Access on Lake Athabasca: Monitoring Indigenous Rights

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
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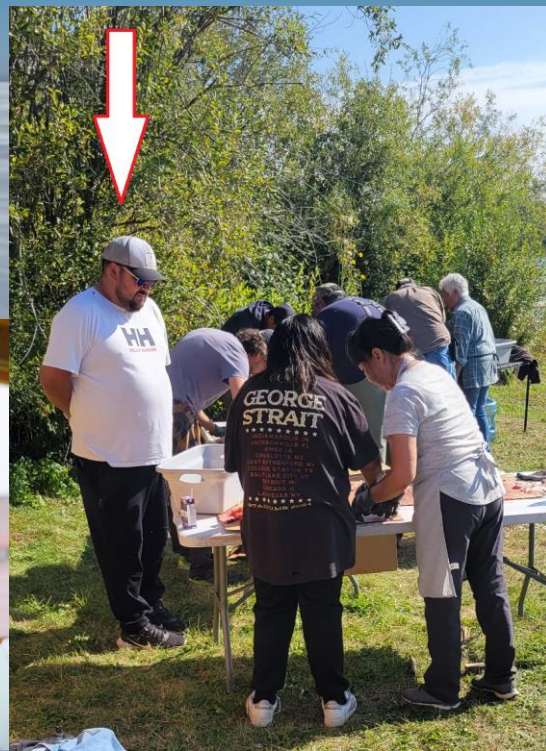
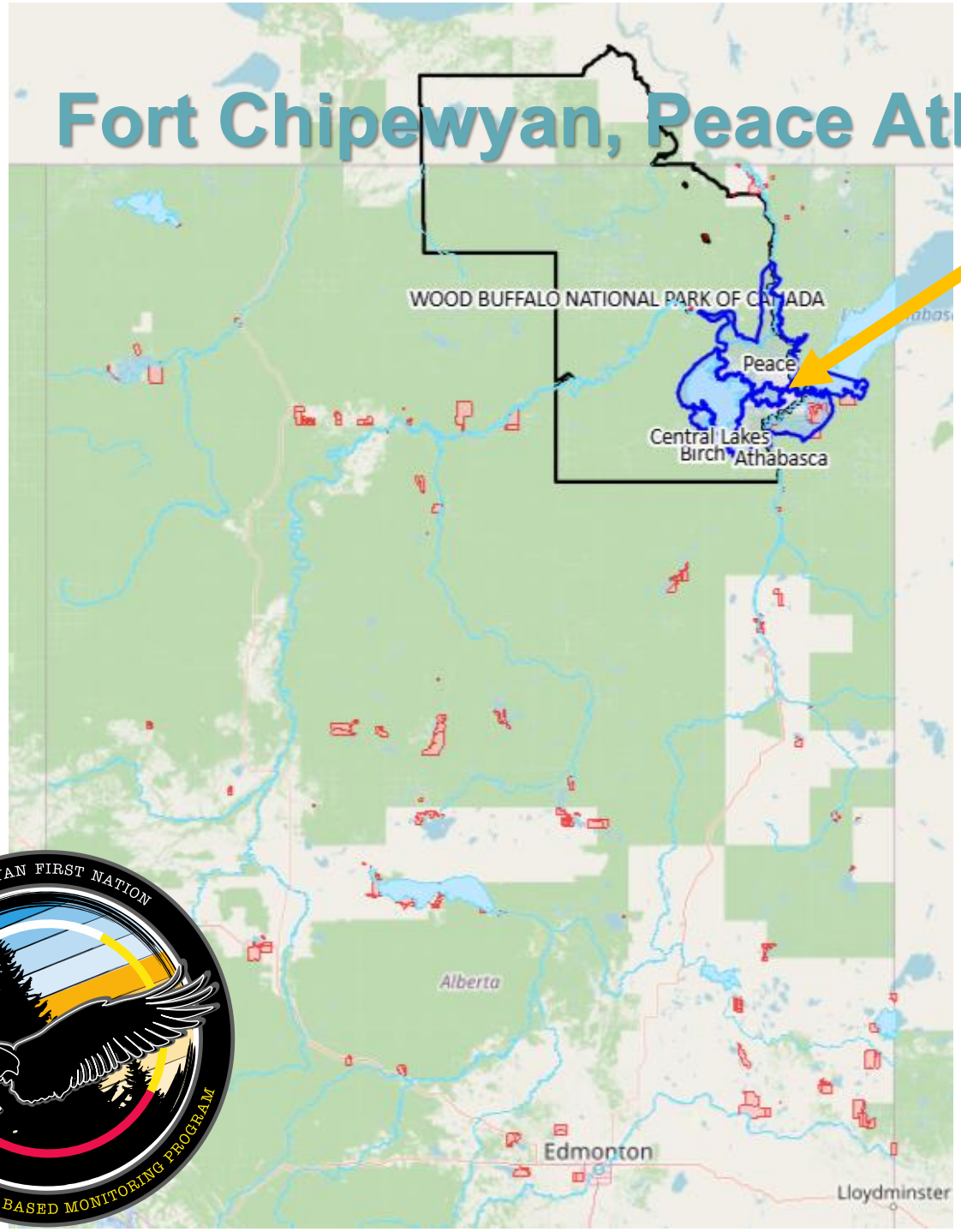
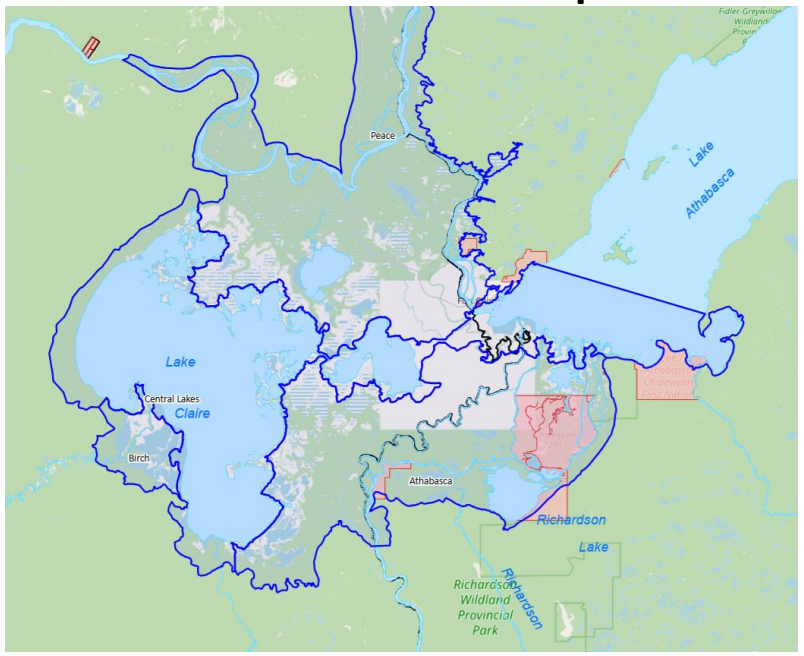
ALMS Annual Conference
10.2026



Fort Chipewyan, Peace Athabasca Delta



- Home to 3 Nations
- Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
- Fort Chipewyan Métis Nation
- Mikisew Cree First Nation
- Traditional territories encompass the PAD



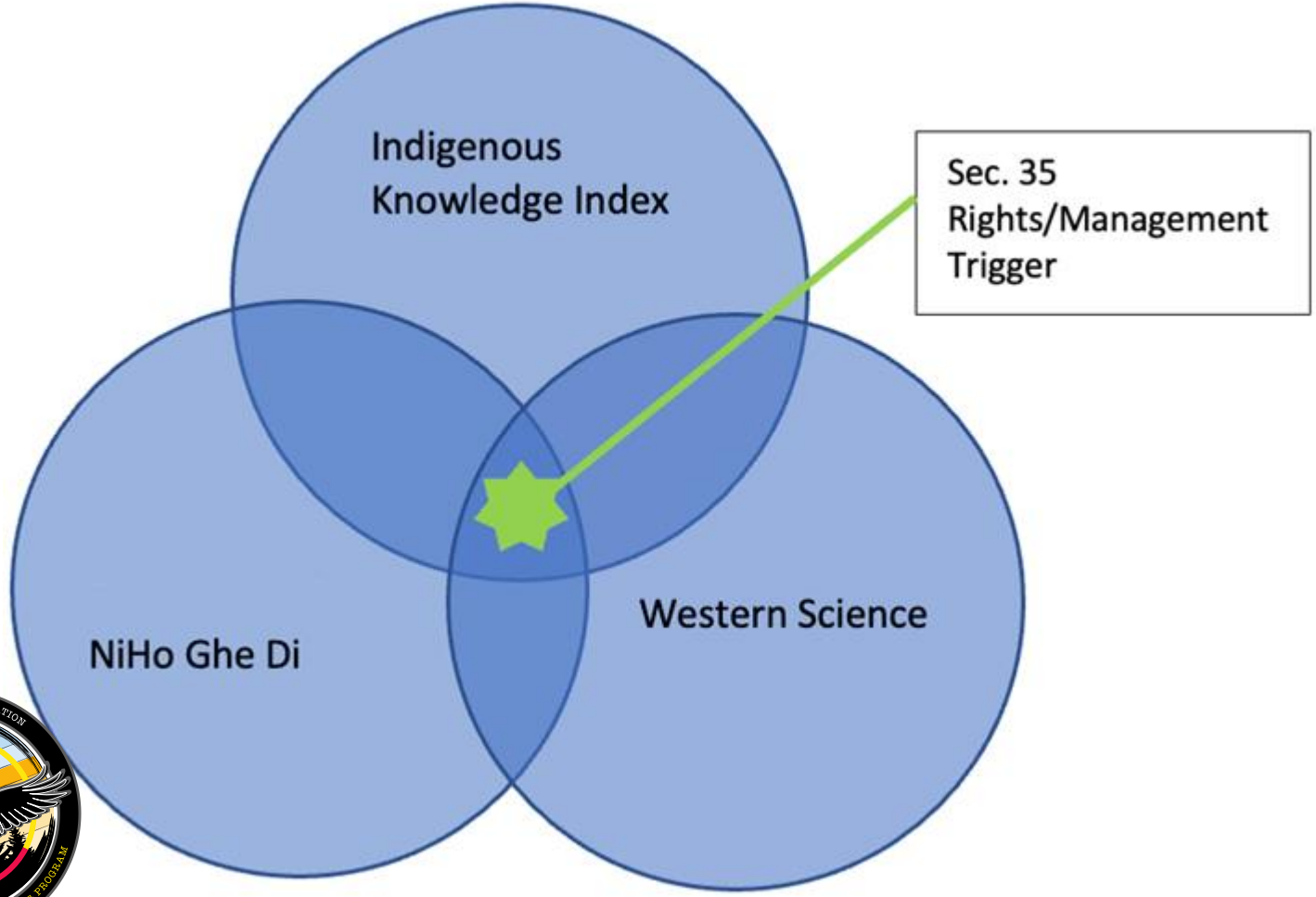
Elders and land users observations

- Open water season:
  - Elders and land users have noticed loss of access to our territories
  - Especially late summer and fall since the 80’s on the Athabasca River
  - This is a critical period for hunting access
- Winter season:
  - The ice is no longer thick and solid since the Bennett Dam
  - Ice is now often slushy and dirty, some areas are no longer freezing
  - Ice is changing color, not clear and blue

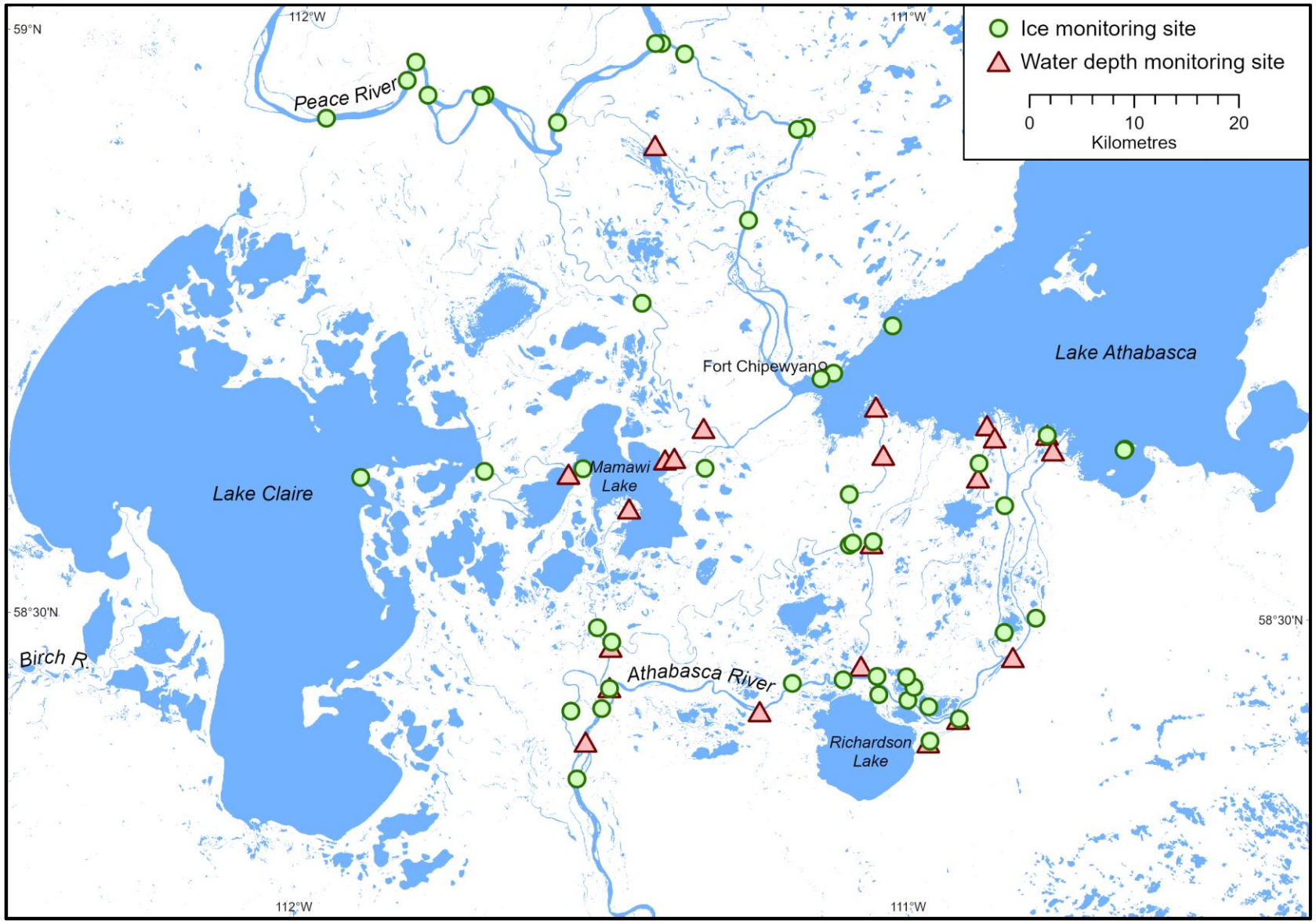
Community access and navigation questions

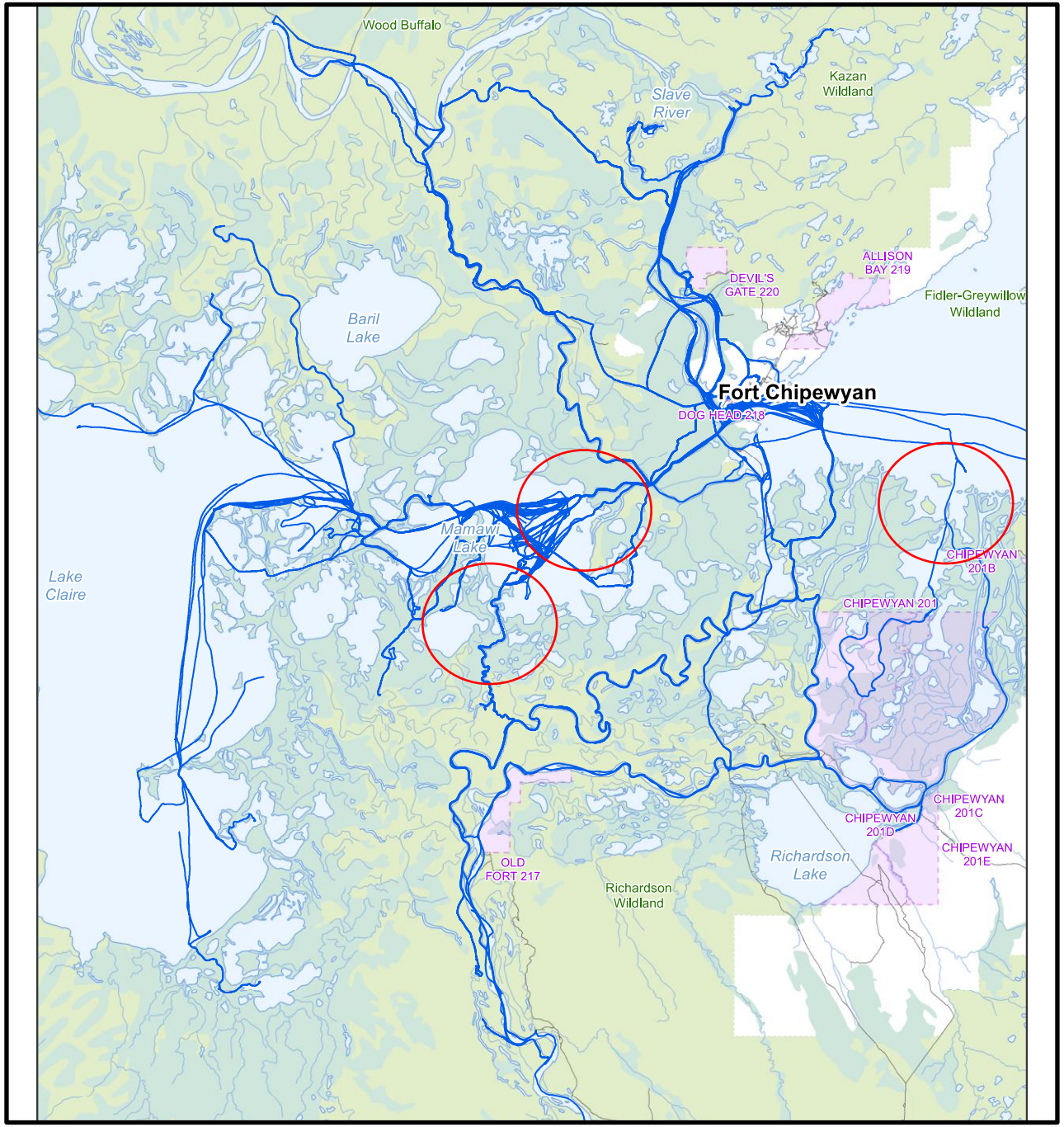
- Is there sufficient water depth for open water access?
- Is there sufficient ice thickness for winter access? And how long does it last?
- Do these potential changes impact members' way of life and rights?

CBM/Guardian Program Origin:
Ni Ho Ghe Di
Dene: watchers of the land



ACFN water depth and ice monitoring



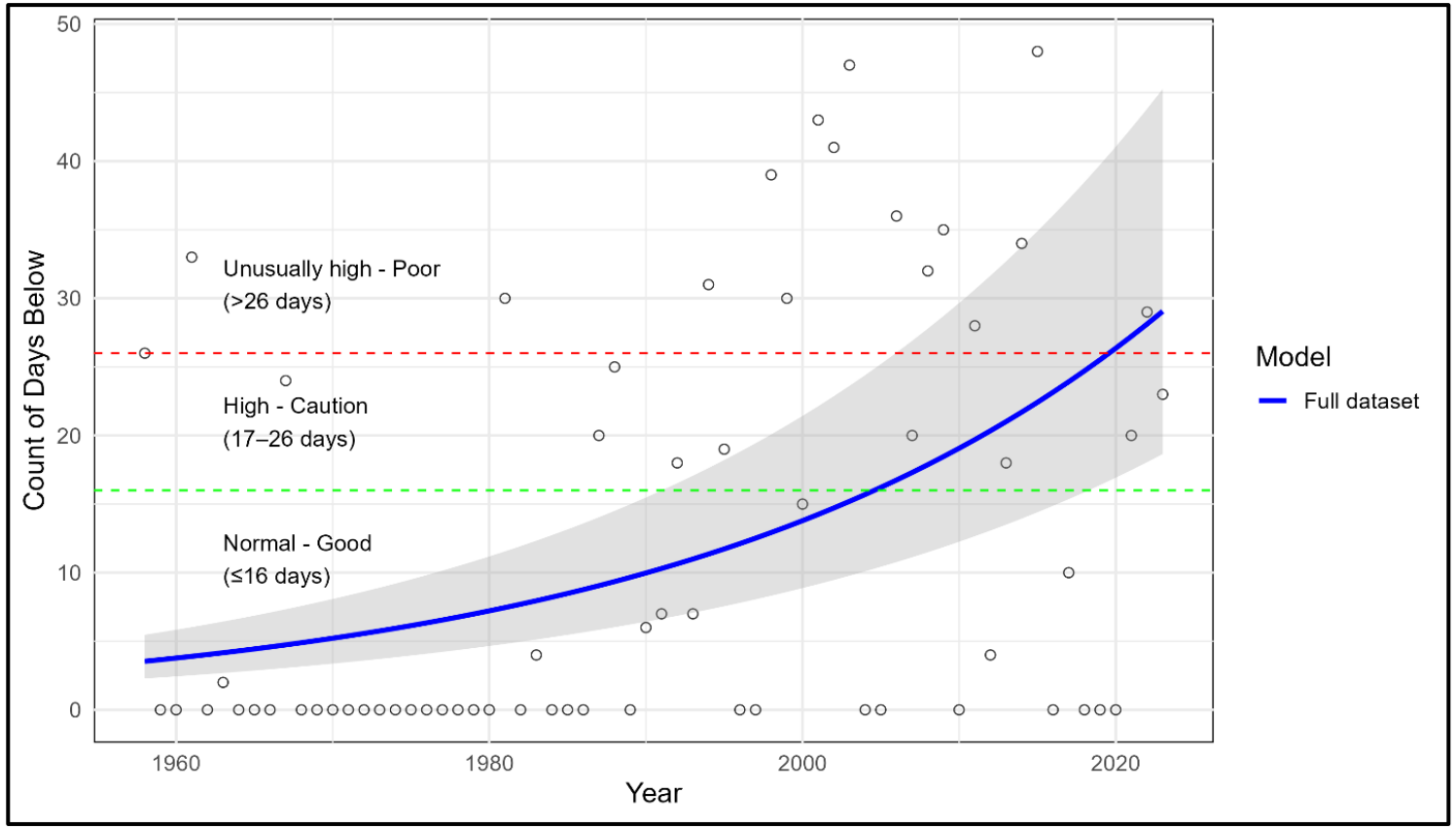


What are we monitoring? Open water depth (since 2011)

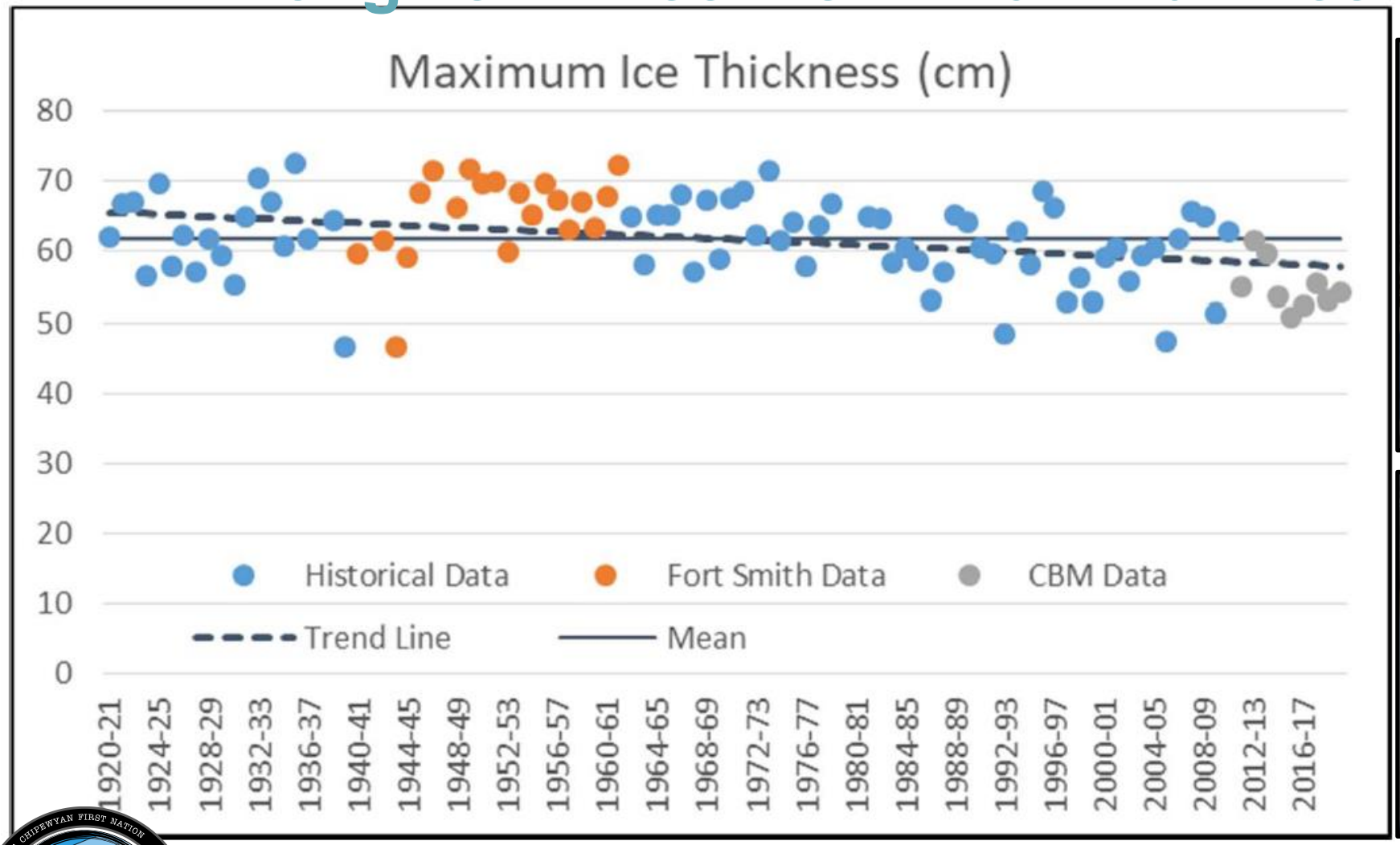
- Map illustrates travel in a good high water year
- Below: logs in channel

Aboriginal Extreme Flow (AXF)

- Flows of 482 m^3/s make navigation challenging (at Fort McMurray gauge)
- If you were an Elder growing up hunting in the 60s, today you would have 10 -12 more challenging days during that hunting window (weeks 33-41)

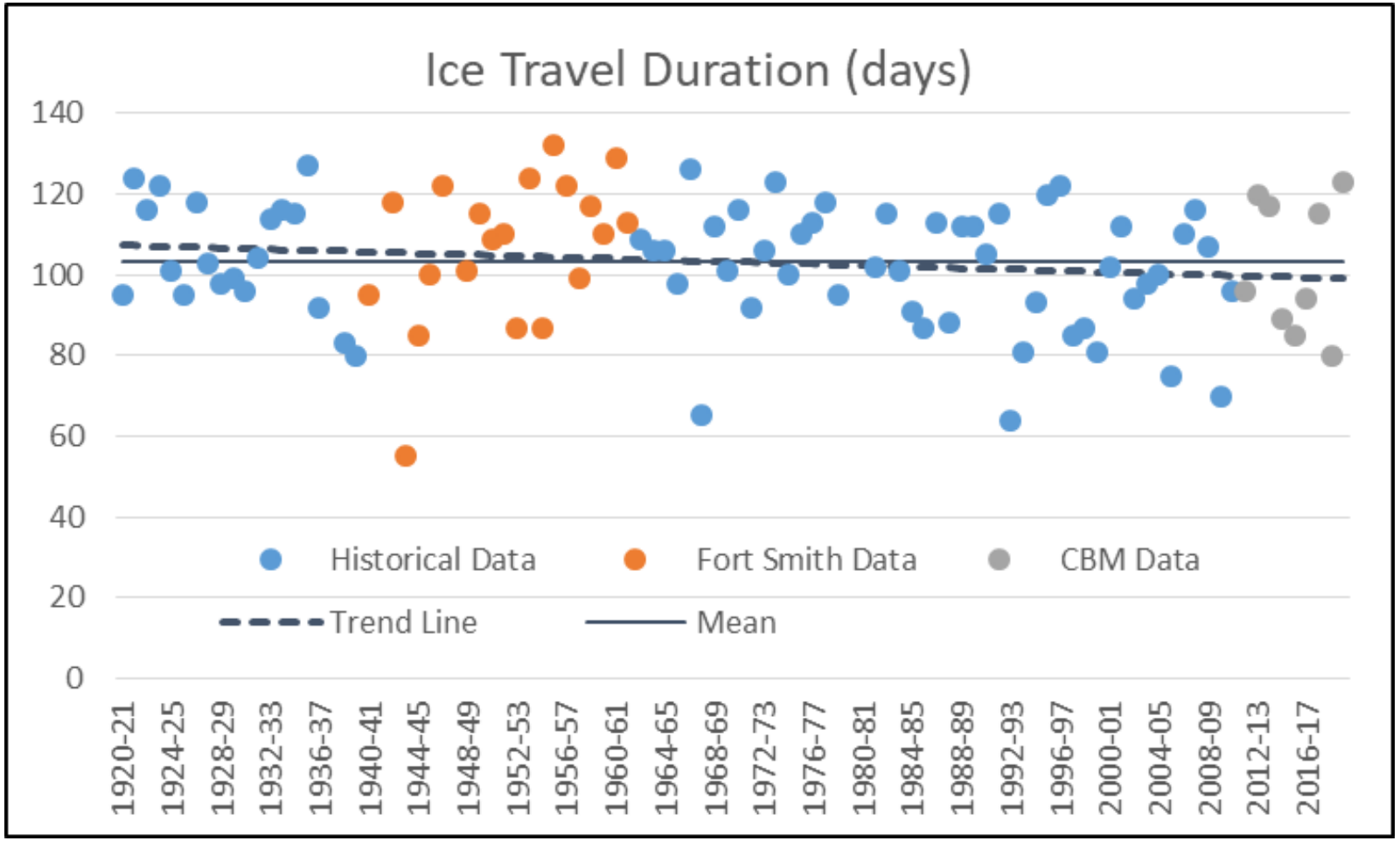


Long Term Decline in Maximum Ice Thickness



Ice thickness calculated using daily temperatures and precipitation across an ice season to describe ice growth. The period of CBM data indicates the period which was used to build the model.

Long Term Decline in Ice Travel Safety



Regional ice travel duration calculated for the last 100 years. The period of ice travel duration is calculated from the day the ice reaches 30 cm until maximum ice thickness is reached.

Wider ecosystem monitoring

- Monitoring with Partners
- Indicators across 3 Themes:
  - Access
  - Wildlife quantity
  - Wildlife quality
- Add up to Health of the Delta and infringements on the Way of Life

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

Thank you to:

- Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation Elders, CBM and Guardian Staff
- Mikisew Cree First Nation
- Parks Canada*
- Environment and Climate Change Canada*
- Alberta River Forecast Centre (AEPA)*
  - Partners in end of season ice thickness campaign for flood forecasting
- University of Alaska Fairbanks
- International Institute of Sustainable Development – Experimental Lakes Area