

# Regional Assessment in the Ring of Fire Area

---

*Aabitaad / Megwaad / Pitamah / Interim Report*

## Summary

In January 2023, leaders and members from 15<sup>1</sup> First Nations from Matawa and Mushkegowuk territories and Weenusk First Nation met with the federal Minister of the Environment and Climate Change along with representatives of the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC). They agreed to establish a Working Group (the Regional Assessment Working Group or “RAWG”) and to begin a co-led process for a regional assessment in the area commonly referred to as the Ring of Fire. This environmentally sensitive area of boreal forest and peatlands in Ontario’s far north and James Bay lowlands, is locally known in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) as Kawana ‘Bi ‘Kag, meaning hole in the ground; in Oji-Cree as Biiwaapiko'kaning", meaning land of metal; and in Ininimowin (Cree) as Kahwanna Bay Yak, meaning watery hole as you walk through muskeg.

Guided by the Terms of Reference (finalized in January 2025), the Regional Assessment process will serve to achieve several objectives, including to assess the potential positive and negative effects, including cumulative and interactive effects, due to possible development activities, within Kawana ‘Bi ‘Kag/ Biiwaapiko'kaning"/ Kahwanna Bay Yak. The Regional Assessment will also identify and provide recommendations on how the cumulative and other effects may best be managed to avoid adverse consequences and enhance positive ones. The Regional Assessment itself is not a decision-making process, but will serve to inform other decision-making processes. It does not intend to duplicate project-specific assessments, but rather to support the identification and management of issues that are beyond the scope of single projects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: Marten Falls First Nation approved the terms of reference in principle, but community review and consideration is ongoing.

This Interim Report is an update on the progress of the Regional Assessment. The Terms of Reference require that the Interim Report includes

- findings on community and regional conditions and priorities;
- possible development scenarios; and
- knowledge gaps and uncertainties identified so far in the process.

Since the findings and recommendations contained within the Interim Report will continue to evolve throughout the Regional Assessment, the Report is given titles that mean “for now”:

- ***Aabitaad*** in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe)
- ***Megwaad*** in Oji-Cree
- ***Pitamah*** in Ininimowin (Cree)

### ***Partnership and Engagement***

The Regional Assessment is made possible by a unique partnership between First Nations and IAAC. The partnership aims to be a meaningful example of a co-led process, while improving transparency and Nation-to-Nation relationships. Each partner brings their own perspectives and mindset to the process. Through consensus-building exercises and open, transparent dialogue, the RAWG aims to close gaps in understanding and bring together the priorities of each community.

It is essential that the Regional Assessment is guided by the voices and wisdom of Elders, Youth, land users, and other community members. First Nation Partners strive to bring community knowledge and expertise to the process in the spirit of sharing and educating each other, as well as the public and Indigenous People throughout Canada. This process is intended to be inclusive, in support of the objectives of the Regional Assessment, at the core of which are transparency and respect for the community members whose lives will be affected by these processes.



The RAWG aims to conduct the process in a manner that advances reconciliation by building trust and learning from each other. The First Nation Partners and IAAC recognize that communications and the transmission of knowledge from the First Nation Partners' community members present a key challenge, but also an important opportunity. The Partners rely on guidance from Elders, and support from Matawa and Mushkegowuk Councils, to collaborate across different mindsets and ensure the Regional Assessment retains a community-driven focus. The Regional Assessment will work to overcome interpretation and translation challenges, as well as issues with limited capacity and fixed deadlines, in part by including oral and visual ways of communicating and sharing information. This is with the intent of ensuring that First Nations' voices are heard.

The RAWG has already made good progress, but the bulk of the work lies ahead. Timelines and resources continue to be issues for many First Nation Partners, making it difficult to move forward together equitably. It is important to recognize and respect the challenges and inadequate resources faced by the First Nation Partners, including dire emergency and crisis conditions. As such, although this Interim Report is based on discussions that involved all Partners at key times throughout the last 12 months, not all partners were able to contribute equally due to capacity and resource issues. It is important to note that this Report does not bind any First Nation Partner to the views it expresses or recommendations it may make.

*"Cumulative effects are not new, we live, lived and will continue to live them."  
RAWG member from partnered First Nation*

The RAWG also recognizes that several areas it must assess are within provincial expertise. The RAWG will identify specific needs and request information from Ontario as needed.

### ***Information Gathering, Findings and Scenario Building***

The voices and values of each partner led to the assessment priorities set out in the Terms of Reference. These are:

- to be well together (community wellbeing)
- cultural and spiritual wellbeing
- social and economic equity
- healthy environment relationships

Since the beginning of the conduct phase in January 2025, the RAWG has been gathering information about these priorities, and discussing ways to address gaps, uncertainties and opportunities. This has been done through, for example, community engagement, expert workshops, requests to federal departments and agencies, public requests for information and data, and contracting technical studies.

At the same time, the RAWG is developing ways to understand changing conditions and their impacts on the assessment priorities, through “development scenarios”. In these scenarios, different potential levels and types of development are tested out, in relation to the priorities that they would impact. These scenarios will help improve decision-making, in line with community values.

The RAWG has already identified several urgent issues and recommendations:

- ***Conditions and access to health and social services are profoundly inadequate.*** Travel to obtain healthcare is a major barrier to wellbeing. Funding and capacity gaps in healthcare (especially mental health) need to be addressed urgently, before any additional development can be considered. First Nations need ceremony and cultural practices, guided by Elders, to heal from harm that continues into the present. First Nation Partners request a commitment from the Government of Canada to address funding and capacity gaps for access to health and social services as an immediate priority.

- ***Coming together, in unity, to map community values is an important next step.*** This will build a shared understanding of First Nations' relationship with the land and what must be preserved and protected. This work will identify what changes may occur and the impacts on inherent and Treaty rights. Indigenous governance and natural law will be the cornerstones of a sustainable future.
- ***The cost of living in remote communities represents large social and economic inequity.*** A study is underway to better understand the various factors that contribute to high cost of living. The study will help to identify measures to reduce cost-of-living inequity. Economic development can be positive, as long as it improves health and community wellbeing.
- ***Too little is known of past and existing environmental conditions in the region, since previous and ongoing programs are sparse, short-term and underfunded, and primarily based on western science.*** Comprehensive baseline monitoring must be community-driven and started immediately, and before any development occurs, as climate change is already creating extreme shifts in conditions. Western scientific data are insufficient and must be paired with the extensive Elder and land user expertise to be relevant.

### ***Next steps***

The RAWG will continue to update and share information gathered throughout the Regional Assessment leading up to the Final Report, using the [IAAC Internet Site](#) and the [Information Sharing Platform](#). Exceptions and safeguards will be put in place for confidential Indigenous knowledge and information.

In the coming months, members of the RAWG will continue to focus efforts on engaging with the partnered First Nation communities and will also conduct engagement activities with the public and other Indigenous participants.

Community engagement facilitates the sharing of key information from the Regional Assessment process with Elders, Youth, land users, knowledge keepers and community members alike. Discussions include positive, negative, and cumulative impacts that may result from development activities, as well as the effects of proceeding without any additional development.

These engagements will help to develop a deeper, shared understanding of community values. It will also help define development scenarios by assessing existing and potential impacts from development activities or the lack of development.

Most importantly, the invaluable feedback received through community-level engagement with First Nation Partners is representative of respect for the future, the next seven generations to come, and beyond.

