



# WADIN BAY

Planning and investing in firefighting resources to protect the community

*By Sophie Guilbault*

*Source: Denis Renaud - Wadin Bay*

## THE SCIENCE

Small, remote communities located in Canada's northern forests typically operate with few local firefighting resources. They are dependent on provincial support for the management of wildfire risks. Nevertheless, some communities demonstrate strong, proactive leadership seeking to understand the risk of fire in their community and actions that reduce the risk. Partnerships with organizations like FireSmart Canada can assist communities that wish to conduct a formal assessment of their risk and develop an action plan to mitigate future losses associated with wildfires. Modest financial investments coupled with appropriately directed volunteer actions are effective in preventing a fire from entering the community and successfully avoiding what may have been catastrophic losses.

## THE TRIGGER

The community of Wadin Bay is primarily a cottagers' community situated in Northern Saskatchewan. The resort subdivision is located 30 kilometers North of La Ronge and counts approximately 30 permanent residents. The population increases to around 230 people in the summer months.

The community was evacuated due to a wildfire in 2006. Residents had to leave the community for a few weeks and were fortunate to come back to undamaged homes. The 2006 event, however, triggered a reaction among community members who started actively thinking about the environment they live in, the fire risk that comes with it and potential actions that could be taken to better protect themselves.

## THE APPROACH

Over the years following the 2006 wildfire, community leaders in Wadin Bay approached wildfire risk reduction from many different angles. Firstly, they connected with their provincial FireSmart liaison to complete an initial wildfire community risk assessment that allowed them to better understand the risks faced by the residents of Wadin Bay. The assessment initially revealed that several areas were exposed to high fire risks, which prompted the community to seek financial support for investments in risk reduction and firefighting resources.

Following the assessment, the community secured funding from the provincial government and Northern Municipal Services in addition to contributions from private residents, to invest in building a local fire hall. The first investments were water pumps and hoses to facilitate the pumping of water from La Ronge Lake during an emergency. Over a period of time, the community kept investing in additional fire protection equipment such as rooftop sprinklers and other apparatus that could be used by professional firefighters if they were to get deployed to Wadin Bay during a wildfire. Professional firefighters are aware of the type of equipment that was purchased by the community and where it is located. They were also consulted prior to the purchase to ensure the material was compatible with other pieces of equipment they are trained to work with.



**Figure 4:** A strong sense of community and collaboration between residents was instrumental in the success of the various initiatives undertaken in Wadin Bay.  
(Source: Denis Renaud, Community of Wadin Bay)

In addition to the investments made in firefighting resources, Wadin Bay held several events to educate the local population about fire risk and prevention measures that can be adopted to reduce this risk as part of its wildfire protection plan. For instance, Wildfire Community Preparation Day events were held where local residents were invited to conduct a community clean-up of vegetation in at-risk areas.

## THE OUTCOME

The dedication of the community to invest in fire protection over several years resulted in FireSmart Canada naming Wadin Bay the first FireSmart community in Saskatchewan. The time and energy invested by the community proved to be of utmost importance in 2015, when the area was threatened by a severe wildfire. Thanks to the investments made in wildfire preparedness and firefighting resources, the community only suffered small losses. It was estimated that the outcome of this event could have been significantly worse for community members and their homes if the wildfire protection activities had not taken place. The community's efforts were recognized by Saskatchewan's Environment Minister who stated that "Wadin Bay, named Saskatchewan's first FireSmart community, developed and implemented a protection plan to address its wildfire risks, and that proved to be invaluable to those protecting the community this summer when it was threatened by wildfire."

The 2015 FireSmart report produced for Wadin Bay also states that “without a doubt, the pre-fire work that occurred, such as thinning of the forest, having purchased our own firefighting equipment, setting up a network of sprinklers, having a fire plan (escape route, safe places to retreat to, when to leave, who is where, and good communication) and most of all having community members committed to protecting their community (before, during and after the fires), saved our community.” Indeed, the impressive results achieved by the community of Wadin Bay would not have been possible without a strong community commitment to the cause. In 2015 alone, residents of Wadin Bay invested approximately \$20,000 and 700 hours of their time on FireSmart related activities.

## **A WORD FROM WADIN BAY**

When asked what advice he would offer to other small communities interested in investing in wildfire risk reduction measures, Denis Renaud, President of the Wadin Bay Cottage Association, mentioned that Wadin Bay owes a lot of its success to its strong core of residents. “We have a group who work well together, who can problem solve and gather around one common cause,” said Mr. Renaud. He also mentioned that educating residents on the value of the investment in risk reduction measures was instrumental in achieving success. Once this communication took place, people quickly got on board with various initiatives such as Firesmart clean-ups in the spring and the fall. “It is easy to witness a strong sense of community during these events when every year, we have about 40 to 50 residents coming up and cleaning up not only their area but also the rest of the community. Some people are even driving up from their main residences for the sole purpose of contributing to these cleaning efforts,” mentioned Mr. Renaud, who also believes that the time and financial resources invested by community members into the wildfire risk reduction effort in Wadin Bay contributed to making the community more resilient to wildfires.