

Regional Assessment in the Ring of Fire Area

Federal Authority Advice Record

Response due to regionalrof-cdfregionale@iaac-aeic.gc.ca by March 28, 2023

Response from Indigenous Services Canada, March 28, 2025

Prepared by:

Jan Triska, Environmental Management Officer; Lands and Economic Development

Jan.triska2@sac-isc.gc.ca

Meng Koh, Health Impact Assessment Coordinator; First Nations and Inuit Health Branch

meng.koh@sac-isc.gc.ca

*Note from Indigenous Services Canada:

ISC is responsible for a range of expertise, policies, programs and services that are relevant to issues related to Indigenous communities and Nations in the region being studied. It is to be noted that many of the departmental resources detailed in this record require an application from interested groups, may have application deadlines, are time- and resource-limited, are often over-subscribed, and have application criteria that may not align with the profiles of all impacted groups who wish to access them.

It should also be noted that the programs identified here were not designed to mitigate impacts from potential development that may occur in the region, including those assessed under the Impact Assessment Act. While program capacity may exist, they are not directly aligned with the objectives of mitigating impacts, and may not adequately address emerging needs in relation to a future project. If considered in the context of addressing needs specific to Ring of Fire studies or potential developments, they may require additional resources to better fill that role.

In providing your responses to the items below, please include any relevant information on associated Indigenous, public or other consultation or engagement activities and identify any partners or collaborations.

1. MANDATE AND AREA(S) OF EXPERTISE

Clearly outline the mandate of your department or agency and detail your area(s) of responsibility or expertise that may be related to the regional assessment

Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) works collaboratively with partners to improve access to high quality services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Our vision is to support and empower Indigenous peoples to independently deliver services and address the socio-economic conditions in their communities.

ISC has statutory and fiduciary obligations to manage reserve land under the *Indian Act* for First Nations that are not operating under the *First Nation Land Management Act* or a self-government agreement.

ISC's Communities and the Environment Program works with First Nation communities to increase the reserve land base and support sustainable management of land, environment and natural resources through the development of innovative policies as well as process and system improvements. In doing so, activities in this program area provides the foundation for community and economic development and facilitates greater First Nation independence and self-sufficiency in managing their lands and resources.

The mandate of the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) at Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) is to ensure the availability of, or access to, health services for First Nations on-reserve and Inuit communities; to help First Nations and Inuit communities overcome health barriers and disease threats and achieve levels of health comparable to other Canadians living in similar locations; and to build strong partnerships with First Nations and Inuit to improve health services.

FNIHB has specialist or expert knowledge pertaining to First Nations and Inuit in Canada. Areas of expertise include, but are not limited to: community level demographics; health promotion and disease prevention activities; the provision of health services; community health and wellness programs; drinking water quality on First Nations reserves; and the social determinants of health (e.g., physical environments, healthy behaviours, access to health services, etc.).

Within this mandate, ISC could provide the Agency with guidance in regards to what health, social and economic components the regional assessment should be focusing on, as well as support to describe baseline conditions of communities located in the area of the regional assessment.

2. REGULATORY AUTHORITIES

List and summarize the nature of the regulatory authorities of your department or agency in relation to physical works or activities in the Ring of Fire area.

Indian Act

Projects and activities on reserve lands are under the authority of the federal government (the Crown). ISC has statutory and fiduciary obligations to manage reserve land pursuant to the *Indian Act*, including administering, issuing, and authorizing lands instruments such as leases and permits to third parties.

Lands Instruments are used to enable economic development by granting interests and rights in parcels of land on reserve. Depending on the type of project or activity, federal regulations may also be applicable including the *Indian Mining Regulations*, *Indian Timber Regulations*, *Indian Reserve Waste Disposal Regulations* and *Indian Referendum Regulations*, amongst others.

First Nations Commercial and Industrial Development Act

The *First Nations Commercial and Industrial Development Act* allows the federal government, at the request of a First Nation, to produce regulations for complex commercial and industrial development projects on reserve. These regulations are project-specific, developed in cooperation with the First Nation and the relevant province and limited to the lands described in the project. The Act allows for the adoption of regulations on reserve that are compatible with existing provincial regulations, and allows the government to delegate monitoring and enforcement of the new regulatory regime to the province by way of an agreement between the federal government, the First Nation, and the relevant provincial government. It could be possible that a proposed commercial or industrial development project located on reserve lands, in the area of this regional assessment, trigger the development of regulations under this Act while the regional assessment is underway.

First Nations Land Management Framework Agreement and First Nation Land Management Act

First Nation Land Management was initiated in 1991 by 14 First Nations chiefs; the Framework Agreement on First Nation Land Management was signed in 1996 by the First Nations and Canada, and recognized in Canadian legislation by the *First Nations Land Management Act* in 1999. Together the Framework Agreement and the Act form First Nation Land Management and enable First Nations to opt- out of 44 sections of the *Indian Act* relating to land and environment management. First Nations enact a community-approved land code, through which they can develop their own laws about land use, the environment and natural resources in line with community values and priorities. This includes the authority for First Nations to develop and implement their own laws and process for environmental assessment, which apply on their reserve lands. Through a shared delivery model, ISC and CIRNAC work collaboratively to advance initiatives related to First Nation Land Management. CIRNAC has taken the lead on legislative aspects while ISC provides operational and programmatic support to the First Nation Land Management Resource Centre and First Nations. Currently, Long Lake 58 First Nation is the only community in the Ring of Fire area operating under a land code.

Impact Assessment Act

Under Sections 81-91 of the *Impact Assessment Act*, ISC is responsible for ensuring that smaller, non-designated projects located on reserve lands do not result in adverse effects. This is done by conducting environmental reviews of these projects. It is possible that some non-designated projects located in First Nations communities within the area of the Ring of Fire regional assessment undergo an environmental review.

3. EXPERT INFORMATION OR KNOWLEDGE

List and summarize the specialists or expert information or knowledge that your department or agency has that may be relevant to the regional assessment. Include all research, reports and data sets in this response inventory.

ISC has some general information on First Nations communities that are accessible to general public and could potentially inform the regional assessment. This information can be accessed via the First Nations Profiles and the Community Well-being Index or by engaging with personnel in ISC regional offices.

First Nations Community Profiles

The First Nation Profiles is a collection of information that describes individual First Nation communities across Canada. The profiles include general information on a First Nation along with more detailed information about its reserve(s), governance, federal funding, geography, registered population statistics and various Census statistics. This information can be accessed here: <https://fnp-ppn.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/fnp/Main/index.aspx?lang=eng>

Community Well-being Index

ISC maintains the Community Well-being Index (CWB). This index measures socio-economic well-being for individual Indigenous communities across Canada. It has 4 components: education, labour force activity, income, and housing. It is compatible with other community-level data to facilitate a wide variety of research on the factors associated with well-being, and allows for cross-comparison with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The Community Well-being Index can be accessed through the following website: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100016579/1557319653695>

Also, through the Strategic Research and Data Innovation Branch, ISC could contribute information related to population data, population projections and socioeconomic information about communities in the Ring of Fire area, so long as the data is not owned by the community. The Strategic Research and Data Innovation Branch can be contacted at this email address: aadnc.instat.aandc@canada.ca

ISC has numerous programs and services for on-reserve First Nations, which provide similar functions as a province or municipality does off-reserve. These programs include health, social, education, economic development, lands and environment, governance and infrastructure services. Although ISC maintains inventories of data related to each of these programs, often this data belongs to the participating community.

Access to clean and safe drinking water:

[Short-term Drinking Water Advisories](#)

ISC maintains a list of short-term drinking water advisories in First Nation communities south of 60°N. A short-term drinking water advisory means there is a temporary water quality issue on a specific water system (e.g., boil water advisory, do not consume advisory, do not use advisory). As of March 20, 2025, there are two partnering communities to the Regional Assessment Working Group that are under a ST-DWA.

Long-term Drinking Water Advisories

ISC maintains a map of long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves. ISC funds public water systems that serve 5 or more household connections. ISC also funds public water systems serving public facilities that are funded by the department. These water systems are managed and operated by the band, a band-owned utility or a qualified third party under contract. At the time of preparing this response, there are four partnering communities to the Regional Assessment Working Group that are under a LT-DWA.

Regional Nutrition Information:

ISC-FNIHB has access to regional information regarding food security, nutrition programming, and food related practices (including traditional practices) and may provide insight as to how regional development could result in changes that may contribute to health and/or disease in the communities.

Wastewater and Collection Systems:

ISC has access to local knowledge regarding the condition of existing infrastructure in some of the northern Ontario communities within the study area. Currently, some systems do not support the growing demand of the communities and require multiple upgrades or replacements.

Condition of Housing:

ISC has access to local knowledge regarding the condition of housing in some of the northern Ontario communities within the study area. Currently, there is an issue with overcrowding and a lack of regular maintenance that exacerbate existing sub-par housing conditions that communities are experiencing.

4. POLICIES, PROGRAMS OR INITIATIVES

List and summarize the past, current and planned policies, programs or initiatives of your department or agency that may be relevant to the regional assessment. Include an outline of related funding initiatives in this response and provide information on geographic locations, next steps and timing for the program/initiative.

In addition to services provided to communities, ISC has a wide variety of funding programs related, but not exclusive, to health, education, economic development, infrastructure, and reserve land and environment management that would be available for communities located in the Ring of Fire area.

Below are short descriptions of these funding programs for which ISC could coordinate information collection to inform the regional assessment. It is important to note that ISC may not be able to share some data from these programs, as data could be owned by communities.

Education

ISC has programs that support First Nations elementary and secondary education, and distinctions- based strategies for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation post-secondary students. The programs listed below could be relevant for communities located in the Ring of Fire area.

- [Education Partnership Program](#) – a proposal-based program designed to advance First Nations student achievement in First Nations and provincial schools.
- [Elementary and Secondary Education Program](#) – provides eligible students ordinarily living on reserve with elementary and secondary education programs comparable to those in provincial schools.
- [First Nation and Inuit Skills Link Program](#) – supports initiatives that help First Nations and Inuit youth acquire essential employability and job-related skills, and to learn about job and career options.
- [First Nations and Inuit Summer Work Experience Program](#) – supports initiatives to help First Nations and Inuit youth acquire skills, prepare for full-time employment and earn income to support post- secondary education.
- [Post-Secondary Student Support Program](#) - department provides financial assistance to First Nations students who are enrolled in eligible post-secondary programs.
- [High-Cost Special Education Program](#) – to assist eligible First Nations students with high-cost special needs to access quality programs and services that are culturally sensitive and reflective of generally accepted provincial or territorial standards.
- [University and College Entrance Preparation Program](#) – to enable First Nations students to attain the academic level required for entrance into degree and diploma credit programs, as prioritized and directed by First Nations.

Emergency Management

The [Emergency Management Assistance Program](#) provides funding to First Nations communities to help build resiliency, prepare for natural hazards and respond to them using the 4 pillars of emergency management (mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery). This program is jointly implemented with provincial and non-governmental organizations.

Health

ISC-FNIHB provides health care services and programming for First Nations and Inuit in Canada. The following health care services and programs may be applicable to the First Nations in the Ring of Fire area. Links to programs have been provided, where available, and indicated in **blue** :

- [Jordan's Principle](#).
Jordan's Principle makes sure all First Nations children living in Canada can access the products, services and supports they need, when they need them. Funding can help with a wide range of health, social and educational needs, including the unique needs that First Nations Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA children and youth and those with disabilities may have.

- [First Nations Child and Family Services, and Jordan's Principle Settlement Trauma-Informed Health and Cultural Support Services](#)
 The First Nations Child and Family Services and Jordan's Principle Settlement Trauma-Informed Health and Cultural Supports have been established in direct response to the First Nations Child and Family Services and Jordan's Principle Settlement. This initiative builds on the existing trauma-informed support programs, with special attention given to the needs of children, youth and families. Assistance with transportation may be offered when mental health counselling and cultural support services are not locally available.
- [Mental Health Counselling Benefits for First Nations and Inuit.](#)
 The program provides coverage for professional mental health counselling to complement other mental wellness services that may be available to clients or in communities. The program provides clients with coverage for benefits not available under other federal, provincial, territorial or private health insurance.
- [Aboriginal Head Start of Reserve Program.](#)
 The Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve program supports child development and school readiness for children living in First Nations communities on reserve. The program focuses on support in the following areas: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parent or guardian, family and community involvement.
- [First Nations and Inuit Home and Community Care Program.](#)
 The First Nations and Inuit Home and Community Care program provides funding and advice on developing home and community care services to Indigenous people living in First Nations and Inuit communities. The program focuses on services such as: client-need assessment, case management and care coordination, nursing, and personal care, etc.
- [Non-Insured Health Benefits Program.](#)
 This program provides eligible First Nations and Inuit clients with coverage for a range of health benefits that are not covered through other social programs, private insurance plans, and provincial or territorial health insurance. The program provides coverage for the following medically necessary goods and services: vision care, dental care, mental health counselling, medical supplies and equipment, prescription and over-the-counter medication, and medical transportation.
- [Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program.](#)
 This program provides cultural and emotional support, and mental health counselling services to Survivors of Indian Residential Schools and the families of former students.
- [Federal Indian Day School Health and Cultural Support Program.](#)
 This program provides health support services for individuals affected by the trauma associated with their attendance at an historic Federal Indian Day School.
- [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Health and Cultural Support Program.](#)
 This program provides mental health counselling, emotional support, community-based cultural support services and some assistance with transportation costs for survivors,

family members and those affected by the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

- [Health Facilities Program.](#)

This program provides funding to support the planning, construction, expansion, renovation, maintenance and management of community health facilities. The types of health infrastructure supported under this program include health services buildings, addictions treatment centres, Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve spaces and residences for healthcare professionals.

ISC-FNIHB also manages the following funding programs which are available to Tribal Councils and First Nations communities and organizations in the Ring of Fire area:

- [First Nations Environmental Contaminants Program.](#)

This program supports First Nations communities south of the 60th parallel in identifying, investigating and characterizing the impact of exposure to environmental hazards through research, monitoring, risk assessment, risk communication and knowledge integration activities.

- [Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program.](#)

This program supports First Nation communities south of the 60th parallel to identify, assess and respond to the health impacts of climate change. The program supports projects that focus on the health impacts of climate change by helping communities to develop and implement health-related adaptation or action plans; develop and share knowledge-building and communication materials; and support adaptation decision-making at the local, regional and national level.

- [First Nations Baseline Assessment Program on Health and the Environment.](#)

This program supports First Nation communities south of the 60th parallel to assess the baseline status of human health and the environment in their community and traditional territory prior to the implementation of a major industrial, natural resource or infrastructure project (e.g., mine, nuclear facility, oil and gas facility, dam, port). The program supports two types of projects:

- Primary Research: Community-based research to collect and analyze data on human health and the environment directly through questionnaires, surveys, interviews and sampling.
- Knowledge Integration: Community-based research that compiles, integrates and analyzes existing community information and scientific data on human health and the environment.

[First Nations Food, Nutrition & Environment Study](#)

The First Nations Food, Nutrition & Environment Study was implemented across Canada over a 10-year period (2008-2018). Data collection was conducted in 18 First Nations communities in Ontario during the fall of 2011 and 2012. The [Results from Ontario 2011-2012](#) report presents the aggregated and statistically representative results from these 18 First Nations communities in Ontario. The FNFNES included five components:

- 1) Household interviews to collect information on dietary patterns, lifestyle and general health status, environmental concerns and food security;
- 2) Drinking water sampling for trace metals;
- 3) Hair sampling for exposure to mercury;
- 4) Surface water sampling for pharmaceuticals; and
- 5) Traditional food sampling for chemical contaminant content.

[Environmental Public Health Services in First Nations Communities](#)

The Environmental Public Health Services team within FNIHB works with First Nations communities to identify and prevent environmental public health risks. These risks could negatively impact the health of people in both the natural and built environment. Most of these services are provided by Environmental Public Health Officers, who are certified public health inspectors employed either by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch or First Nations. Environmental Public Health Officers deliver environmental public health services to support First Nations communities in identifying and recommending corrective action on potential public health risks that could adversely impact the health of community residents on reserve. The services are provided in the eight core program areas of:

- 1) Drinking water;
- 2) Health and housing;
- 3) Food safety;
- 4) Wastewater;
- 5) Solid waste disposal;
- 6) Facilities inspections;
- 7) Communicable disease control; and
- 8) Emergency planning, response and recovery.

The Environmental Public Health Services team may have inspection reports of relevance for the First Nations in the Ring of Fire area.

Please note that while some of this data may be useful in the context of the regional assessment for the Ring of Fire area, the department may need to seek permissions from the First Nations to share this information with other federal departments. The RAWG would need to approach the community directly.

Housing

The [First Nation On-Reserve Housing Program](#) helps to improve on-reserve housing. While it does not cover the full cost of housing, this program can be accessed by First Nations to build and renovate houses, as well as contribute towards maintenance costs, insurance, debt servicing, and the planning and management of a housing portfolio.

Infrastructure

ISC works with First Nations governments and communities to support adequate and sustainable housing, clean drinking water and community infrastructure such as schools, roads and wastewater systems, which are essential to healthy, safe and prosperous communities.

In the context of this regional assessment, the [Capital Facilities and Maintenance Program and the First Nation Infrastructure Fund](#) are relevant for First Nation communities. Additionally, ISC, in partnership with the Province of Ontario, cost-shares the annual construction and operations of the winter road network that services the remote fly-in communities of the Ring of Fire area.

The [First Nations Waste Management Initiative](#), launched in 2016, supports First Nations in developing sustainable solid waste management systems through modern infrastructure, operations, training and partnerships. It is a complementary source of funding to the [First Nation Infrastructure Fund](#). As part of this, ISC works with First Nation communities across northern Ontario to deliver various waste management projects.

Lands, Environment and Economic Development

Since 2011, through whole-of-government efforts led by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario (FedNor), the Government of Canada has made major investments in First Nations communities in the region. This includes over \$190M of programming investments to improve socio-economic conditions and support informed decision-making for natural resource development. In addition, \$51M in direct investments have been made via the federal Strategic Partnerships Initiative (SPI) to support First Nations participation in the mining sector and improve socio-economic conditions. Other programs at ISC and other government departments have also supported the region through investments in infrastructure (e.g., broadband and clean energy), mineral research (e.g., Canadian Chromite R&D Initiative), and capacity support for data collection, wildlife surveys, mapping, etc.

More specifically, environmental monitoring activities included support for review of environmental assessment/impact work, baseline and environmental monitoring studies, as well as training and capacity development to prepare communities for environmental assessment and projects related to mineral development in their traditional territory. Other notable projects included research to collect data from land users and Elders on traditional ecological knowledge (TK) as it relates to boundaries extending into the Ring of Fire region on environmental impacts from upstream and up muskeg development.

In addition, ISC prioritized approximately \$25M in community-level investments (e.g., housing, governance, health, etc.) through the Community Wellbeing Pilot project with Neskantaga, Webequie, and Marten Falls First Nations. ISC also provides a suite of community economic development programming, as well as programming to support Comprehensive Community Planning and Professional and Institutional Development.

In the Northern Ontario region, one new approach that ISC has introduced is the Community Development Wrap-Around initiative (CDWAI); it represents a wrap-around approach to community development that is changing the way First Nation communities and government do business. CDWAI communities lead their process by identifying their community priorities, capacity development opportunities they wish to access, and the external partners they want to work with during implementation. Each CDWAI community

will create a CDWAI Support Team made up of community members and their partners to facilitate the implementation of their community development activities.

ISC is active in fostering conditions for economic development in Indigenous communities through the [Community Opportunity Readiness](#) program, [Indigenous Business Development](#), the [Lands and Economic Development Services Program](#) and Land Use Planning.

In addition, ISC manages the [Contaminated Sites On Reserve](#) program which works to identify and remediate environmental contamination on reserve lands. Since 1992, this program has provided financial assistance to assess and remediate environmentally contaminated sites on reserve lands and other lands under its custodial responsibility; sites deemed to pose human health risk are a priority.

Over the last decade, projects to remediate contaminated sites on Marten Falls and Webequie First Nations lands were supported. Also potentially relevant to First Nations in this region is the department's [Reserve Lands and Environmental Management Program](#) which provides funding to First Nations to develop the capacity needed to manage and exercise increased responsibility over their reserve land, resources and environment.

Social

The Indigenous communities in the Ring of Fire area can access the below listed ISC programs.

- [Assisted Living Program](#) - provides funds to identified service providers to help provide non- medical, social support services to people living on-reserve with chronic illness or disability.
- [First Nations Child and Family Services Program](#) – funding for prevention and protection services to support the safety and well-being of First Nation children and families (on reserve).
- [On-reserve Income Assistance Program](#) – to support greater labour market participation in First Nation communities. It is intended to cover the costs of their daily living and provides funding to access employment supports; it has been recently boosted to respond to increased demand from First Nations individuals and families affected by COVID-19.

Water

[Circuit Rider Training Program](#) provides First Nation operators with direct training on how to operate, service and maintain the water and wastewater systems in their communities. ISC regional offices hire a roster of qualified experts who are available to train First Nation water and wastewater system operators.

- 5. Outline any additional responsibilities, information or knowledge and any partners or collaborations that have not been specified, above.**

Health Canada

Through the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, ISC collaborates with Health Canada to inform assessments of health impacts on First Nations from resource and infrastructure development projects, including their cumulative effects.

Indigenous Centre for Cumulative Effects

In 2018, in collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners, ISC led the co-development of an Indigenous Centre for Cumulative Effects. This not-for-profit organization is housed outside of government and will help to build the scientific and technical capacity of Inuit, Métis and First Nation communities to undertake the assessment, monitoring and management of cumulative effects of projects on their lands and waters. The Centre provide support and resources for Indigenous communities across Canada which may include providing access to expertise, funding, training and tools that could help inform regional assessments.