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FEATURE

MANITOBA WILDFIRES: RESILIENCE AMID THE FLAMES

Spotlight on Bissett, Sherridon, and Lake Athapapuskow

anitoba is facing its most severe wildfire season in over 30 years. As of late July, more than 17,000 residents have been evacuated, and over 1.2 million hectares of land have burned. Nearly 200 wildfires remain active, driven by prolonged drought, extreme heat, and high winds.

The province declared its first state of emergency in mid-May, followed by a second in early July as fires reignited across the North. Several Northern Affairs communities - including Bissett, Sherridon, Herb Lake Landing, Island Lake, Cormorant, Pelican Rapids, and remote cottage areas near Flin Flon, Wanless and Wallace Lake were directly impacted. Thousands sought shelter in Winnipeg, Thompson, The Pas, and nearby centres, with evacuation support coordinated by the Province of Manitoba and the Canadian Red Cross.

This edition highlights the courage and collaboration shown across the region with a spotlight on Bissett, Sherridon, and the Lake Athapapuskow cottage area. Though each faced different challenges, all communities demonstrated extraordinary strength and unity in the face of crisis.



or 18 days, the community of Bissett endured a full evacuation as wildfire EA061 closed in. While most residents evacuated, Bissett's Fire Department and essential services staff remained to defend the community and maintain critical infrastructure. Local leadership coordinated remotely with Manitoba Wildfire Services, Northern Affairs, and emergency partners to keep residents informed.

"Even through the tears, anxiety, and constant worry, we never gave up," said Mayor Carla Nicholson-Spence. "We are survivors of the 2025 Manitoba Wildfires, and we are forever changed by this experience."

Support came from all levels: the Bissett Fire Department led evacuation and preparation; 1911 Gold Corporation provided meals and equipment; Wildfire Services deployed air and ground crews; and the Beausejour Brokenhead Fire Department sent additional resources.



"You truly don't know what it feels like to face a wildfire at your doorstep until you live through it.

Even through the tears, anxiety, and constant worry, we never gave up. We are survivors of the 2025 Manitoba Wildfires, and we are forever changed by this experience. But through it all, we remained 'Bissett Strong.'"

Mayor Carla Nicholson-Spence



"You truly don't know what it feels like to face a wildfire at your doorstep until you live through it," said Mayor Nicholson-Spence. "Even on the good days, fear could return quickly when the winds changed. But through it all, we remained 'Bissett Strong."

Mayor Nicholson-Spence extended heartfelt thanks to the Department of Municipal and Northern Relations, Minister Glen Simard and Assistant Deputy Minister Kevin McPike for their support and efforts in helping the community fight the fire. She also expressed

deep gratitude to the Northern Affairs team, with special recognition for Kevin Popowich, Protective Services Consultant, for his diligence and exceptional dedication to the community during the crisis.

Additional thanks were extended to North Central Director, Stew Sabiston and other Northern Affairs staff who supported displaced residents, as well as to the Office of the Fire Commissioner for their swift and effective response.

"The constant communication, compassion, and efforts made by these individuals in our time of need were incredible. We are eternally grateful."

To our neighbouring northern communities:

"It takes a team of dedicated, selfless, community-minded people to get through a crisis like this: keep hope and prayers alive. Everyone is feeling the same fear, but coming together makes us stronger. We hope to get through this wildfire season safely, and we'll carry the lessons forward to protect our communities even better." Mayor Nicholson-Spence concluded.

Sherridon: Rapid Evacuation and Fireline Resilience

n May 23, Sherridon Council made the immediate decision to evacuate the community, as wildfires advanced and the only road out was at risk. With support from the Northern Affairs Branch and wildfire officials, the entire community, except essential personnel, was safely evacuated within two hours.

Those who remained, including Mayor Michelle Reimer, Wildfire Services, and Cold Lake Fire Department, launched immediate sprinkler protection and worked to safeguard infrastructure.

The following day, even essential staff were withdrawn for safety, leaving only frontline fire crews, Rangers, and the Initial Attack Team on-site. Mayor Reimer remained to coordinate efforts on the ground, while the Deputy Mayor supported logistics externally.



"Sherridon was completely surrounded by fire," said Mayor Reimer. "Without the dedication and sacrifice of those who stayed, our community would not be here today. Even in times of stress and uncertainty, when people who may not always see eye to eye come together with a shared goal protecting their home the strength of community shines through."

-Mayor Michelle Reimer The evacuation was coordinated in close partnership with Northern Director, Tracy Grexton and Protective Services Consultant Kevin Popowich. Their leadership made the process smooth, arranging hotel stays and bus transport. With responsibilities divided among council and staff, the entire community (except for essential services and the fire department) was safely evacuated in two hours. "Sherridon was completely surrounded by fire," said Mayor Reimer. "Without the dedication and sacrifice of those who stayed, our community wouldn't be here today. To everyone who played a role in our survival - thank you."



They also expressed gratitude to the Minister of Municipal and Northern Relations for being hands-on and ensuring they received the necessary equipment for their fire trucks.

Reflecting on what helped the most, Mayor Reimer noted:

- The science behind sprinkler systems works.
- Constant communication between leadership and wildfire services is crucial
- Preplanning, including pre-registering residents, made the evacuation smoother
- Strong partnerships, especially with the Northern Affairs Branch and the Wildfire Program Coordinator, were essential.

"Even in times of stress and uncertainty, when people who may not always see eye to eye come together with a shared goal protecting their home the strength of community shines through."

Moving forward, Sherridon's council continues to explore an additional preventative measure, such as installing fire guards to protect the community in future seasons.

Remote Cottages: Lessons from Lake Athapapuskow & Surrounding Areas

he 2025 wildfire season posed serious threats to remote cottage areas, especially around Lake Athapapuskow and surrounding areas. The Cottage Association includes properties both within the Provincial Park and in areas under Northern Affairs. While the jurisdictional boundary has



caused some challenges in the past, communication between departments improved significantly this year, especially compared to the 2024 evacuation.

Cottage areas along Lake Athapapuskow faced a major threat as the Wolf Fire advanced from Saskatchewan. Members of the Little Athapap Cottage Owners Association mobilized quickly to protect remote properties on the Manitoba side.

Across both Provincial Parks and Northern Affairs areas, outdated mapping remains a critical issue. Many newer cottages and developments are missing from current maps, complicating emergency planning, wildfire response,

infrastructure
upgrades, and
property
management. "When
the Wolf Fire became
a threat, I was
contacted to help
coordinate value
protection. It took
hours of outreach

and mapping to identify what was in place and where support was needed. Those with remotes on the east side of the lake were given no opportunity for value protection."

— Leslie Beck, Vice President, Little Athapap Cottage Owners Association

Thanks to the Cranberry Portage Fire Department, Hudbay Rail, and wildfire crews, sprinkler systems were deployed in many areas. Firesmart efforts by property owners helped save over 30 cottages near Millwater. However, at least five were lost near Bakers Narrows, where there was no time to prepare.

The experience revealed key gaps - "The biggest challenge was timely communication and the lack of Northern Affairs staff in the area. This year was better than 2024, but more work is needed," said Sherry Trudeau, President of the Little Athapap Cottage Owners Association.

"The biggest challenge was timely communication and the lack of Northern Affairs staff in the area. This year was better than 2024, but more work is needed.

My gratitude goes to the men and women from Manitoba and around the world who fought to protect our lands."

- Sherry
Trudeau,
President of the
Little Athapap
Cottage Owners
Association and
Leslie Beck, VP

2025 Summer Edition

The Association used the Cottage Association Facebook page and a Call Multiplier System to share updates but emphasized the need for updated contact lists and full integration of remote residents into emergency protocols.



Cottage owners recommend updated mapping and surveys, tailored Firesmart policies, mandatory fire suppression systems, better communication, Northern Affairs staff who could be involved with daily update meetings and providing consistent oversight in the unorganized territories. Concerns were also raised about inconsistent cross-border policies. Saskatchewan permitted lodge owners to act, while Manitoba restricted access. This disparity underscores the need for a National Fire Program to align prevention and response efforts. Northern Affairs continues to coordinate with various stakeholders to update mapping tools and technology, aiming to address these ongoing challenges.

"My heart goes out to the many losses during this 2025 season. My gratitude goes to the men and women from Manitoba and around the world who fought to protect our lands," Leslie Beck concluded.

Looking Forward

he 2025 wildfire season has left behind smoky conditions, charred landscapes, disrupted lives, and difficult memories, but also powerful lessons, renewed gratitude, and a stronger sense of community.

Northern Affairs extends sincere gratitude to the firefighters, emergency responders, volunteers, local leaders and Manitoba departments working tirelessly to protect lives and homes. We also recognize the ongoing efforts of evacuee support teams, and the vital contributions of the Office of the Fire Commissioner and Northern Affairs staff as part of a coordinated team throughout the wildfire response.

We are humbled and deeply grateful to the communities and cottage areas that have shared their stories with us. Your feedback helps us reflect, learn, and improve how we support communities in future wildfire seasons. Wildfire debrief meetings are in process for impacted areas. Northern Affairs remains committed to working with all stakeholders. These fires are among the most severe in Manitoba's history. Our hearts are with those still affected. We continue to monitor the situation closely and work with Northern Affairs communities, cottage areas, and emergency partners as we move forward - stronger together.

WILDFIRE INFORMATION



For timely and accurate information:
Contact Kevin Popowich
Protective Services Consultant
Phone: 204-648-7161

Email: Kevin.Popowich@gov.mb.ca

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Northern Affairs 24hr Emergency Toll-free Number: 1-866-735-3111

NORTHERN AFFAIRS EVENTS

2025 Regional Workshop

This May, the Northern Affairs Branch hosted another successful Regional Workshop at the Holiday Inn Airport West in Winnipeg from May 13–14, welcoming approximately 90 participants from Northern and North Central communities.

The workshop offered a valuable opportunity for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and networking between community leaders and government representatives. Attendees engaged in a series of informative sessions focused on addressing key regional challenges and exploring opportunities for sustainable development.



Minister Glen Simard addressing the delegates

This year's event was honored by the presence of Minister Glen Simard, Deputy Minister Mona Pandey, and Assistant Deputy Minister Kevin McPike.



L-R - Deputy Minister Mona Pandey, Minister Glen Simard

Minister Simard opened the workshop with personal reflections on his journey from a long teaching career into public service, driven by his desire to improve communities. He shared government priorities for the upcoming year and acknowledged the pressures facing communities. He also took time to hear directly from delegates responding to concerns around policing, fire services and infrastructure gaps. Elected officials expressed appreciation for the Minister's presence, his willingness to engage, respect for local leaders, and commitment to ongoing support.

Following the Minister's remarks, Day 1 sessions began with Sheldon Kowalchuk presenting an update on the proposed Crown Land sales initiative, outlining the process and next steps. The Wildfire Planning and Preparedness tabletop exercise, led by Kevin Popowich, detailed the roles of CAOs, Emergency Coordinators, and Councils during wildfire emergencies. Ben Lyle followed with a session on Municipal Codes of Conduct, emphasizing ethical leadership and accountability.

In the afternoon, Paul Doolan from Northern Affairs led interactive discussions on policy revisions, and Jessica Drakul provided funding model updates, encouraging active participant feedback. The day continued with a technical session on Infrastructure Maintenance and Planning, followed by a Workplace Safety and Health Manual review led by Jaime Bertrand and Ron Bruneau. Wellness breaks offered space for informal networking, and the day concluded with door prize draws, a fun tradition that fosters connection and community spirit.

Day 2 included sessions on communication, financial literacy, and leadership. Chris Downey from ACHIEVE opened with strategies for managing difficult conversations, followed by Reg Ellingson on understanding and interpreting municipal financial statements. Jessica Drakul shared a communications engagement update, and Mayor David Bosiak of Dauphin led a session on effective

leadership, focused on collaboration, transparency, and strategic

planning.



Elected officials in a breakout session

One of the highlights of Day 2 was the afternoon breakout sessions, where participants joined targeted groups for CAOs (both experienced and new), elected officials, and settlement contact persons. Led by Northern Affairs Branch staff, these sessions focused on practical responsibilities, updated policies, and community expectations. Participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions and ask questions directly. Settlement contacts expressed appreciation for the dedicated attention to their unique challenges and called for more tailored sessions in future workshops.

The final session, "Own It! Your Role in Compliance," led by Environment Program staff, focused on maintaining water, wastewater, and solid waste systems. The workshop wrapped up with closing remarks and another round of door prizes, leaving participants with new tools, stronger connections, and a renewed commitment to their communities.

We thank all participating communities for their valuable insights and ongoing dedication to strengthening regional partnerships. Your engagement is essential in advancing the goals of the Northern Affairs Branch. We look forward to continuing this tradition of collaboration and to welcoming even more participants at the 2026 workshop.









Good Governance: Clarifying Roles for Stronger Communities

In Northern Affairs communities, good governance is the foundation of strong, effective local leadership.



Under The Northern Affairs Act, the CAO is responsible for managing and supervising community employees unless council formally decides otherwise. The decision to have community employees like the recreation director report directly to council is contrary to best practices in local governance in Canada. The CAO should remain the sole employee accountable to council, with all other community employees reporting through the CAO.

Having members of council directly oversee community employees, particularly outside of formal council meetings, can create confusion, undermine administrative effectiveness, and blur the critical line between governance and operations. It increases the risk of conflicting directions, diminishes

accountability, and can erode employee morale and trust. Individual council members have no legal authority to direct community employees, nor are they paid to be supervisors. Council members are elected to set policy, not to manage staff, and all decisions must be made collectively at properly convened meetings.

Professional administration ensures that operations are handled by qualified employees who understand legislative requirements, especially in areas like human resources and workplace safety. When council members take on operational roles without proper training or authority, it significantly increases legal risk for the community.

When council members directly oversee community employees, especially outside of formal meetings, it can:

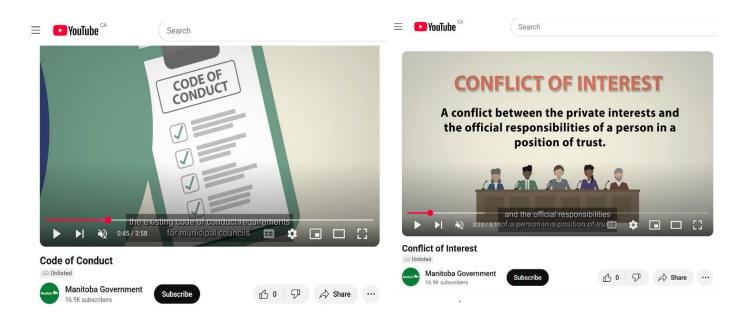
- Create confusion and conflicting directions
- Undermine administrative effectiveness
- Blur the critical line between governance and operations
- Diminishes accountability
- Erode employee morale and trust
- Increase the risk of legal and HR issues

While not unlawful, the delegation of operational oversight to council is not in the best interest of good governance and is not recommended. We strongly encourage all communities to maintain a clear distinction between the policy-making role of council and the administrative role of the CAO. Upholding this structure fosters professionalism, stability and efficiency in municipal operations, and supports the long-term health of local governments.



Additional information on the role of council and the administration can be found in the Community Documents section - Province of Manitoba | mr - Community Documents - of the department website, namely: Council Orientation Manual, Employee Management Guide.

New Animated Videos on Municipal/Community Governance



We're excited to share two new animated videos on **Council Conflict of Interest** and the **Council Member's Code of Conduct**, now available on our website:

- Code of Conduct Video: Province of Manitoba | mr code of conduct
- Conflict of Interest Video: Province of Manitoba | mr conflict of interest

These short accessible videos are designed to help council members, municipalities, Northern Affairs communities, and the general public better understand key governance responsibilities and standards.

This project has been in the making for over a year. Special acknowledgement to The Municipal Governance and Advisory Services (MGAS) team of Municipal and Northern Relations, the Communications and Engagement Division (CED) of the Department of Finance, and their service providers for their dedication and hard work. The Association of Manitoba Municipalities and the Manitoba Municipal Administrators were also consulted for their input and collaboration during the development stages.

These resources are another step forward in supporting transparency, accountability, and strong governance across Manitoba.

We hope you find these videos informative and shareable within your networks.



What We Heard Report: Communications Survey Results

Engagement Overview

In the summer of 2024, Northern Affairs Branch (NAB) conducted a communications survey with Northern Affairs Communities (NACs) to improve communication and service delivery. We received 17 responses from 14 Northern Affairs communities.

What We Heard:

- Need for faster response times and providing clear timelines for responses
- Implement a system to acknowledge receipt of emails immediately
- Preference for consistent, email-based communication that will help maintain clear and traceable interactions
- Desire for tailored support based on community needs, such as providing more hours for CAOs or offering additional support for technical issues, to enhance overall effectiveness



Next Steps:

NAB is developing communication guidelines with service standards to:

- **Establish Clear Timelines**: Provide communities with timelines for when they can expect responses to their inquiries.
- Implement Regular Check-ins: Conduct regular check-ins with communities to understand their ongoing needs and address any issues promptly.
- Provide Training and Tools: Provide communities with the necessary tools and training to manage communication effectively, such as access to email and support for maintaining records.
- **Provide Enhanced Support**: Offer more comprehensive support for financial requests, public works, and technical issues to address the specific needs of each community.

We would like to thank all the communities that participated and took the time to complete the survey!

Questions? Contact Jessica Drakul, Manager, Policy, Program and Corporate Services at Jessica.Drakul@gov.mb.ca or 204-801-9543.



CSO Program Review

A review of Manitoba Justice's community safety officer (CSO) program is ongoing and projected to be completed in October 2025. We are currently engaging municipalities with active safety officer programs under the revised Police Services Act to learn about their experiences.



Fire Program Review

Northern Affairs Branch (NAB) has concluded its review of the fire program. Over the past few months, NAB held engagement sessions with multiple communities and settlements. Based on the survey and engagement findings, a What We Heard Report will be shared with communities in the coming weeks. NAB has also completed a report with recommendations on the fire program, which is currently under internal review. Thank you to all the communities that participated and stay tuned for the upcoming report!



Workplace Safety for Summer Students

Information regarding Workplace Safety and Health requirements for your summer students has been sent to your community inbox.

- ✓ All 15-year-olds must complete the Young Worker Readiness Certificate Course before starting work
- ✓ Forms must be signed by a parent/guardian and submitted to the employer
- ✓ If hiring multiple students, consider designating a lead student to help support and supervise others.

For more details, visit https://gov.mb.ca/labour/standards/doc,young-workers,factsheet.html or contact Ron Bruneau, Workplace Safety and Health Consultant at Ron.Bruneau@gov.mb.ca or 204-679-0222.

Thank you for supporting safe and productive summer employment!

Northern Affairs Organizational Update: POS Unit Launch

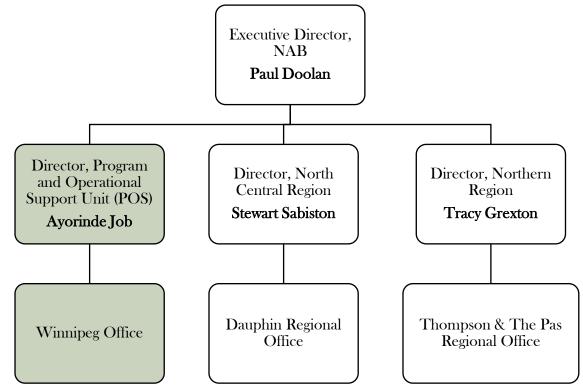
The Northern Affairs Branch has established a new Program and Operational Support (POS) Unit as part of a broader structural reorganization to improve internal coordination and service delivery across Northern Affairs communities and Cottage Areas. The POS unit consolidates key functions, including policy development, regulatory oversight, cottage area administration, financial services, and capital planning under one dedicated unit to strengthen coordination, streamline regional service delivery, and support long-term sustainability.

The new unit, led by Director Ayorinde Job (reporting to Executive Director Paul Doolan), is designed to strengthen regional service delivery, improve internal collaboration, and support long-term sustainability across Northern Affairs communities and Cottage Areas.

As part of this update:

- Municipal Support Services (MSS) is now Policy, Program and Corporate Services (PPC), led by Jessica Drakul.
- Asset Management and Community Grant Services (AMCG), led by Shannon Greer, includes Capital Grants, Municipal Operating Grants (MOG), and O&M funding.

This realignment reflects our continued focus on efficient regional service delivery, partnerships, and building resilient, well-supported communities.



*Changes highlighted in green

NORTHERN AFFAIRS STAFF PROFILE



Name: Ayorinde Job

Current Job Title: Director of Program and Operational Support Unit

Previous Role: Manager of CAMP (Cottage Administration Modernization Program)

Region/Location: EDO Office / Winnipeg

We are pleased to welcome Ayorinde (Ayo) Job as the Director of the Program and Operational Support Unit within the Northern Affairs Branch, effective June 2, 2025. This newly established leadership role is central to advancing strategic planning, coordination, and transformation initiatives that support safe, healthy, and sustainable Northern Affairs communities.

Ayo is completing his MBA at the University Canada West and holds multiple business and finance degrees and professional credentials, including PMP and Certified Scrum Master designations. He previously managed the Northern Affairs Cottage Program and currently serves as the lead of the Manitoba Black Employees Resource Group (MBERG), an employee network group within the Manitoba government.

With a strong background in both public and private sectors, Ayo brings valuable experience in project management, Finance, and community engagement. He is also an active volunteer, and he served as the Director of Finance and Program Delivery for a Winnipeg-based charity.

NORTHERN AFFAIRS STAFF PROFILE



Beth Ladyka

We are pleased to announce that Beth has joined the Northern Affairs Branch as our new Lands Development Consultant on a term position until the end of December. Beth works out of the Winnipeg (Donald Street) office. She had been working for the branch over the past year as a Co-op student supporting efforts on several files and initiatives, including the fire program review and the community safety officer (CSO) program review.

Prior to joining our team, Beth worked as a Civilian Instructor with Cadets Canada at her local Air Cadet Squadron in Stonewall, MB. She holds a 2025 Master of Public Administration jointly offered by the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba. Outside of work, Beth is a member of her local Legion, enjoys reading and spending time with her dog, Snoopy. She's excited to continue connecting with communities.



Deborah Ogundeyin

Pleased to welcome Debbie to the Northern Affairs Branch, in the Municipal and Northern Support Services Division. Debbie has been working as a Research and Policy Assistant (STEP student) with Municipal Support Services and the Northern Affairs Fund over the past few months. She has been actively supporting the completion of Tangible Capital Asset (TCA) and Construction in Progress (CIP) reports. Debbie works out of the Winnipeg (Donald Street) office.

Debbie is currently pursuing her Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Manitoba, where she has developed strong financial analytical skills, along with valuable skills like problem-solving, communication and organizational skills. Her enthusiasm to learn and grow in the finance field is

complemented by her ability to adapt to new environments. Previously, Debbie has gained valuable experience in the non-profit sector and in childcare, where she demonstrated an ability to work well under pressure, take initiative, and contribute to team goals. During her spare time, she loves to spend time with family, play rugby or read a book.

Mental Health Supports for Public Safety Personnel

Manitoba's public safety personnel play a crucial role in protecting the well-being and security of our communities. Whether extinguishing fires, providing life-saving medical assistance, maintaining law and order, managing correctional facilities, or coordinating emergency responses, your dedication and swift action saves lives and preserves public safety every day.

There for You

You are there for Manitoba and it is important that Manitoba is there for you.

Recognizing the urgent need for increased mental health supports for public safety personnel, the provincial government announced an expansion of services in 2024.



Manitoba

Launching in September 2025, this new service will offer a range of prevention and intervention supports delivered by a multidisciplinary team of mental health clinicians.

Support is Available Now

While we prepare for the full program launch, immediate support is already available through Shared Health and the University of Manitoba's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with Mindfulness (CBTm) Hub.

To learn more and register, visit the CBTm Hub and Shared Health websites. Once registered, you will have access to the Hub's full range of offerings, including a program tailored specifically to the unique experiences of public safety personnel.

For more information or if you have any questions, please contact 204-944-7075 or visit www.cbtm.ca.

Thank you for the incredible work you do to keep Manitobans safe and secure. If you believe CBTm may benefit your mental health and well-being, we strongly encourage you to reach out today.

If you have any additional questions, please direct them to mentalhealthandaddictions@sharedhealthmb.ca.



Congratulations to the Class of 2025!

We celebrate and congratulate all graduates from Northern Affairs communities on this incredible milestone. Your hard work, resilience, and determination have brought you to this milestone.

Wishing you success in all your future paths, the best is yet to come!

DID YOU KNOW?



Here's a fun fact about Northern Affairs communities in Manitoba:

Some of the best fishing spots in Canada are in Northern Affairs communities!

Many of these remote communities are located near pristine lakes and rivers, making them prime locations for catching trophy-sized walleye, northern pike, and lake trout. For example, communities in the Northeast like South Indian Lake and Brochet are known among anglers for their incredible fishing experiences often accessible only by air or winter roads! Fishing remains central to food, culture, and recreation in northern communities.

RANDOM FACT

Lemons floats in water but limes sink



9

August 4

Stat Holiday - Terry Fox Day

August 5 @ 1:30pm

Community Townhall (Teams Call)

August 12 - 14

NACC Annual General Meeting and Tradeshow- Winnipeg (Polo Park)

September 2 @ 1:30pm

Community Townhall (Teams Call)

October 7 @ 1:30pm

Community Townhall (Teams Call)

Municipal Calendar:

https://www.gov.mb.ca/mr/northern/pubs/na manual/financial/appendix f2-a.pdf

General Enquiries

NAB.General@gov.mb.ca

"Everything good, everything magical, happens between the months of June and August." - Jenny Han



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We hope you enjoy this issue and invite you to help shape the next one!

Have an article suggestions, photo, event, or community achievement you'd like to share?

We'd love to hear from you! Your contributions help keep this newsletter community focused.

We acknowledge that Manitoba is located on the Treaty Territories and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishininewak, Dakota Oyate, Denesuline and Nehethowuk Nations, the ancestral lands of the Inuit, and the homeland of the Red River Métis.