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Submission on BC's Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy

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Human Rights Watch

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Background

Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization conducting research and advocacy in some 100 countries worldwide. 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.¹ With Canada warming at about twice the global average, the worst is yet to come.

This submission outlines Human Rights Watch’s concerns and recommendations in response to the Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy’s proposed actions for 2022-2025 based on [research](#) conducted from 2018-2020 with First Nations in the Skeena River watershed in British Columbia (“BC”) on how climate change is impacting their rights to food, health, and culture. This submission is also based on current ongoing research on the impact of 2021 heatwaves on older people and people with disabilities.

First Nations members in the Skeena River watershed in northwest BC told Human Rights Watch that they are experiencing increases in temperature, particularly warmer winters accompanied by decreased snowfall and increased rains, and warmer summers accompanied by low water levels, with some streams drying out completely. They also reported increased and more intense forest fire activity. 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.²

These changes have caused significant impacts on First Nations access to traditional foods: making it more difficult and in some cases dangerous to access moose, fish (especially salmon), and plants and berries. With less food to be harvested, households supplement their traditional diet with more purchased food. First Nations members and service providers in the Skeena River

¹ Human Rights Watch uses “food poverty” in this brief to describe lack of consistent access to adequate healthy food, or more specifically, decreasing affordability and access to nutritious and traditional food sources for First Nations, and the related impacts on health and culture. “Food security” and “food insecurity” are only used when referring to more formal, systemic measurements of access to food at the individual or household level, which may not reflect additional variables of food poverty, such as whether a household has access to culturally acceptable food.

² Human Rights Watch, “‘My Fear is Losing Everything’: The Climate Crisis and First Nations’ Right to Food in Canada,” October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/21/canada-climate-crisis-toll-first-nations-food-supply> (accessed August 8, 2021), pp. 21-64.

watershed told Human Rights Watch that some First Nations families rely on food banks or school food programs to be able to meet food needs, especially when traditional food is not available.³

Recent climate change-exacerbated high heat, meanwhile, has [disproportionately harmed](#) older people and likely also people with disabilities in British Columbia, highlighting the urgent need for a comprehensive climate response. The Chief Coroner’s statement from July 30, 2021, reported that 79 percent of people who died from June 20 until July 29 were age 65 or older.⁴

People with some physical disabilities interviewed by Human Rights Watch spoke about the inability to cool themselves and minimize overheating and difficulties they faced in accessing cooling centers and cooling devices. Socioeconomic factors—such as disproportionate rates of poverty and substandard housing for people with disabilities—exacerbate the problems. People with mental health conditions told Human Rights Watch that heat-related distress increased the symptoms of their mental health conditions, including PTSD, insomnia, and depression.

I. Monitoring Climate Impacts

In order to address climate change impacts and realize human rights, governments should, as a basic step, adequately assess and monitor climate change impacts, in particular on the wellbeing and livelihoods of marginalized populations, including Indigenous people, older people, and people with disabilities, and understand the efficacy of measures taken to address these impacts.⁵

The draft strategy emphasizes that “[t]he Province, Indigenous Nations, municipalities, regional districts, utility operators and academics already have networks in place to collect data on stream flow, water quality, snowpack, weather, fish stocks, wildlife and habitats across the province.”⁶ However, BC does not appear to have measures in place to monitor climate change impacts on people, particularly at-risk populations. At the time of publication of Human Rights Watch’s report on climate impacts on First Nations’ right to food health, the government of British Columbia had

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-55.

⁴ Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, BC Coroners Service, “Chief coroner’s statement on public safety during high temperatures,” July 30, 2021, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/news/2021/chief_coroner_statement_-_heat_related_deaths.pdf (accessed August 11, 2021).

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “My Fear is Losing Everything”, pp. 67-68.

⁶ Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy Draft Strategy and Phase 1 Actions for 2021-2022 (“CPAS”), <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/568/2021/06/Climate-Preparedness-and-Adaptation-Strategy-2021.pdf> (accessed August 8, 2021), p. 27.

not responded to questions about its climate or food security monitoring efforts, and it has not provided a response since.

The strategy says the province is working to “[i]ncrease understanding of climate risks through improved data, monitoring and forecasting,” but does not elaborate on what concrete steps it has taken, or what new steps it proposes to take in 2022-2025.⁷

Gaps in the Draft Strategy

The province should track climate impacts on food security and climate-related health conditions (e.g. heat stroke, respiratory illness, and vector-borne diseases). The strategy should also lay out concrete steps to specifically monitor climate impacts on marginalized and uniquely impacted populations including Indigenous peoples, older people, and people with disabilities.

The province should also specify who will be responsible for coordinating this work as well as the timeline for implementation, and quickly clarify in upcoming budget announcements what funding will be allocated to carry out expanded monitoring of climate impacts.

II. Climate Adaptation Planning and Emergency Response

As Human Rights Watch has reported, government failure to address the rights implications of current and projected climate change on specific populations contributes to serious harms. For example, lack of coordinated support for First Nations in the wake of the 2017/2018 wildfires meant many communities did not have adequate, timely access to resources to address impacts on food security and health.⁸ Our current research raises concerns that inadequate preparation of response to extreme heat has wrought significant and foreseeable negative impacts on older people and people with disabilities, including on their right to life.⁹

Positively, the draft strategy commits to developing specific response strategies in 2022-2025 related to flooding, extreme heat and wildfire smoke, ocean acidification, and for water supply and demand management in priority watersheds where climate change is likely to result in greater water scarcity.¹⁰ The strategy also notably commits to “[b]uild climate resilience into community planning, disaster risk management and recovery by making data more accessible, developing

⁷ CPAS, pp. 28-29.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, “My Fear is Losing Everything,” p. 77-78.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Record Canada Heat Harms Older People and People with Disabilities,” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/09/record-canada-heat-harms-older-people-and-people-disabilities>.

¹⁰ CPAS, p. 33-34.

new tools and guidance, and ensuring equity is addressed.” But it includes few details on how these commitments will be tailored to the unique needs of marginalized populations who are already experiencing disproportionate climate impacts.¹¹ In particular, it is concerning that the strategy contains no mention of older people or people with disabilities.

Gaps in the Draft Strategy

The province should specify how it intends to respond to not just some, but all climate risks identified in the 2019 [Preliminary Climate Risk Assessment](#). For example, the province should coordinate a wildfire response strategy and not just a response plan for wildfire smoke in relation to heat.

Further, the province should elaborate on how it intends to ensure “equity is addressed” in climate-related disaster risk management and recovery. It is important that BC consider and address the specific rights and needs of uniquely impacted groups such as Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, older people, women, and children.

Further details are also needed on who will be responsible for coordinating this work, and timelines for what actions will be prioritized along what schedules. The province should also quickly clarify in upcoming budget announcements what funding will be available to carry out these actions.

III. Addressing Impacts on First Nations Food Poverty

Positively, the draft strategy acknowledges concerns raised in surveys conducted by the First Nations Leadership Council and Métis Nation BC regarding climate impacts on Indigenous communities. Many of these concerns echo impacts Human Rights Watch has documented, including decline in traditional food species and health impacts due to loss of traditional foods.¹²

Gaps in the Draft Strategy

The draft strategy does not provide information on specific measures the province plans to take to address climate impacts on Indigenous food security, which government entities will be responsible for coordinating this response, and what the timeline for this response will be. The

¹¹ CPAS, p. 33. The strategy notes ongoing efforts to improve the provincial response to extreme heat and wildfire smoke for unhoused and housing insecure populations in 2021-2022, and some commitments related to addressing climate impacts on Indigenous peoples (discussed elsewhere in this briefing).

¹² CPAS, p 23.

province should provide concrete details on how it plans to respond to food insecurity and how it will address feedback received through engagement with Indigenous peoples. The province should also quickly clarify in upcoming budget announcements what funding will be available to carry out these actions.

While the strategy does list other measures that may provide a tangential positive impact on Indigenous food security, it is not clear that Indigenous food security needs will specifically be accounted for or considered in these efforts, for example when integrating climate adaptation and mitigation measures into forestry harvesting practices.

IV. Financial and Technical Support for First Nations Climate Adaptation

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.

The draft strategy contains a few positive commitments to help support Indigenous communities in developing and leading climate resilience efforts.¹³

Gaps in the Draft Strategy

Further details are needed in regards to who will be responsible for coordinating this work, and timelines for what actions will be prioritized along what schedules. The province should also quickly clarify in upcoming budget announcements what funding will be available to carry out these actions.

¹³ CPAS, p. 34. Including to: “Work with an Indigenous organization to develop a community learning network for Indigenous communities and organizations to share approaches that enhance climate resilience;” and to “Establish a community climate resilience program with Indigenous communities, friendship centres, local governments and non-profit organizations that is place-based, equity-informed, and youth-driven.”

Recommendations

In updating the Climate Preparedness and Adaptation Strategy the BC government should:

- 1. Provide clarity on which government officials are responsible for implementing specific actions and specify what the timeline for each action will be.**
- 2. Address gaps in monitoring climate impacts, particularly on at-risk populations including Indigenous peoples, older people, people with disabilities, and pregnant people.**
- 3. In collaboration with First Nations, develop a plan for monitoring climate change impacts on rights to food, health, and culture.**
- 4. Ensure adaptation planning and programming is inclusive of the experiences and needs of uniquely impacted groups such as people with disabilities, older people, women, and children.**
- 5. Provide financial and technical support enabling First Nations to develop community-based adaptation policies.**
- 6. Explain how the province will concretely respond to Indigenous food security needs as identified during engagement with Indigenous communities and organizations.**