

North

N.W.T. First Nation to rebuild climate research station ravaged by late-season wildfire

'I can't escape the irony here ... there should be snow on the ground,' says founder

[Liny Lamberink](#) · CBC News · Posted: Oct 22, 2022 2:00 AM CT | Last Updated: October 22



Some of the rubble, and a broken solar array, left in the wake of a wildfire at the Scotty Creek Research Facility near Fort Simpson, N.W.T. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

A research station used to study climate change near Fort Simpson, N.W.T., was almost completely destroyed by an unusually late-season wildfire last weekend.

The damage to buildings and research equipment is expected to cost more than a million dollars, but the driving forces behind the Scotty Creek Research Facility have already committed to rebuilding it.

"It's in our best interest to get this thing going again," said Dieter Cazon, the director of lands and resources for Łı́ı́dlı́ Kúę́ First Nation (LKFN). He underscored the importance of the work carried out at the facility, which combines traditional knowledge and western science to understand and respond to climate change.

William Quinton, of Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, founded the Scotty Creek Research Facility back in the '90s. LKFN has been involved from its early days, and Quinton handed the keys over to the First Nation this summer — making it one of the first Indigenous-led research stations in the world.



Drone footage of the Scotty Creek Research Facility after the wildfire passed through on the left, compared to what it looked like during the 2021 field season. (Submitted by Mason Dominico, Scotty Creek Research Facility)

"This collaborative work we're doing together is going to be the only way we're going to figure a lot of these answers out," said Cazon.

Loss for local communities and international research

The forest fire damage [was first reported by CKLB](#). A later press release from LKFN said the blaze burned five of nine buildings to the ground, destroying research equipment, lab space, sleeping accommodations and solar arrays.

The First Nation said it's a loss for communities that used the space for field courses, on-the-land camps and events, as well as for universities in Canada, the U.S. and Europe that it works with.



Łíídlıı Kúę First Nation Chief Kele Antoine says early estimates peg the cost of the damage from the wildfire to be over a million dollars. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

"Researchers from around the world depend on Scotty Creek to provide critical data on the rates, patterns and impacts of climate change," the release said.

Kele Antoine, the chief of LKFN, said Fort Simpson's economy will also take a hit — since researchers have been a reliable source of income for the village's hotels, grocery stores and airlines.

Antoine said LKFN was proud of the steps it had taken to lead the space, and seeing photos of the devastation has been disheartening. Quinton, meanwhile, can't bear to look at the images anymore.

"It's hard not to get attached to something that you've been building for up to 25 years," he said. "It was more than just a research station. I think the researchers that go there are always very surprised at how, sort of, homey it is."

A perfect place to study wetlands

The Scotty Creek Research Facility is 50 kilometres south of Fort Simpson.

The creek itself drains a 152-square-kilometre area of boreal forest. Because of the nature of permafrost in the area, there is a lot of thaw — so parts of the landscape have transformed from forested permafrost to permafrost-free, treeless wetlands.



Łíídlı́ Kúé First Nation says five of nine buildings were burned to the ground, destroying sleeping accommodations, research equipment and solar arrays. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

Quinton said the area was considered a "perfect" place to study wetlands back in the '90s, when Canada was participating in an early international climate research project.

In 1994, Scotty Creek started being used to measure snow. By 2003, a seasonal camp had been turned into an all-season camp. According to the [research facility's website](#), it runs from mid-March to early September and is one of the busiest research stations in Canada's North.

Quinton handed the lease for the Scotty Creek Research Facility to LKFN during a ceremony in August. Cazon says being an Indigenous-led research facility means LKFN takes an "active approach" to working with researchers to make sure they understand issues affecting local First Nations, and ensure the information they gather is shared in Fort Simpson.

"We can collaborate, working with our harvesters, with our monitors, and try to learn more together than we could individually."



A boat launch on the nearby Goose Lake. Mike Westwick, a wildfire information officer for the territory, said efforts to protect the research station were hampered by how late in the season the fire was happening. Sprinklers froze and a helicopter had trouble collecting water from bodies of water that were starting to freeze. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

Unusual firefighting challenges

In its statements, LKFN said the territory's environment and natural resources department did not attack the fire even though it was close to the research facility.

Mike Westwick, a wildfire information officer for territory, said in an email to CBC News it was unsafe to attack because of extreme winds. "We will never recklessly send staff into harm's way. And with the fire behaviour in the area, that was what we would be doing if we ordered them to directly attack that fire," he said.



A photo of the Scotty Creek Research Facility during the 2021 field season. (Scotty Creek Research Facility)

Westwick also said efforts to protect the research facility were hampered by [how late in the season the wildfire has been burning](#). In late September and early October, crews removed fuel and set up sprinklers around the camp. Westwick said the sprinklers protected the station when the fire made its first pass — but they later had to be removed because they froze and stopped working.

- [In the N.W.T., dry, warm weather is causing the fire season to persist unusually long](#)

A helicopter tried to limit damage when the wildfire passed through the area a second time, but the aircraft had difficulty picking up water from nearby water bodies, because they were starting to freeze over, said Westwick.

"When we're fighting fires and protecting structures, it is highly unusual for there to be the threat of freezing temperatures," he wrote, noting that it's a sign of an "extraordinary" wildfire season.

Westwick said the territory helps fund the research facility, and he acknowledged the setback would hurt.



Though not all the structures on the land burned down, those that remain have been damaged by the fire. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

A year to rebuild

The fact that a research facility designed primarily to study climate change was burned down by an unusually late-season wildfire is not lost on Quinton or the First Nation.

"I can't escape the irony here," said Quinton. "It was damaged so extensively by fire ... when there should be snow on the ground."

But, he said, fire can't destroy the relationships Scotty Creek has helped create.

"And that's going to be the foundation on which we build and move forward," he said.



Equipment at the Scotty Creek Research Facility melted by wildfire. (Submitted by Mason Dominico)

- [Wind that toppled tree on Tulita, N.W.T., home intensifying in Nunavut](#)
- [Yukon smashed 8 high temperature records this past weekend](#)

Team members have been to the site to take stock of the damage, but Antoine said there still needs to be a methodical assessment of exactly what was damaged and burned, and what is still left. Then, there's the matter of claiming insurance.

Quinton expects next summer will be focused on rebuilding the facility.

"[It's] very unlikely that this is a one off. I'm sure that things are changing, and that we will see this again, and for that reason — we need to be prepared."

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