

'We have nowhere to return': First Nations and other rural residents in BC say the rainstorms have permanently changed the landscape

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Chief Arnold Lampreau expects his house is a total loss, but the devastation goes far beyond that, extending hundreds of years into the future. Last week's storm didn't just flood the Shackan First Nation's reserve in B.C.'s Nicola Valley, Lampreau said, it changed the landscape.

"It moved rivers and moved hills and filled valleys and then created new valleys ... That's the magnitude of that storm," said the elected chief of the Shackan First Nation. "The land that our ancestors had worked for thousands of years and ensured that we had a place to grow ... productive crops, those lands are no longer there. They're just rocks."

Roads and bridges connecting the Shackan reserve to the rest of the province have been washed away completely, and Lampreau predicts it could be years before infrastructure is rebuilt to let reserve residents to return. And once they can go back home, they fear they will be returning to a different place.

This summer's wildfires had already ravaged fish-bearing waters and wooded areas where Shackan people picked berries and medicinal plants, Lampreau said. This month's storm has now destroyed land where they raised animals and grew crops.

"Our grandfather spent from break of morning until the last light of day working on his fields in preparation for one day, children and grandchildren to take over. ... But when we look forward, for our grandchildren and their children, now the devastation has left them nothing," Lampreau said. "We have nowhere to go."

The Shackan reserve has been entirely evacuated, with some community members staying with friends and family in nearby towns, Lampreau said, while others are in hotels and work camps. Some have slept in their cars. Displaced residents of Shackan and other communities along Highway 8, between Spences Bridge and Merritt, say it's hard to comprehend the scale of the desolation.

But the Shackan Nation is not unique — other remote Indigenous communities and rural residents in the area have also sustained massive losses that go beyond repairing buildings and infrastructure. One local official says many will never return home.

"I've been on Zoom calls for the last three or four days, listening to stories directly from the chiefs of communities that have been devastated," said Grand Chief Stewart Phillip of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. "It's everywhere."

“This cannot be framed within traditional notions of a one-time weather event, where we simply make superficial repairs to transportation infrastructure and then expect things to be OK. The devastation will have very serious long-term detrimental impacts on the land itself.”

The [World Meteorological Organization](#) has linked climate change to increases in extreme weather events in recent decades, and Phillip says what’s happened this month in remote communities like Shackan as well as more populated areas like Abbotsford should be a warning to all Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. “We all need to know and understand that, literally, the wolf is at our door with the climate crisis. The land is speaking to us, and we need to listen, particularly government and industry. These catastrophes will intensify and continue to wreak havoc within all communities.”

Steven Rice, who evacuated his farm outside Spences Bridge last week, agreed. “Climate change is making an emphatic statement,” said Rice, a Thomson Nicola Regional District director. “Wildfires, floods used to be the exception, they are now the rule.”

Rice likened last week’s calamity to an episode of 'The Twilight Zone'. “I’ve seen drone footage. ... Many folks will never return home, the river has swallowed their home ... There will be no rebuilding,” said Rice. “It’s beyond the scope of one’s imagination.”

The Cook’s Ferry First Nation chief, Christine Minnabarriet, said it will be difficult for her community, made up of “26 tiny reserves sprinkled along the Thompson River,” to recover. “We are in an economically deprived area,” Minnabarriet said. “We don’t have a bank account set up for emergencies like this.”

The chief said her people, historically, “have been put on these little tiny parcels of land” which were deemed “not appropriate or acceptable” by settlers who took better pieces of land. “And then things come in like weather storms, whether it be fire or floods, and we’re impacted first and we can’t make a living on that land.”

The community has worked hard to become more self-sufficient, Minnabarriet said, and band members have toiled to make the land productive. Now much of that land is no longer there, she said. It has literally floated away down the river. “It’s just compounded devastation over the many decades and centuries,” she said. “We cant seem to get ahead The rug gets pulled out from under you.”

First Nations leaders held a conference call Tuesday to discuss the situation with B.C.’s ministers of Indigenous relations, Murray Rankin, and public safety, Mike Farnworth.

At a media briefing on November 25, Rankin said he heard Indigenous leaders’ concerns on the call and he “heard we have more work to do,” including improving emergency support for and communications with First Nations, some of whom have said they never received an evacuation alert from the province.

Rankin said his government has assembled “integrated Indigenous response and recovery deployment teams,” including staff from federal and provincial agencies, “that will better support First Nation communities with little or no access.”

Regional Chief Terry Teegee of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations said that on Tuesday’s call with the cabinet ministers, he tried to impress upon them that if this month’s disaster is indeed unprecedented, as Farnworth has described it, “then we should be doing unprecedented things to get ready” for the next time.

Some leaders question provincial officials’ description of last week as a “once-in-a-century storm.”

Minnabarriet worries about the spring flooding to come when the snow melts. But even before she can deal with that, she said: “We’re looking at more rain this week. It’s going to come.”