

Meadow Lake First Nation News



Birch Narrows Dene Nation



Buffalo River Dene Nation



Canoe Narrows Cree First Nation



Clearwater River Dene Nation



English River First Nation



Flying Dust First Nation



Makwa Sahgaiehan First Nation



Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation



Waterhen Lake First Nation



July 2020

Volume 3 • Issue 7

WORKING AT FLATTENING THE CURVE

Essential services and pandemic update

Flora Fiddler, senior director of MLTC Health and Social Development, says nurses in the Meadow Lake First Nations began their COVID-19 programming with ordering supplies at the end of January of this year.

“We had ordered items like non-touch thermometers, pulse oximetry units and personal protective equipment (PPE),” she says. “Our main concern was to be ready and work to flatten the curve.”

MLTC’s advance practice nursing supervisor Renee Hein noted some items were already in short supply at that time due to world demand.

She says Brenda Hadland, MLTC home care nursing supervisor, had ordered, tracked and distributed PPE on a weekly and emergent schedule to the communities.

Community members within the nine First Nations were informed through educational material provided by Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority (NITHA) and distributed by each band’s respective nurses, health directors and health authority members.

“Community health teams also handed out these information packages at their security gates while some were also delivered to homes of the elderly and the vulnerable,” Hein adds.

NITHA updates were forwarded daily to MLFN nursing staff, health directors and health authority members.

“We were always in communication,” Hein adds. “Now and during the height of the pandemic.”

COVID-19 mental health is a new term coined during this pandemic as people had to be in lockdown where families were confined to stay within their own households.

“Our MLTC therapist is Darlene Stonestand,” Hein noted. “She graduated with an extra certificate as a virtual counsellor and with her we were able to keep an eye on the safe shelter and the treatment center as we feel it’s very important to continue to promote health and wellness during this time.”

Another aspect of communication were weekly teleconferences with the NITHA partners and the communities. Direction was given

by the medical health officer and forwarded to the First Nations.

Another major purchase by MLTC was the Lucas compression devices (CPR machines) which were deployed to the five Primary Care sites – Birch Narrows, Buffalo River, Canoe Lake, English River and Waterhen Lake.

Also, extensive contact tracing was completed in the First Nations who experienced an outbreak with MLTC and NITHA supporting them.

“During the Clearwater River outbreak there were four nurses from MLTC who assisted with COVID-19 testing and contact tracing,” Hein noted. “We are anticipating re-opening these communities as the MLTC nursing division has ordered more non-touch thermometers for all the MLTC offices and daycare centres.”

Looking ahead

Going forward, MLTC nurses will be supporting the communities as needed.

“Like everywhere else, many of the staff and community members are challenged with the continuing regulations around public gatherings and social distancing,” Hein adds. “An important element during an emergency at this time is continuity in messaging.”

MLTC senior environmental officer Yolanda Ducharme has been collaborating with the MLTC occupational health and safety, human resources and administration staff in creating a manual for staff. This manual will be provided to all MLTC staff and will include current information on COVID-19 and workplace safety procedures. It will also be an educational tool to alleviate any concerns regarding the gradual return to work.

Fiddler notes the manual outlines a series of recommended controls in the workplace including physical distancing, employee screening, PPE and enhanced environmental cleaning.

“It will also include a series of administrative controls outlining changes in how we do business on a day to day basis,” she adds. “This includes things like fleet vehicle use and boardroom/meeting protocols.”



At top, Dion Fineblanket of the Makwa Sahgaiehan First Nation picks up isolation capacity equipment supplied by the Red Cross. Above, supplies such as cots, blankets, pillows and more, also courtesy of the Red Cross, are loaded into a waiting English River First Nation van.

CULTURAL CAMP

Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation

"We got started with the Ministikwan Cultural Camp with help from two late MLTC Elders, Simon Kytwayhat and Harry Blackbird."

Those are the words of Ministikwan's Dr. Kevin Lewis in explaining the origin of this special First Nations summer camp. His specialty is Indigenous knowledge systems, specifically Cree from the Ministikwan area.

"Earlier in the COVID-19 crisis we set up a large tipi," Lewis says. "We could only have about five people in it at a time, but we needed a place to continue the teaching of the kids from our community. We made a fire to stay warm; we also lifted the bottoms of the tipi up to have the air circulate better. Here, we taught wilderness First Aid during that time."

Dr. Lewis recalls the reason the cultural camp started. It happened after an unfortunate event. "One of my former Grade 10 students left a party and later we found out had tried to make a fire, but was unable to survive the night," he says.

After a discussion with his father, Lewis knew it was crucial they teach the youth survival skills and how to live off the land.

"Long ago there was an elder from this area and she was the last canoe maker, Ayakwicho. We wanted to carry on her legacy so, in 2005, we made a prototype canoe," Lewis adds.

Other band members, Dr. Lewis included, saw a disconnect the youth had from their Cree identity, especially in not understanding their own language.

The Ministikwan Cultural Camp first began for oskapewisak (helpers).

"It was just geared for boys, but girls from our First Nation tapped us on the shoulder and wanted to be a part of this camp as well," Lewis adds. "This spot (pointing to the little point) is a traditional campground and from here they would move to different areas depending on what they needed or what they wanted. Always picking up and going, either for hunting camps, fishing camps, berry picking camps, and medi-



Dr. Kevin Lewis from the Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation, stands next to the first canoe they made and holds a paddle made by the late elder Phillip Wolverine.

cine camps. Carrying on the legacy of Ayakwicho meant we needed help."

At a past MLTC gathering, Lewis met two Dene elders, Norbert Billette from Buffalo River and the late Phillip Wolverine from English River.

"They showed us how to make paddles. We later had all these paddles, but no canoes," Lewis says with a laugh.

To build a canoe it's physically demanding. You have to dig, you have to harvest, you have to split wood, you have to hammer, you have to soak and peel spruce roots and then sew them into the birch bark.

Via the Internet, Lewis got in contact with an Abenaki man named Aaron York. Since the

Abenaki are very close relative of the Cree, it was a good match.

"Aaron York knew how to build a canoes the old way," Lewis adds. "During that time they built five canoes. Based on that original prototype we built a life-size canoes in the Cree and Dene styles. They're built from this area of northwestern Saskatchewan."

Teaching to build a canoe to the youth requires teaching them to make pitch from spruce gum. Pitch is from the fire and a little fat.

To build an 18-foot canoe these days takes about a month.

"But, you're not just working on one canoe, you're building a few at a time and at different stages," Lewis adds.

All the materials to build a canoe can be found near the cultural camp. Tamarak is the ribs of the canoe, spruce makes up the gunny wells and the canoe is sewed together with spruce roots.

"The first canoe proved we could build and continue the legacy of the last local canoe maker, Ayakwicho," Lewis says.

At the cultural camp, out in the wilderness with the youth, they often find themselves hunting for large enough birch trees. The best trees are where there wasn't any previous burn and also on islands where these trees grow the largest.

"What I found during all of this," Lewis says, "Is that you make a lot of your own traditional tools. An example of this is a bear awl which has the strongest bone. Long ago our people were real do-it-yourself people. They were experts at survival and that's what we try to do here at the Ministikwan Cultural Camp – teach our kids to speak Cree and know how to live off the land."

Looking back, Lewis says they are grateful of MLTC health for all their help.

"We lost one person long ago and I feel like now we're saving so many," he says. "We're making one-of-a-kind birch bark canoes and we're teaching our youth their ways, their language, and teaching them that they are priceless."

Ron Desjardins: videographer and artist

Ron Desjardins says he fell into videography by accident and out of convenience.

"I saw that the technology for capturing our way of life here in the North was easily available, and now, especially with digital media, we can use our phones," the Birch Narrows Dene Nation man says.

Besides being a videographer, Desjardins is also a songwriter among other things. Most recently, on Aboriginal People's Day through SaskMusic's online concert, one of Desjardins songs, *The Elders Honour Song*, was featured.

"The message of the song," says Desjardins, "Is about the elders. They're the ones who brought us here and their strength is visible in us and so is their capacity to survive."

For Desjardins it's about celebrating the elders' work done for the community.

"Sometimes you don't see the value or the importance of the cultural work in the community until you see it visually. Sometimes we've looked back at the videos and said to ourselves. 'Wow! We did that?'"

When Desjardins shows videos of past events, it sometimes shows elders who might no longer be with them telling a story, or singing a song they don't hear anymore.

"Recording an event also adds a lot of value to the activities that we as elders take part in when

we are together with the youth and the rest of the community," adds Desjardins. "We have an elder living here in his 90s. When he is able, I set up the camera and interview him. He talks about the traditional way of preserving meat in the old days and he talks about where the Dene gathering used to be – up by the Clearwater River."

Recording elders on camera validates the oral tradition, Desjardins states.

An important elder to Desjardins captured on camera was his late brother-in-law, Ernest Sylvestre. "He was quite an entertainer. He could really work with youth and in that video we called it, *Ernest Goes to Camp*."

As Indigenous people, Desjardins believes their spirituality is important.

"We never had a doubt about there being a Creator, and even the words of thankfulness," he says. "In the old days when a hunter went out, and after a successful hunt, he would have said, 'I have been divinely fed.'"

Growing up, Desjardins said he heard that a lot, but it's something that's disappeared.

"It was an important phrase because it was an acknowledgement of receiving their sustenance from the land," he adds.

Desjardins says one thing an elder always communicates is, that there is a Creator.



Ron Desjardins

"There is someone taking care of you," he says.

Among others, one thing Desjardins appreciates about his community is that they have always been land-based.

"We take kids around to where their family's traditional cabin sites were and where the traditional

fishing sites were. Even for myself, I have a lot of fond memories of those places," he says.

Through the capturing of his Dene elders on video, Desjardins says the community has been on a journey of revitalization.

"What I just love about today's younger generation is they are going out there, they're hunting, they're fishing and they're building cabins," he adds. "Definitely, we need to capture more of our elders on video. But with this COVID thing, we have been working on keeping our community and home safe."

Finally, Desjardins is encouraged to spread the elders' truth.

"We can't put away our old people, we need to celebrate them. We have treasures in our communities and they can help us build for the future."

Working for the betterment of the youth of BRDN

Natasha Sylvestre is the community and school recreation co-ordinator and Brittany Billette is coordinator for Jordan's Principle. Both are from Buffalo River Dene Nation.

"We mostly do family oriented programs for the members of the household," Billette says.

Working closely with BRDN councillor Chris Laplante, Sylvestre and Billette have been directed in what the programming can and cannot do.

"Chris works with us on how to keep the program running and still have everyone staying safe," Sylvestre says.

"Up north here, we still can't have more than 10 people in a gathering. So we have been building kits for families for their youth at home. It's a way of keeping kids busy," she adds.

Billette recalls the strict lockdown, saying she felt safe during that period. She noted chief and council and the pandemic team, led by Norma Billette, supplied food and cleaning supplies.

"The pandemic team still has the best in mind for keeping us safe," Billette says. "We're allowed to leave, but no one from the outside is allowed in."

When Sylvestre first started in her position in December 2019, the first thing she did was organize an astronomy clinic.

"It was one of the first programs I organized. Afterwards, we had a lot of gym nights, school dances and crafts nights," she says.

A memory that stands out for her was the pizza making night.

"The kids loved this because it was their first time making a pizza. We all love fun and creative food," Sylvestre says.

Both, Billette and Sylvestre agree on the work they do.

"What we enjoy about this work is the part where we help kids make a lot of positive and fun memories," adds Billette.

What brought Sylvestre to this job was that she was intrigued by the work done by the previous employee and that she wanted to be a

part of that.

Kids, Sylvestre says, need something to look forward to, something to take them out of their home. They have also worked with a few local elders that shared their knowledge with the kids and gave the youth a new perspective on a subject.

"Along with the elders, we recently hosted a fishing camp for our youth. However, we could only take a few kids at a time because of the social distance regulations under COVID," says Sylvestre.

Before COVID there were plans to organize a drum making class and start a Dene drum group.

"The plan with this was to get the youth back into learning their Dene songs," she adds. "We still have plans to do this. As we slowly reopen, we'll be introducing this."

One of the pre-COVID plans taking form is the work being done by BRDN chief and council along with Jesse Sylvestre.

"We all want to help bring back the language to the community.

There are plans for Dene language classes for people that want to learn, relearn, or sharpen their Dene language skills," says Sylvestre.

Since COVID, Billette and Sylvestre say they aren't able to build one-on-one relationships with the youth.

"We put together kits and we drive by, honk and someone comes out to get the kit," says Billette.

"Then we go to the next house. They know us and remember us, but everyone misses the programming that brought them all together for the social event."

The kits have included a home scavenger hunt, tie-dye making kits, canvas painting kits, small bird house making kits, the dancing glow stick challenge, volcano making and the finale – a drive-in theatre show at the arena.

"Like everyone has been saying, we're in this together, but not together," adds Sylvestre. "I think other youth and recreation directors should be in contact each other, and bounce ideas off each other, and even borrow from each other."

Chaz Natomagan: ERFN Youth & Cultural Recreation Activities Director

Chaz Natomagan is the new English River First Nation youth and cultural recreation activities director, working closely with Health Canada and the ERFN health director to meet all the requirements for organizing events during the pandemic.

"I always wanted this job," Natomagan says, "And with the great leadership behind me, I completely enjoy the work."

Recently, Natomagan started a new softball league and the locals are enjoying it because they haven't played ball in a while.

"Not only because there hasn't been a ball league here for a few years, but also because of this COVID lockdown," he says. "We have people who are finally taking a cautious step outside."

Natomagan is a band transferred member from Canoe Lake Cree First Nation. He played hockey for ERFN and did odd jobs prior to his new posting.

"Eventually chief and council came looking for me and said they thought my best fit would be in the recreation field," he states.

ERFN councillor Katrina Maurice says, when she ran for council, she wanted to make recreation her work.

"I believe in working with Chaz Natomagan and see we are on the right path," she states.

Natomagan's work on hosting events includes first submitting a proposal.

"Even our Canada Day celebrations we needed masks, wash stations, hand sanitizers and we roped off events for the elders and the vulnerable," he adds.

The goal, Maurice says, is to create a consistent flow of activities, to promote togetherness,

physical wellness and most importantly for the betterment of mental health.

Natomagan started in early July and immedi-



Chaz Natomagan

ately had teams signed up for the ball league.

"We've also started a beach volleyball league and there are plans for a walking club for elders," he adds. "We have other ideas like ball hockey and floor hockey too."

For the ball league, Natomagan cleans each glove and all the equipment due to COVID-19. He says ball is a good social distancing game with the only time one is close to another player is when they're batting.

Councillor Maurice adds her community has adapted to the new normal with activities in hopes they can avoid the virus, but also to continue moving forward even during this pandemic.

"We can only still have small groups, so we have to plan carefully," confirms Natomagan, adding he wants people to wake up every morning looking forward to the day's activities whether it's volleyball or the ball league.

"I'm glad the community is reaching out to me with programming ideas, but I also need some volunteers from the community to help make their events happen," he says.

"Chaz has always been involved within the community and we are delighted to have him join our team here at ERFN," councillor Maurice says.

"I have always wanted to work with youth – they make my world go around," Natomagan continues. "We can have a very active community, especially with the chief and council behind me and with community involvement."

Most importantly, says Natomagan, is to build programming that builds role models within the community.

Chris Mazuren: MLTC Employment Services Officer

"My job," says Chris Mazuren, "is to ensure the community members within the nine Meadow Lake First Nations have an opportunity to find employment with the construction contractors during the building of the MLTC Bioenergy Centre."

Mazuren is the MLTC employment services officer and his work is about building connections.

Currently, the mandate for Mazuren is to ensure there is a good representation of First Nations members within MLTC building the Bioenergy Centre.

"I meet the contractors to get an understanding of what it is they're looking for in a potential employee," he says. "Based on that, I send out a call for résumés. Work-ready individuals contact me and then I make the link – I make it

happen between the two."

Mazuren says the goal is to attract as many résumés as possible.

"I'm interested in hearing from labourers, skilled labour, tradespeople or apprentices," he adds.

The MLTC Employment and Training Facebook page, will have the latest job opportunities posted.

"I go through the résumés and shortlist them. The contractor

looks at the list I have compiled for them, then it's job interview time," he says.

Mazuren says he looks for applicants who have some past experience and their safety tickets needed for the particular job.

"For example," Mazuren adds, "When I posted the most recent job opportunity I was looking for individuals who have experience in concrete construction."

Within minutes, Mazuren had résumés emailed to him from all nine First Nations bands.

"From the best résumés, I recommend those as potential employees," he adds.

Mazuren notes a good candidate has a good support network that includes family, friends and employment office support from their First Nation.

Because of his 28-year work history in the various fields of the construction industry, Mazuren has become familiar with a lot of the contractors looking for workers.

"The construction field is a small world," he says, adding he also personally knows a lot of them.

Mazuren explains MLTC Employment and Training is better than a job placement agency in that his team totally understands the industrial needs of each contractor.

What Mazuren likes about finding band members from the nine First Nations is the chance to help MLTC community members get their foot in the door.

Each phase of construction of the MLTC Bioenergy Centre has different time periods. Different tradespeople are required at different times.

"Right now it's concrete, then, in a while, it's about 10 months of building," Mazuren says. "There's four major components in the build, and we'll need about 20 different contractors. All those contractors need employees and we want to get as many of our First Nations involved."

Mazuren reminds potential employees to keep checking the MLTC Employment and Training Facebook page.



Chris Mazuren

COMPLETION SET FOR FALL 2021



MLTC Bioenergy Centre construction underway

A notable accomplishment for MLTC in 2019-20 includes the announcement of a 25-year power purchase agreement for up to 6.6 megawatts of base load electricity to power approximately 5,000 homes.

Construction on the MLTC Bioenergy Centre, currently being constructed next to NorSask Forest Products, began April 27.

When it's completed, MLTC Bioenergy Centre will provide economic support to the nine Meadow Lake First Nations within the Meadow Lake Tribal Council. Dividends and revenue will flow directly to them supporting their core programs and services (health, education, housing, recreational projects and cultural activities).

Construction of the facility began amid the COVID-19 pandemic and there will be future job opportunities.

"We moved forward even with the pandemic going on," states MLTC tribal chief Richard Ben.

SaskPower and the MLTC signed a power purchase agreement in the spring of 2019 and it's the first of its kind in the province. The objective of MLTC's bioenergy project is to generate carbon-neutral green power using sawmill biomass residuals and to reduce air emissions by eliminating one of Canada's last remaining beehive burners at NorSask.

In order to address provincial environmental regulations, and contribute to Saskatchewan's green energy mandate, two lumber kilns at the plant will be converted to biomass heating for further carbon emission reductions.

"The MLTC Bioenergy Centre will create energy by using the same sawmill waste that is currently burned in the beehive burner," project manager John Hamstra says.

Over the course of 25 years, the MLTC Bioenergy Centre is expected to decrease greenhouse gases emissions by one million tonnes.

"We're expecting completion of the construction by fall 2021," Al Balisky, president and CEO of NorSask Forest Products, adds.

He notes contractors can visit the easy to follow request for proposals on the www.mltcbioenergy.ca website.

"The website is very informative and I am sure everyone can see this is a very exciting project," Balisky adds.

When one visits the www.mltcbioenergy.ca website, they are able to see its current status, the timeline of its build and a 3D image of what it will look like.

By the time employees are trained to operate it and bring it online, it will be October 2021.

Balisky says MLTC will also sell carbon neutral energy to the SaskPower grid to further stabilize their grid in the North.

By this Christmas there will be a 100-foot steel structure – a clean energy monolith in the distance.

MLTC vice-chief Richard Derocher is excited about MLTC's newest venture and excited about its completion in 2021.

"I think the membership of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council should be very proud of what is happening with the MLTC Bioenergy Centre," he states.

It is Canada's only 100 per cent Indigenous-owned sawmill converting a waste stream into valuable energy. The ultimate recipients of the financial benefits of the power plant will be the Indigenous youth and families of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council located in northwest Saskatchewan.



MLTC Newsletter for information contact:

Howie Summers
Communications Officer
Meadow Lake Tribal Council

8003 Flying Dust Reserve • Meadow Lake, SK • S9X 1T8
Phone: 306-236-5654 • Fax: 306-236-6301
Email: receptionist@mltc.net • website: www.mltc.net

©MLTC 2020



The Meadow Lake Tribal Council
wish you and your families
all safety at this time.