

The logo for Human Rights Watch, consisting of a blue square with the words "HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, arranged in three lines.

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

**Written Submission on Human Rights and Climate
Change for the Pre-Budget Consultations in
Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget**

February 19, 2021

Recommendations

In the 2021 budget, Human Rights Watch recommends that Canada:

1. Allocate funding to enable the meaningful participation of, and partnership with, First Nations, including women, youth, and older people, in the implementation of Canada's 2020 climate plan, Covid-19 recovery, and food policy discussions.
2. Ensure consistent, adequate, and long-term funding and support for Indigenous-led programs to monitor climate change impacts, including through investments in First Nations Guardians and support for a national network of First Nations climate coordinators at the community and regional levels to facilitate climate adaptation planning.
3. Ensure long-term, sufficient, predictable, and sustainable funding to respond to climate change impacts on First Nations' infrastructure (including winter roads), food supply, and health, including by:
 - a. Addressing the infrastructure deficit, including operation and maintenance needs, to ensure adequate, sustainable, and affordable housing, sufficient and reliable clean drinking water and wastewater services, and sustainable community infrastructures such as schools, clean energy, and roads; and
 - b. Supporting First Nations-led conservation efforts to foster environmental and climate resiliency, including the establishment and maintenance of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and Guardian programs.
4. Ensure support for a comprehensive framework of First Nations-led adaptation policies and programs to address the impacts of climate change on First Nations food poverty and health, including through:
 - a. The creation of a First Nations Climate Institute, responsible for expert support, facilitation, and coordination for First Nations-led climate initiatives; and
 - b. Support for a First Nations-led National Food Security/Sovereignty Strategy.
5. Improve access to mental health care and psychosocial support in First Nations by allocating targeted funding for community-based services.
6. Support a national school food program to provide healthy food in all public schools, with a particular focus on ensuring that First Nations children have prompt access to the program and are provided with traditional or other culturally appropriate food.
7. Not introduce new subsidies or other forms of financial support for fossil fuel companies in its 2021 Budget.
8. Ensure that Budget 2021 supports a just transition towards clean, renewable energy, including prioritizing First Nations looking to transition away from reliance on fossil fuels.

Background

Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works in over 100 countries around the world as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all. In 2020, Human Rights Watch released a report, “[‘My Fear is Losing Everything’: The Climate Crisis and First Nations’ Right to Food in Canada](#),” which documents how climate change impacts—including more extreme weather, thawing permafrost, reduced snow and ice, and more wildfires—are depleting First Nations’ traditional food sources, increasing the danger and difficulty of harvesting, driving up the cost of imported alternatives, and contributing to a growing problem of food poverty and related negative health impacts.

These impacts are particularly acute for children, older people, and people with chronic diseases whose health conditions can make a healthy diet all the more critical. Climate change impacts on traditional food sources also affect First Nations’ abilities to practice and maintain their cultures, resulting in significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing. With Canada warming at about twice the global average, the worst is yet to come. Human Rights Watch has worked on human rights crises impacting First Nations communities since 2012, including documenting government failures related to the [crisis](#) of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and the [First Nations water crisis](#).

This submission outlines Human Rights Watch’s recommendations for Canada’s Federal Budget 2021 as they relate to our climate change research, conducted from 2018-2020 on First Nations’ rights to food, health, and culture. While these recommendations are specific to addressing the harmful climate impacts Human Rights Watch documented on First Nations, other Indigenous peoples in Canada have reported [similar impacts](#) and would likely benefit from similar programming support.

I. Supporting First Nations’ Climate Change Adaptation Needs

As Canada works to “build back better” toward a “a greener, more competitive, more innovative, more inclusive, more resilient Canada,” the federal government should ensure that First Nations are not left behind.

The Federal government has repeatedly [committed](#) to realize the rights of First Nations people and address historic discrimination and inequality, including through its Covid-19 response. But federal funding has yet to address longstanding First Nations’ concerns including regarding infrastructure gaps, sub-standard housing, and food poverty.¹ For example, Human Rights Watch [documented](#) in 2016 how the federal government has long over-promised and under-delivered on key investments in water and wastewater infrastructure and the equally important operation and maintenance of such assets.

Now, climate change is further exacerbating this socio-economic inequality, along with the related disparity in health and food poverty outcomes in First Nations. Human Rights Watch has documented how climate change is taking a growing toll on First Nations in Canada, depleting food sources and adding to existing physical and mental health inequalities between First Nations people and non-Indigenous Canadians.

¹ The First Nations infrastructure deficit is estimated to be as high as CAD\$30 billion. Indigenous Services Canada, Government of Canada, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1523817069680/1523817091386?wbdisable=true> (accessed February 16, 2021).

In line with Canada’s international obligations, First Nations should receive the financial and technical support needed to respond to current and projected climate impacts, including on food and health, and should lead the design and implementation of programs addressing these impacts.

Across Canada, First Nations are working to proactively address and respond to the impact of the climate crisis, including impacts on their rights to food, health, and culture. Some maintain strong traditional food sharing networks, while others have created monitoring systems for climate change impacts on their environment. Yet, all these efforts require resources and capacity, which many communities lack. Human Rights Watch research found that the Canadian government has yet to meet its human rights obligation to support First Nations in adapting to current and anticipated impacts of climate change.

In the December 2020 climate plan, *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy*, the federal government recognized that “[s]upporting self-determined [Indigenous] climate action is critical to advancing Canada’s reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.” In the September 2020 Speech from the Throne, the government further committed to “work with ... First Nations ... to address food insecurity in Canada.”

Budget 2021 presents a crucial opportunity to deliver on these commitments and ensure Canada meets its human rights obligations to First Nations.

In the 2021 budget, Human Rights Watch recommends that Canada:

1. Allocate funding to enable the meaningful participation of, and partnership with, First Nations, including women, youth, and older people, in the implementation of Canada’s 2020 climate plan, Covid-19 recovery, and food policy discussions.
2. Ensure consistent, adequate, and long-term funding and support for Indigenous-led programs to monitor climate change impacts, including through investments in First Nations Guardians and support for a national network of First Nations climate coordinators at the community and regional levels to facilitate climate adaptation planning.
3. Ensure long-term, sufficient, predictable, and sustainable funding to respond to climate change impacts on First Nations’ infrastructure (including winter roads), food supply, and health, including by:
 - a. Addressing the infrastructure deficit, including operations and maintenance needs, to ensure adequate, sustainable, and affordable housing, sufficient and reliable clean drinking water and wastewater services, and sustainable community infrastructure such as schools, clean energy, and roads; and
 - b. Supporting First Nations-led conservation efforts to foster environmental and climate resiliency, including the establishment and maintenance of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and Guardian programs.
4. Ensure support for a comprehensive framework of First Nations-led adaptation policies and programs to address impacts of climate change on First Nations food poverty and health, including through:
 - a. The creation of a First Nations Climate Institute, responsible for expert support, facilitation, and coordination for First Nations-led climate initiatives; and
 - b. Support for a First Nations-led National Food Security/Sovereignty Strategy.

5. Improve access to mental health care and psychosocial support in First Nations by allocating targeted funding for community-based services.
6. Support a national school food program to provide healthy food in all public schools, with a particular focus on ensuring that First Nations children have prompt access to the program and are provided with traditional or other culturally appropriate food.

II. Preventing Further Foreseeable Harm from Climate Change

Canada should ensure that spending does not cause foreseeable harms from climate change by entrenching fossil fuel dependence.

Climate change is significantly impacting First Nations—and their livelihoods—across Canada, and there is [evidence](#) that the worst is yet to come. Canada is warming by about twice the global average, and northern Canada is warming even faster.

The choices Canada makes about where to direct funds to stimulate and support a post-Covid-19 recovery could be a game changer to enable rapid transition to clean, renewable energy, and to protect the rights of those impacted by the Covid-19 and climate crises. However, to date, Canada has chosen to double down on support for fossil fuels, increasing government support to fossil fuels by over US\$15 billion since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than three times the amount allocated to support Indigenous and northern communities.²

Human Rights Watch recommends that Canada:

1. Not introduce new subsidies or other forms of financial support for fossil fuel companies in its 2021 Budget.
2. Ensure that Budget 2021 supports a just transition towards clean, renewable energy, including prioritizing First Nations looking to transition away from reliance on fossil fuels.

² “Canada,” energy policy tracker, International Institute for Sustainable Development, The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Oil Change International, Overseas Development Institute, Stockholm Environment Institute, and Columbia University, 2020, <https://www.energypolicytracker.org/country/canada> (accessed February 16, 2021); “Government of Canada announces further reinforcement of COVID-19 supports for Indigenous communities,” Indigenous Services Canada, Government of Canada, January 13, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-services-canada/news/2021/01/government-of-canada-announces-further-reinforcement-of-covid-19-supports-for-indigenous-communities.html> (accessed February 17, 2021).