Plan 2019–20, Indigenous Services Canada • Departmental Plan 2020–21, Indigenous Services Canada • <i>Canadian Gender Budgeting Act</i> • Guidance for Drafters of Treasury Board Submissions, Treasury Board of Canada Secretaria

Period covered by the audit

The audit covered the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2022. This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters that preceded the start date of this period.

Date of the report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on 30 August 2022, in Ottawa, Canada.

Audit team

This audit was completed by a multidisciplinary team from across the Office of the Auditor General of Canada led by Glenn Wheeler, Principal. The principal has overall responsibility for audit quality, including conducting the audit in accordance with professional standards, applicable legal and regulatory requirements, and the office's policies and system of quality management.

Recommendations and Responses

In the following table, the paragraph number preceding the recommendation indicates the location of the recommendation in the report.

Recommendation	Response
<p>8.32 Indigenous Services Canada should work with First Nations to implement a risk-based approach to inform program planning and decisions on where to invest in preparedness and mitigation activities to maximize support to communities at highest risk of being affected by emergencies.</p>	<p>The department's response. Agreed. In collaboration with First Nations, Indigenous Services Canada is committed to implement a risk-based approach to inform funding decisions. Targeted investments by the department will consider, as it has to date, the communities' willingness, readiness and interest in undertaking emergency preparedness activities by empowering First Nations to take the lead in preparing for and managing emergencies. The department is committed to support First Nations in their endeavours to identify their unique communities' level of risk and priorities to seek funding from the department to enhance emergency preparedness.</p>
<p>8.36 Indigenous Services Canada should work with First Nations communities to address the backlogs of eligible but unfunded structural mitigation projects and of unreviewed structural mitigation projects to effectively allocate resources to reduce the impact of emergencies on First Nations communities.</p>	<p>The department's response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada is currently working with First Nations to identify the infrastructure gap, which includes structural mitigation needs. The department will support First Nations to work toward closing that gap in the long term. In addition, the department is committed to work with First Nations, as well as collaborate with central agencies, other government departments, and all levels of government to leverage partnership opportunities and explore alternate financing options to meet the needs of First Nations in structural mitigation while working toward the transfer of infrastructure services.</p>
<p>8.39 Indigenous Services Canada should, on the basis of an assessment of risks, regularly update outdated departmental and regional emergency management plans and take immediate action to develop regional emergency management plans for the 3 regions that do not have them. These plans should be used to make informed decisions and take concrete actions to assist First Nations communities with managing the risks related to emergencies.</p>	<p>The department's response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada, in collaboration with First Nations, will proceed to review and update the department's national Emergency Management Plan and regional plans and will develop customized regional emergency management plans based on an assessment of risks.</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p>8.42 Indigenous Services Canada, in collaboration with First Nations, should determine how many emergency management coordinator positions are required and allocate funding for these positions on the basis of risk and need to ensure that First Nations have sustained capacity to manage emergencies.</p>	<p>The department’s response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to work in partnership with First Nations to build emergency management capacity. The department also agrees that funding for emergency management positions, provided through the Emergency Management Assistance Program’s capacity enhancement funding stream, should be expanded. Emergency management coordinators, of which the department currently funds 196 full- or part-time positions across the country, provide First Nations with valuable emergency preparedness and planning capacity. The department is diligently working to secure additional funding to provide more positions to First Nations communities.</p>
<p>8.62 Indigenous Services Canada should, in collaboration with First Nations, provincial governments, and other service providers, ensure that First Nations communities receive the emergency management services they need by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing emergency management service agreements and wildfire agreements in all jurisdictions that include all First Nations • establishing mutually agreed-upon evacuation service standards in the jurisdictions that lack such standards • increasing support for First Nations–led approaches to emergency management 	<p>The department’s response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to work in partnership with First Nations and emergency management partners to establish comprehensive emergency management service agreements.</p>
<p>8.66 Indigenous Services Canada should develop performance indicators to allow the department to measure progress against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and use these indicators to track and report publicly on progress.</p>	<p>The department’s response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada agrees that certain performance indicators could be improved to better measure progress against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. Moving forward, the department will ask its programs that use performance indicators related to emergency management to review and consider revising how they measure progress against the Sustainable Development Goals. The review process should involve programs analyzing both the federal and departmental sustainable development strategies as well as the Sustainable Development Goal targets to understand how the programs could best measure progress and to identify which performance indicators should be utilized to do so.</p> <p>The Government of Canada also reports on progress made to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals domestically and uses</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p>8.68 Indigenous Services Canada should, in collaboration with First Nations, provincial governments, and other service providers, ensure that First Nations communities receive the emergency management services they need by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defining what is meant by comparable services for First Nations in relation to those available to municipalities of similar size and circumstance in each jurisdiction • monitoring the services provided to First Nations to ensure that they are comparable to services provided to non-Indigenous communities, are culturally appropriate, and address the needs of marginalized groups • identifying and addressing shortcomings by monitoring emergency management service agreements and conducting lessons-learned exercises 	<p>performance indicators from the Canadian Indicator Framework (see Taking Action Together—Canada’s 2021 Annual Report on the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals). The department supports this whole-of-government process by providing information on relevant departmental actions and initiatives that contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.</p> <p>The department’s response. Agreed. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to work in partnership with First Nations and emergency management partners to establish comprehensive emergency management service agreements that will define comparability of services and monitoring and reporting components to identify and address shortcomings for continuous improvement.</p>

