



# NAPATAK

Active involvement of community  
volunteers in wildfire risk reduction

*By Sophie Guilbault*

*Source: Community of Napatak*

## THE SCIENCE

It is common to find community volunteers at the core of successful disaster risk reduction initiatives. Volunteer efforts frequently have a significant direct impact on the protection of lives and enhance the safety of properties in the community. While community volunteers have always played crucial roles in disaster response and recovery, their participation in pre-disaster preparedness is often less frequently recognized as crucial to building disaster-resilient communities. Research has shown that when communities are empowered to manage the adverse effects of local natural hazards, they are more likely to sustainably and effectively address natural disaster risks.

## THE TRIGGER

Napatak is a small community of approximately 150 permanent residents located in a mature boreal forest on the southwest shore of La Ronge Lake. It is situated approximately 30km South of the Town of La Ronge in Northern Saskatchewan and can only be reached through one access road. Napatak has experienced potentially threatening wildfire situations several times over the years, including one in 1999 during the Mallard Fire and more recently in 2015 when wildfires forced the evacuation of 13,000 residents in the La Ronge area. Wildfire risk became a growing concern for residents of the community who have since showcased great leadership in pursuing various wildfire risk reduction initiatives.

## THE APPROACH

While residents of Napatak have been aware of the wildfire risk faced by their community for many years, the 2015 wildfires acted as a turning point for the development of local risk reduction efforts. One of the first initiatives that was implemented in the community was the establishment of an Emergency Preparedness Team to ensure community safety. One of the mandates of the Team was to look at establishing a stronger system to communicate with community members about emerging risks and potential evacuations. In order to do so, residents living on each block of the community were identified as 'block captains' and were tasked with the responsibility of notifying their neighbours in the event of an emergency. The Emergency Preparedness Team also developed a chart identifying various jobs that need to be done in the event of a fire, evacuation, or other emergency. The chart identifies community members who are in charge of communicating status updates from each of the community's two divisions. In the event of an evacuation, community volunteers have also been tasked to identify which house has been evacuated through the use of a symbol displayed in front of each property. This allows local leaders to know who is still in the community as the evacuation process takes place. The plan, developed by the Emergency Preparedness Team, also identifies which residents are in charge of turning on the various pumping stations, filling stationary tanks and communicating to wildfire management teams about where the 'wet' properties and homes with sprinkler systems are located throughout the community. Where possible, the community's Initial Response Team maintains the pumps and tries to assure there is continual water being pumped to these properties.



**Figure 19:** The Emergency Preparedness Team in Napatak identified where the ‘wet’ properties and homes with sprinkler systems are located throughout the community. (Source: Community of Napatak)

Given the large amount of forested areas that come right at the edge of people’s properties in Napatak, the community also invested a lot of time in the establishment and maintenance of wildfire defensible buffer zones. Following the Mallard Fire in 1999, a fire risk assessment was completed for the community showcasing the importance of these zones. However, little had been done between 1999 and 2015 to ensure the continuous maintenance of the buffer zones that were established following the assessment. With the support of FireSmart Canada, a group of residents organized themselves and received approval to clean these spaces in order to reduce the risk of fire damage in the community.

In recent years, the community of Napatak also made significant investments to be able to keep the community ‘wet’ when wildfire risk arises. More specifically, approximately one third of the homes have installed rooftop sprinklers. A 10,000-gallon water tank was installed in one of the higher at-risk areas within the community in order to protect

two entire city blocks in the event of a fire. Finally, several pumps were also purchased by residents to be able to access water coming from the lake for firefighting purposes.

## THE OUTCOME

The various wildfire risk reduction initiatives led by the community of Napatak contributed to making them a FireSmart recognized community in 2016. Pam Sanderson, who coordinates the Emergency Preparedness, FireSmart and Fire Mitigation Portfolio for the Napatak Community Association Executive Board, has been documenting the number of volunteer hours invested by her fellow community members in recent years. "I have records from 2015 to 2020 on approximately 25 percent of what gets done on peoples' properties and I have already recorded 7,500 hours of residents' in-kind resources and volunteer work around wildfire risk reduction actions and there is so much more out there," said Ms. Sanderson.

In addition to all the local initiatives that have been taking place in the community to mitigate the risk of damage from future fires, the community is now looking at investing in a new building that would be used to house an emergency command centre, firefighting equipment and to host FireSmart events.

## A WORD FROM NAPATAK

When asked what led to the success of Napatak in implementing wildfire risk reduction strategies, Pam Sanderson mentioned the importance of a strong sense of community when developing community-led efforts around disaster risk reduction. "I think it's important to conduct the work with the idea that your neighbours are important and that everyone should be safe and feel secure in their community," said Ms. Sanderson. She also mentioned the importance of partnerships with various government agencies such as Northern Municipal Services, Wildfire Management and the La Ronge Fire Department when implementing risk reduction initiatives. "Our local emergency response team understands that we have a vested interest in where we live and we are prepared to partner and work with others to ensure that it's a safe place to live," added Ms. Sanderson.