



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“MY FEAR IS LOSING EVERYTHING”

The Climate Crisis and First Nations’
Right to Food in Canada



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SUMMARY

Joseph Koostachin, 58, remembers when he and his wife Helen, 56, went out on the land to hunt and berry pick with their young children. In the summer, the forests and meadows were lush and the water in the rivers plentiful. The winters were cold, with ice and snow cover allowing them to travel by dog sled from November through April. They would hunt caribou, a large type of deer, in the winter, while snow geese predictably arrived in April, and fish were bountiful in summer. The varied, seasonal harvest helped Joseph feed his family healthy food year-round.

The Koostachins live in Peawanuck, a remote community on Hudson Bay in the Canadian province of Ontario. Joseph and Helen’s sons are now grown and have taken over the responsibility of securing food from the land for the family. Going out on the land means more than just finding food, however, it is also a reflection of their deep ties to the land of their ancestors and its importance to their cultural identity and traditions.

Yet as global temperatures have risen as a result of climate change, the Koostachins’ way of life, and livelihood, have become increasingly difficult to maintain, and the realization of their rights to food, health, and culture are at risk. There are fewer caribou and geese migrating to the area. And it is harder—at times impossible—to hunt them because the ice and permafrost they must travel over is no longer stable throughout the winter, while the waters they traverse in summer are unpredictably low. As the climate continues to warm, these changes to their lands and environment will intensify, and their traditional sources of sustenance could entirely disappear.

Already, as a result of these changes, the Koostachins have not been able to harvest the food they need to ensure an adequate diet, and, like many northern and remote First Nations people in Canada, they lack a cost-effective, healthy alternative. If not enough food can be harvested from the land—through hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants—their only option is to buy costly food imported from the [Canadian] “South.” An average family of four in Peawanuck must spend around 30 percent more to purchase a standard selection of healthy food each month compared to a family in Toronto.

With their modest income, the Koostachins said they cannot afford to buy healthy food such as vegetables at the store. While there are government subsidies meant to make food shipped from the South more affordable, healthy imported food, particularly produce, remains inaccessible to many and is becoming more expensive as a result of climate impacts on transport costs.

Across Canada, Indigenous families are already much more likely to be “food insecure”—defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as not being able to access food to meet dietary needs and food preferences—largely as a result of historic marginalization and the impacts of colonialism. Some studies find nearly one in two households in First Nations are food insecure, compared with one out of nine white Canadian households. Food poverty now risks reaching increasingly dangerous levels as climate change impacts across the country intensify and accelerate, undermining First Nations’ access to food and worsening health outcomes, especially for adults and children with chronic health conditions such as diabetes.

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. A 2019 government report, commissioned by the federal climate ministry, projects increasingly warmer temperatures, shorter snow and ice cover seasons, and thawing permafrost across the country. In fact, key sub-Arctic ecosystems that support many traditional sources of food are already at risk of reaching climate tipping points, past which they will not be able to recover from the consequences of rapid warming. This change, according to scientists, will contribute to carbon emissions. For example, climate change-induced permafrost thaw and increased forest fires are pushing historic carbon sinks like Canada’s vast boreal forest to the brink, causing them to become net carbon contributors.

Indigenous peoples in Canada are among the lowest contributors to greenhouse emissions in the country, yet academic research shows they are among the most exposed to climate change impacts. As the climate warms, there are fewer animals migrating and traditional plants growing on First Nations’ traditional territories. Unpredictable weather hampers the ability of hunters, who

rely on traditional knowledge, to safely navigate potentially treacherous terrain to access hunting grounds. And as transport options like winter roads—constructed from snow and ice—become less reliable in warming winters, communities increasingly rely on more expensive air transport to deliver food, driving up the cost of purchased foods.

The harmful impacts of warming that Indigenous populations in Canada are experiencing point to more devastating impacts in the future. Human Rights Watch research found that the Canadian government’s failure to put in place adequate measures to support First Nations in adapting to current and anticipated impacts of climate change is leading to violations of their rights. And federal and provincial authorities are not doing enough to advance global efforts to curb climate change.

This report, the outcome of research Human Rights Watch conducted in Northern Ontario, Northwestern British Columbia, and Northern Yukon between June 2018 and December 2019, examines the impacts of the climate crisis on First Nations. Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 120 individuals, including residents, chiefs, and council members in First Nations communities; medical providers, educators, environment and health experts, academics, and staff of Indigenous-led and Indigenous representative organizations. The experiences of First Nations described in this report are illustrative of broader climate change impacts across Canada, however, each First Nation is unique, and none of their experiences can be generalized, making it imperative to tailor measures to address climate impacts and community needs in each of their traditional territories.

Climate Change as a Driver of Food Poverty

The communities Human Rights Watch visited are largely populated by First Nations people who have traditionally relied on caribou, moose, geese, salmon and other animals and fish—along with supplements of berries—to feed their families. For generations, traditional food systems have been central to the livelihoods and health of First Nations.

Climate change threatens to decimate these food systems, risking further serious consequences for livelihoods and health. In the three areas where Human Rights Watch conducted research, residents reported drastic reductions in the quantity of harvestable re-

sources available, and increased difficulty and danger associated with harvesting. They attributed this decline in part to changes in wildlife habitat as a result of climate change, including changing ice and permafrost, wildfires, warming water temperatures, changes in precipitation and water levels, and unpredictable weather. Numerous scientific studies support these observations and warn of further devastating impacts as the climate crisis increasingly threatens the viability of and access to traditional food sources.

With less food to be harvested, households supplement their traditional diet with more purchased food. First Nations in remote locations have a compounded risk of food poverty because higher transportation costs drive food prices higher than elsewhere in the country. This cost differential has been increasing in part due to climate-related changes in the local environment. For example, shorter, warmer winters mean shorter periods in which winter roads can be used, and such roads enable more cost-effective delivery of supplies from the South. This change means more people like Joseph and Helen choosing between going hungry or buying cheaper foods they believe contribute to making them sick or sicker. It will get significantly worse if climate change continues unchecked.

Impacts on Health and Culture

Healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, in remote grocery stores are often cost-prohibitive. As a result, people told Human Rights Watch they tend to eat more affordable, but less nutritious foods, compounding existing health disparities in northern communities tied to historic marginalization and poor access to health care. In particular, academic studies show that increased dependence on processed, high-calorie, store-bought foods—often less expensive and with longer shelf-lives—has contributed to serious diet-related health issues among First Nations, such as the growing and disproportionate number of First Nations people affected by obesity and diabetes.

In several of the communities where Human Rights Watch conducted research, teachers and community members said that children come hungry to school. Older people and people with chronic diseases whose health conditions can make a healthy diet all-the-more critical said they find the loss of harvested food impedes their ability to eat healthily. Medical providers told

Human Rights Watch that people with chronic diseases cannot afford to follow medically recommended diets due to their inability to obtain food from the land or to afford nutritious foods sold in stores. Some of the relatively older people interviewed for this report said they have cut down on the number of meals they eat per day.

The impacts of climate change negatively affect Indigenous cultures. Limited access to traditional food sources and decreased ability of First Nations to safely spend time on the land, threatens not only communities’ food supplies but also their ability to engage in related cultural practices and ultimately maintain their cultural identities. First Nations’ land-based knowledge systems, known as “Indigenous knowledge,” which communities use to pass information about harvesting techniques and other cultural knowledge down through the generations, are also being challenged by climate change impacts. The unpredictable weather and animal patterns linked to climate change impacts inhibit the growth and adaptation of Indigenous knowledge, and the transmission of cultural knowledge—which necessitates time spent on the land.

Community Resilience in the Face of the Climate Crisis

Across the country, First Nations are addressing the impacts of the climate crisis, including through projects such as community solar projects or local food sourcing projects like gardens and greenhouses. Some First Nations maintain strong traditional food sharing networks that have helped address climate-driven loss of food through sharing harvest with vulnerable members of the community, while others have built up community-science programs that monitor climate change impacts on their environment. Yet, all these efforts require resources and capacity which many communities cannot access given government funding complexities, especially as needs increase with rising temperatures.

Failure to Address Climate Change and its Impacts on Food Poverty

In its September 2020 Speech from the Throne, in which the federal government outlines its priorities for the upcoming parliamentary session, the government committed to “work with ... First Nations ... to address food insecurity in Canada.” Until now, federal climate change

policies have largely ignored the impacts of climate change on First Nations’ right to food. Most existing policies were designed without meaningful participation of First Nations and fail to monitor—let alone address—human rights impacts in these communities. Food subsidies and health resources required to respond to the current and projected impacts are often not available, insufficient, or do not reach those who need it the most.

For example, the federal government’s “Nutrition North” program subsidizes a list of nutritious foods transported from registered southern retailers. This program is the major means of supplementing inadequate supplies of locally harvested food. However, since its inception in 2011, the program has not led to remote, northern communities securing access to affordable, healthy food: food prices in community-based stores remain high with healthy food options financially unattainable for many. Ordering subsidized food from retailers in the South often requires a credit card—which can be a barrier for some low-income families. It remains to be seen whether changes to the program made in 2019, including subsidy increases, will increase access to healthy foods in First Nations. Robust community-based monitoring of actual price development in First Nations should be undertaken to determine the efficacy of these changes and adjustments made where necessary.

At the subnational level of provincial and territorial governments the response varies. The Yukon territory, for example, released a climate change policy in 2019 that acknowledges the need to monitor and address food security and unique impacts on Indigenous peoples. Ontario, by contrast, starting in 2018, cancelled numerous climate adaptation and mitigation programs that benefited First Nations.

Meanwhile, Canada is not doing its part to advance global efforts to address the change in global temperature, which is contributing to loss of traditional food sources. In 2015, it made a weak pledge to only reduce emissions by 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. At time of writing Canada has not set an adequately ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution, a country’s domestic climate change action plan, to keep global temperature rise below 1.5°C—according to the think tank Climate Action Tracker, if all government targets were in range with Canada’s level of ambition, warming would reach over 2°C and up to 3°C. While the federal government has repeatedly confirmed its commitment to exceed the 2030 goal and reach net-zero emissions

by 2050 through legislated targets, including in the September 2020 Speech from the Throne, it is unclear how it will reach these goals. In any case, the government is not on track to meet either its 2030 emissions targets or net-zero by 2050, and acknowledges that more needs to be done. Despite its relatively small population of approximately 37.5 million people, Canada is still among the top 10 countries worldwide in GHG emissions, with per capita emissions approximately three to four times the global average, and growing.

Complicating efforts to cut emissions is Canada’s continued subsidizing of fossil fuel production. Canada increased its financial support for fossil fuels from 2018 to 2019 to nearly CAD\$600 million, and has continued to provide billions in aid to fossil fuel producers as part of the country’s Covid-19 response in 2020.

The federal government’s plan to cut carbon emissions through a carbon pricing policy can be an essential aspect—though insufficient on its own—of the fight against climate change. The current design of the federal carbon tax, however, will likely drive up food prices, particularly in remote communities, thereby placing a disproportionate burden on a population that bears the least responsibility for the problem. While the policy includes a tax-based rebate intended to mitigate the impacts of these price increases on lower-income people, the federal government has acknowledged this method is ineffective for First Nations given legislated tax exemptions that mean many First Nations people on-reserve do not file federal tax returns.

Ultimately, Canada’s climate policies are insufficient and poorly designed, contributing to a double bind for First Nation peoples: while climate change is adversely impacting their traditional food sources, their ability to afford healthy store-bought food is being undercut by the government’s main mitigation policy: the carbon tax.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

- Set and implement ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals in line with the best available science, taking into account obligation not to further increase food poverty, in particular for those populations most affected, such as Indigenous peoples.
- Set an ambitious new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) that aligns emissions reduction targets with the imperative to keep the increase of global average temperature no higher than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and which explicitly references the rights of Indigenous peoples in line with the preamble of the Paris Agreement. The impact of Covid-19 should not be used as a pretext to unreasonably delay fulfilling obligations under the Paris Agreement, such as the timely submission of the new NDC.
- Ensure that Covid-19 stimulus packages support a just transition towards renewable energy, including prioritizing First Nations.
- In line with the obligation to prevent foreseeable harms from climate change, refrain from entrenching fossil fuel dependence and promoting further fossil fuel development through the use of tax exemptions, subsidies, and other forms of financial support for fossil fuel companies.
- Ensure meaningful participation of, and partnership with, First Nations, including women, youth, and older people, in the design and implementation of Canada’s climate change policies and ensure that any action to address climate change is in-line with human rights obligations, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In particular, ensure that climate change policies protect marginalized populations, including Indigenous peoples, older people, women, children, and people with chronic diseases, already most impacted by climate change.
- Enable meaningful participation of First Nations in the federal carbon pollution pricing system.
- Publicly acknowledge the right to food as a basic human right, and part of the human right to an adequate standard of living, and accept the duty to ensure that nobody in Canada has to go hungry.
- Support Indigenous-led food security initiatives such as community freezers and community garden projects.
- Recognize that Indigenous knowledge systems about climatic conditions and their impacts on traditional food sources are relevant to the realization of the right to food.
- Co-develop with First Nations long-term, sufficient, predictable, and sustainable funding programs to respond to climate change impacts on infrastructure (including winter roads), food supply, and health.

TO ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE CANADA

- Ensure the meaningful participation of and partnership with First Nations in the design and implementation of Canada’s climate change policies, including the 2020 NDCs and Covid-19 stimulus packages.
- Revise Canada’s 2030 target to bring emissions reductions in line with what the IPCC says is necessary to prevent a global temperature rise above 1.5 degrees and to meet Canada’s commitment to reach net zero emissions by 2050.
- Revise the federal carbon tax system to ensure that First Nations benefit from equitable revenue-sharing and those on reserve can easily access the equivalent of a tax rebate and that revenue sharing benefits First Nations.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of and partnership with First Nations in the design and implementation of Canada’s climate change adaptation policies, including by:
- Ensuring consistent and long-term funding and support for Indigenous-led programs to monitor climate change impacts on the realization of the rights to food and health, in line with human rights obligations and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including through the expansion of the Indigenous Guardians Pilot Program.
- Creating a comprehensive framework of Indigenous-led adaptation policies and programs to address impacts of climate change on Indigenous food poverty and health.

TO CROWN-INDIGENOUS RELATIONS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS CANADA

- Monitor the efficacy of the Nutrition North Canada subsidy, including impacts of the 2018 reforms, and revise the program to ensure that:
- Those most in need can access the subsidies and will be able to afford healthy and nutritious food in community stores or by ordering from the nearest major city.
- Specific impacts of climate change on food poverty in eligible First Nations are assessed and considered in determination of subsidies.
- Consider expanding the Nutrition North subsidy program eligibility criteria to support food banks in remote and northern communities.
- Ensure that the promised Northern-based compliance and audit review committee is developed in meaningful partnership with northern Indigenous communities and addresses outstanding concerns about the lack of transparency and accountability regarding how retailers and suppliers pass on the NNC subsidy to consumers.
- Work with Environment and Climate Change Canada to fund and support comprehensive Indigenous-led monitoring of climate change impacts on the realization of the rights to food and health.
- Collaborate with Environment and Climate Change Canada to create a comprehensive framework of Indigenous-led adaptation policies and programs to address impacts of climate change on Indigenous food poverty and mental health.

- **Work with Environment and Climate Change Canada to fund and support comprehensive (and self-determined) Indigenous climate solutions, including those that relate to upholding their rights to food, water, and health.**
- **Respect Indigenous peoples’ decision-making authority over their traditional territories and harvesting resources through appropriate measures, for example: co-management of natural resources; increased protection of areas having high importance for cultural and harvesting purposes, at the direction of, and under the leadership of Indigenous peoples; and the timely resolution of comprehensive and specific land claims.**

TO HEALTH CANADA

- **Collaborate with Environment and Climate Change Canada to develop a plan for Indigenous-led monitoring of climate change impacts on the rights to food and health and to create a comprehensive framework of Indigenous-led adaptation policies and programs to address impacts of climate change on Indigenous food poverty and mental health.**
- **Improve access to mental health care and psychosocial support on the basis of free and informed consent in First Nations, including by allocating targeted funding for community-based services, filling any healthcare worker vacancies in First Nations, and training Indigenous community members as counselors.**
- **In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, establish 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.**
- **Promote programs serving traditional or other culturally sensitive food at hospitals and other institutions.**

TO AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD CANADA

- **Implement the Food Policy to address the impacts of climate change on Indigenous food poverty. In collaboration with First Nations and other relevant ministries, develop a plan for monitoring climate change impacts on rights to food and health.**

TO PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Ensure the meaningful participation of First Nations in the design and implementation of climate change adaptation and mitigation policies.**
- **In collaboration with First Nations, develop a plan for monitoring climate change impacts on rights to food, health, and culture. Give independent provincial or territorial human rights bodies a mandate to oversee monitoring and ensure transparency and accountability.**

- **Working with the federal government, provide financial and technical support to First Nations to be able to respond to climate change impacts on infrastructure (including winter roads), food supply, and health.**
- **In line with the obligation to prevent foreseeable harms from climate change, refrain from using tax exemptions, subsidies, and other forms of financial incentives to support fossil fuel development.**

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE YUKON

- **Work to rapidly implement robust, regular monitoring of food insecurity impacted by climate change, including in First Nations, as committed to in the Our Clean Future plan.**

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO

- **In line with previous efforts to build climate change monitoring capacity in First Nations, and in collaboration with First Nations, develop a plan for monitoring climate change impacts on rights to food, health, and culture and ensure its implementation.**

TO THE BRITISH COLUMBIA GOVERNMENT

- **Revise the provincial carbon tax system so that First Nations on-reserve can quickly and easily access the equivalent of the Climate Action Tax Credit. Ensure that revenue sharing from the carbon tax benefits Indigenous communities, for example by protecting biodiverse carbon stores, supporting Indigenous agriculture programs, or funding Indigenous energy efficiency programs.**
- **Ensure that the 2020 provincial Adaptation Strategy includes Indigenous-led monitoring of climate change impacts on the rights to food and health and provide technical support enabling First Nations to develop adaptation policies.**

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“My Fear is Losing Everything”

The Climate Crisis and First Nations’ Right to Food in Canada

Canada, one of the world’s leading greenhouse gas emitters, is contributing to a climate crisis that impacts the rights of people around the globe. Indigenous peoples in First Nations are among those most impacted in the country. Yet the Canadian government is not adequately supporting First Nations’ efforts to adapt to the mounting crisis and is failing to do its part to reduce the global greenhouse gas emissions that are driving it.

“My Fear is Losing Everything” finds that 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 Nation’s 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.

It is imperative for the Canadian government to adequately support First Nations’ efforts to adapt to climate change and take urgent action to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.



Weenusk First Nation member, Mike Wabano, sets up camp for caribou hunting on a frozen river near Peawanuck, December 14, 2019. As a result of warming temperatures, ice and snow cover is often thinner and more unstable.

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