

More than 100 people uprooted after fire on Yakama Indian Reservation

Community seeks support for survivors; most pressing need is for items for babies and children

The Yakama Nation is seeking help and support to aid the survivors of a wildfire that destroyed 20 homes, burned parts of several more and displaced more than 100 people from the small town of White Swan, Wash., in the heart of the reservation in central Washington state.

In an open letter dated Feb. 16, Yakama Tribal Council Chairman Harry Smiskin wrote of the need for outside assistance from the United States and other governments to help care for the displaced and the immediate cleanup in White Swan.

The Yakama Nation has been in a state of emergency since the fire began Feb. 12. It estimates the cost of rebuilding is at least \$4 million and with other emerging environmental concerns, that sum will only increase.

"We are grateful for the miracle that everyone got out alive, including the people who ran into the street on bare feet as their homes went up in flames and the babies, the Elders and three people with profound disabilities who all survived because the community pulled together," Smiskin said. "We cannot overlook that blessing as we turn to the difficult work ahead of getting people securely housed for as long as it takes to clean up and rebuild a beautiful White Swan."

A chimney fire is believed to have started in one home and quickly spread by wind and 50-mph gusts that carried the fire from house to house, down a dry, wooded creek bed and then to more distant homes.

The town of White Swan is devastated by the damage to 24 homes, including some

multi-family residences, and destruction of other property, including cars, bicycles and all personal belongings for many.

Members of this tight-knit Yakama community now are scattered across the large reservation, some staying with family and others housed in motels.

Few of those whose houses burned could afford homeowner's insurance and few have savings to fall back on, making the recovery of families and housing in this Tribe of 10,000 even more challenging, said Smiskin. In his letter, he requested the following kinds of help:

- Skilled volunteers who can assist in cleanup, including certified asbestos remediation experts, heavy equipment operators and home builders
- Donations of money, clothes, food and other household goods, including diapers and supplies for babies and children
- Temporary housing for displaced people and assistance with rebuilding the destroyed houses, a responsibility the Yakama Nation has undertaken for the victims of the fire

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to bring 10-12 trailers to the reservation, which would serve about half of the displaced households. It and other governments, including Washington state, have committed to building strong and lasting relationships with Yakama and now in the face of this disaster, the Yakama Nation calls on these relations for help.



Courtesy photo by Darla C. Leslie, Yakama Nation Review

Ten-year-old Lorelei Eli stands with her siblings surveying the damage to her Aunt Georgi Ike's house that burned in a wildland fire that swept through White Swan, Wash., on Feb. 12. The house had belonged to the girl's great-grandparents, the late Howard and Sally Ike, who left the family home to their children and grandchildren.

"These are lands that the United States government holds in trust for Indian people and we hope that the federal government in the form of the U.S. Congress and the various agencies will respond as they have to other disasters," said Smiskin. "We believe that more homes have been destroyed by this fire than on any Indian reservation in the history of this country."

Complicating the cleanup, many of the homes were built in the era when asbestos was commonly used in insulation, drywall and floors.

"The mere potential presence of asbestos among the ashes and debris now littering White Swan presents a serious, time-consuming and expensive environmental dilemma," said Smiskin.

In the immediate term, the Nation is worried about obtaining safe housing and collecting money, food, clothing and other essentials for those who lost their homes or are displaced until cleanup and repair can occur. One of the most pressing needs

is for diapers, formula, bottles, baby food, clothing, bedding and other baby supplies.

The Indian Health Service opened after the weekend fire to replace medicines for survivors, but it will take far more to help the displaced people for the months or years it takes to rebuild White Swan.

While the Yakama Nation, its people and its neighbors have responded over the past few days with open hands and hearts, the needs in the short term and the long term are great. The Yakama Nation looks to the United States to uphold its trust responsibility and to the generosity of the American people to support those affected by this disaster on Yakama lands.

In addition to the local businesses and centers that are accepting donations, the Yakama Nation has set up the following ways for people across the country to contribute to the community's recovery:

- The White Swan Fire Relief Fund at Bank of America, with donations accepted at branches nationwide.
- Donations also can be made at the Toppenish Armory, 326 S Division St., Toppenish, WA 98948.
- Donations can be mailed to Yakama Nation CFO Henry Roy, P.O. Box 151, Toppenish, WA 98948.

For more information, please contact Colleen Reimer, Yakama Nation Tribal administrative director, at colleen@yakama.com; or 509-388-3300 (cell) or 509-865-5121, ext. 6004 (office).

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