



August 21, 2006

Mr. Warren McCall
Chair, Standing Committee on the Economy
203 Legislative Building
Regina, Saskatchewan
S4S 0B3

Dear Mr. McCall,

Earlier this month, we embarked on a trip to Stony Rapids and Black Lake in northern Saskatchewan at the request of a number of people in the community to discuss the June forest fire (known as the Noel fire) that caused the subsequent evacuation of many people from these communities. After consulting with individuals, First Nations, other community leaders and stakeholders, as well as our own caucus, we are writing to request that the Standing Committee on the Economy undertake a review of the current “let it burn” forest fire policy and the handling of the Noel fire.

The fire in question was first spotted on June 3rd and was about 32 kilometres away from Stony Rapids. Under the provincial government’s current ‘let it burn’ policy, the fire was left to burn as long as it was outside the 20 kilometre response area. When the fire did reach the community response zone, the smoke was so thick that air support was impossible. More than 800 people were evacuated from these two communities and the fire came within 900 metres of Stony Rapids. The community worked hard to divert the fire and while thankfully no one was seriously injured, the fire threatened homes, businesses, tourist attractions, a new health facility, and the local economy.

The general consensus from speaking to community leaders is that a 20 kilometre community response zone is not far enough. People living in northern Saskatchewan have witnessed many fires in their lives and know that a fire can easily travel 20 kilometres in a day once it gets into the forest canopy. Many of the individuals and communities we spoke to believe that if fire had been dealt with much earlier and if the current ‘let it burn’ policy was not in place, residents would have been spared evacuation.

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We are therefore calling on the Standing Committee on the Economy to:

- Review the government's current 'let it burn' policy
- Review the government's response to the fire
- Review the evacuation procedures utilized
- Review the costs of fighting the fire and evacuating communities versus dealing with the fire much earlier.

We would also encourage the committee to travel to the affected communities and hear from witnesses, as well as to consult with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

It's fair to say the community felt abandoned by their government in a time of crisis. Now that the fire has cooled, it is time to address those concerns and launch a full investigation into how the fire was handled.

We look forward to your response in this matter.

Yours Sincerely,

ORIGINAL SIGNED BY

Glen Hart
MLA Last Mountain-Touchwood
Saskatchewan Party Environment Critic

ORIGINAL SIGNED BY

Denis Allchurch
MLA Rosthern-Shellbrook
Saskatchewan Party Northern Affairs Critic

CC Members of the Standing Committee on the Economy
Hon. John Nilson, Minister of the Environment
Hon. Joan Beatty, Minister of Northern Affairs
Chief Alphonse Bird, Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations