

## COVID-19 and Impact Assessment: A Case Study from the Ring of Fire<sup>1</sup>

*Monday, July 18, 2022 at 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm ET*

*Facilitator: Cheryl Chetkiewicz*

*Panelists: Michael Fox and Qasim Saddique*

*Rapporteur: Kevin Coulter*

### **Webinar Highlights:**

#### **Introductory Remarks**

- Cheryl remarked that today's webinar supports OAIA's mandate to provide a forum for impact assessment practitioners and students to advance innovation, development, and communication of best practice in impact assessment through the exchange of ideas and experiences among its members.
- Cheryl welcomed the panel members including Michael Fox, President of Indigenous Community Engagement (ICE), and Qasim Saddique, Principal of Suslop Inc.
- This webinar encouraged learning and discussion about road proposals in the Ring of Fire in northern Ontario, where both provincial and federal impact assessment processes are underway. The presenters highlighted the challenges, innovations, and lessons learned in adapting impact assessment processes with First Nation communities during COVID-19.

### **Summary of the Presentation: COVID-19 & Impact Assessment: A Case Study from the Ring of Fire**

- Michael and Qasim provided some background and context for the Ring of Fire (RoF) region highlighting the decade long history to develop the region including previous proposals for mining (Cliffs Chromite Project and Noront's Eagle's Nest Project) that included transportation corridors.
- They also introduced the three road projects:
  - Webequie Supply Road (WSR) [<https://www.supplyroad.ca>]
  - Marten Falls Community Access Road (MFCAR) [<https://www.martenfallsaccessroad.ca>]
  - Northern Road Link (NRL) [<https://northernroadlink.ca>]
- They highlighted the ways in which the First Nations in the region have been marginalized through previous impact assessment processes when a number of First Nations communities were protesting the way in which previous impact assessments and their role in them were conducted.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oaia.on.ca/covid-19-impact-assessment-a-case-study-from-the-ring-of-fire-webinar/>

Today, First Nation aspirations and agency are just as critical and today's webinar documents the collective journey from protestors to proponents for the purpose of impact assessment.

- Webequie First Nation (WFN), Marten Falls First Nation (MFFN), and some surrounding First Nation communities were also working towards community-based land use plans with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry under processes established through Ontario's *Far North Act, 2010*. This planning process identified areas of interest, for the purpose of highlighting what areas would be developed and what areas would be protected.
  - The MFCAR and WSR projects where the proponents are First Nations for the purpose of the impact assessment and represent different opportunities for First Nations. For example, the WSR is an economic development opportunity for WFN because it connects the community to mining claims in the Ring of Fire while the MFCAR is an industrial road that can also provide access to the community of Marten Falls. The NRL completes a north-south road for mine development in the Ring of Fire.
  - The WSR and MFCAR are undergoing federal and provincial impact assessment. The NRL has been submitted to the provincial process. All three projects will be considered for the purpose of assessing cumulative effects.
- Similar to the [Wataynikaneyap Power](#) project, the road proposals are Indigenous-led for the purpose of the impact assessment and reflect the relationships of the First Nations with the land.
- Prior to COVID-19, capacity constraints within the community to engage in impact assessment were considered opportunities. Community Coordinators were hired to consider Indigenous Knowledge and facilitate community-based research.
- The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges including the limited access to internet prevalent throughout the remote communities in the north. Other challenges included:
  - Adherence to government-led COVID-19 protocols for travel, work in the community, and in the field.
  - Adherence to community protocols regarding people coming from outside the community such as consultants.
- The uncertainty surrounding the potential duration of the pandemic made things difficult and resulted in significant delays in consultation with neighbouring First Nations, as well as stakeholders.
- The Terms of Reference for both the [WSR](#) and the [MFCAR](#) projects were approved in October 2021.

### ***Webequie Supply Road Lessons Learned***

- A social media strategy based on micro-targeting was established for 21 First Nation communities and the Métis Nation of Ontario.
- The strategy was based on the fact that social media and online engagement would be met with concerns about trust in addition to the limitations on access to the internet.
- They recognized that impact assessment materials are technical, in English, and difficult to communicate about.
  - The presenters shared an infographic showing how online engagement for the WSR (hits, bandwidth usage, # of visits, unique visitors) steadily increased throughout COVID as the project team took advantage of live streaming and adjusted their approach to engagement.

### ***Marten Falls Community Access Road Lessons Learned***

- The context for the MFCAR differed in that there was already general acceptance and support for the project and a limited online community in the Marten Falls. The focus for MFCAR was a broad engagement strategy.
- With COVID-19, the team focused on monthly e-blasts to provide regular updates, particularly around fieldwork.
- Remote meetings were created to supplement in-person community events for the MFCAR project after adjusting to COVID-19 and establishing safety protocols. In general, online participation for MFCAR was positive and in some cases exceeded levels of engagement they had seen for similar in-person events.

### ***Northern Road Link Lessons Learned***

- This project differs from the MFCAR and WSR in that it commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project utilized a hybrid consultation approach with concurrent online and in-person components. For example, events were advertised on community radio, which was a more effective way of reaching the community members. Use of radio was also supplemented by online and social media advertisements.
- The Project Team was aware of consultation fatigue given the long time planning for the Ring of Fire (e.g., 15 years).
- The Project Team has found it useful to provide materials in an “on-demand” model where information is accessible, and people can review the information when they are able or want to. This is a new approach in engagement given the focus on online strategies.

### ***Key Questions & Answers***

- Maps can be both challenging and useful, and a number of maps were shared in today’s presentation. How do the impact assessment processes address First Nations perspectives of the land, as well as the relationship between study areas and homelands?
  - The projects described in this presentation, and the maps that were generated in support of them, were influenced by an awareness of historical use, shared use, family, and clan history.
  - However, not all maps are social constructs – watersheds being one example.
  - Using an example from today’s presentation, the MFCAR communities had questions and priorities that they preferred to focus on during their impact assessment process. The Project Team worked as closely as possible with neighbouring Indigenous communities to have conversations at the community level to understand First Nations perspectives of the land.
- How did communities manage the consultation fatigue mentioned given there are 3-4 impact assessments ongoing that required engagement under provincial and federal legislation?
  - This is a regional issue, and the Ring of Fire isn’t going to change how we manage the processes to make them more effective. One contributing solution includes bringing the Elders and youth together to discuss what the impact assessment processes mean to them.
  - While communities are engaged in the projects where they are Proponents, there are also broader socio-economic issues that affect the projects but are also beyond the individual projects described.
  - The impact assessment process(es) and construction of these roads could take 7 years, which is a long time for people and communities to remain engaged.

- Do communities have interest in additional community access roads besides the current one (e.g., MFCAR)?
  - First Nation communities are always talking about connectivity and the difference it is going to make. However, sometimes Chief and Council take positions on development, including community access, that differ from the broader community and membership. The question we get consistently in the communities are: Why is this process taking so long? When will training programs begin? When are things going to look any different?
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems are not the same as Western science. How are Indigenous Knowledge Systems being protected and shared in ways that are appropriate?
  - Within the MFCAR and WSR projects, Indigenous Knowledge and science were considered as being the same in terms of importance. Communities collected information about themselves, as well as their neighbours. Decisions were made based on both kinds of knowledge; however, COVID-19 made this data collection more challenging.
  - Knowledge is a currency and there are standard practices for how to safeguard Indigenous Knowledge starting with a legal agreement stating that knowledge is shared based on edited versions and the needs of the community. Limiting public access is another way to safeguard information.
  - The proponents are not social scientists; a simpler approach was considered more effective for data collection. For example, door-to-door surveys were used to help gather data and create maps.

## **Conclusions & Themes**

- Communities that have ownership of the information and are involved in the impact assessment process as Proponents are more engaged.
- Road proposals for the Ring of Fire are being shaped by the First Nation communities that are proponents for the purpose of impact assessment, including the sharing of Indigenous Knowledge and Western science.
- Engagement in remote communities is challenging and COVID-19 makes this more difficult. While online engagement is not a substitute for in-person interaction, it can sometimes meet or exceed measures of participation compared to the typical forms of community engagement.
- The WSR, MFCAR, and NRL projects require a set of dynamic consultation tools such as videos that have been effective because they blend community narratives with project information. The amount of content generated for the projects has been streamlined into social media and on-demand virtual platforms that people can continue to access, as they need.

## **Recommendations:**

- Engagement with communities should blend community narrative with project information to be meaningful.
- Project updates and information should be shared well in advance to be useful for the community. For example, fieldwork plans for the summer should be communicated the previous spring, if possible.
- A virtual on-demand model that includes social media is useful to enable people to access information more readily and when they have time, particularly given COVID-19.

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