



The Insider, May 1

A special edition of The Insider to commemorate the 10 year wildfire anniversary on May 3.

Ten years on, the legacy of the Horse River Wildfire is not just a moment in time; it's part of the collective story of the region and the people who serve this community: you.

This special edition brings together reflections from staff across the organization, recognizing that whether you were here in 2016 or joined later, the values shaped by that experience continue to guide how we work and support one another today.

Recovery by the numbers

- **2,231 homes** rebuilt
- **434 hectares** of FireSmart management treatments completed
- **\$6.4 million** invested in **proactive wildfire mitigation** since 2016
- **1,800 advanced FireSmart home assessments** completed since 2019
- **\$378,000** distributed to homeowners in **FireSmart Home rebates** since 2021

- **2024** – the year that Council approves new **Municipal Development Plan**
- **2025** – the year of most recent **Emergency Management Bylaw update**
- **107,740 total residents** across the region according to Census 2025 (up **1.6%** from 2021)

Showing up stronger: CAO Andrew Boutilier reflects on the Horse River Wildfire

Ten years after the Horse River Wildfire, CAO Andrew Boutilier doesn't talk first about plans, policies, or procedures. He talks about people.

Here is his story:

In 2016, the wildfire changed everything very quickly – for families, for workplaces, and for the entire community. Like many others, I was navigating the situation as both a leader and a parent, trying to make sure the people around me were safe while finding a way to reconnect with my own family.

My kids were with their nanny, who had only been in Canada for a short time and was understandably terrified. My wife Tracy was at the hospital, helping prepare patients for evacuation. And I was overseeing CEDA operations in Gregoire, with multiple sites and teams spread around the community.

The focus became clear: account for our people, close facilities safely, connect families, and get everyone moving in the right direction. We set up staging areas, moved trailers, brought in water, and created temporary places for people to land – somewhere safe, even if it wasn't permanent. Friends stepped in to help my family evacuate. Colleagues made sure no one was left behind. People helped however they could, often without even being asked.

What stands out most when I look back isn't the disruption or uncertainty – it's how people showed up for one another.

Across organizations and neighbourhoods, people stepped in where they were needed. Colleagues supported colleagues. Friends helped friends get where they needed to go. Decisions were made quickly, often with limited information, but always with care for people at the centre.

That experience has stayed with me.

The wildfire revealed something fundamental about Wood Buffalo. Ten years later, what feels most true to me is this: we show up stronger. Stronger in how we prepare, stronger in how we

support one another, and stronger in the values that guide us as an organization and a community.

That's what this milestone represents for me – and that's what continues to define the region.

Your stories

Tammy Jackson

The further away this event gets, the less we remember the urgency. I sometimes read through the magazine that came out after we returned, and the rawness of some of those stories still gets to me. I didn't have to drive out of town with fire raining down on me wondering if the heat was going to melt my tires before we could get out. My family was able to stay together, and we had somewhere to go. I am thankful for this every day.

But I also learned the following:

- There is always enough fuel in my vehicle to make it to at least Wandering River. This is non-negotiable and goes beyond driving on the top half of your tank in the winter.
- I also keep a "go bag" in my closet with a week's worth of medication and have moved important documents to a safety deposit box at a bank.
- I have inside and outside pictures of our property to help if we have to make an insurance claim.
- When push comes to shove, we worked as a community and evacuated approximately 88,000 people, along with a lot of pets. How many places could do this?
- The world took notice and Fort McMurray became known for more than our oil.
- Businesses all over the country gifted us with special discounts on meals and many items as many left with little to nothing.
- This situation has unfortunately happened in other places, and we can say "hey - we know what to do" and offer helpful suggestions, whether it's a place to stay or just a sympathetic ear.

While the sound of helicopters flying overhead still causes me to stop and sniff for smoke, I can again enjoy a bonfire in the backyard firepit. I am still here and proud to call this place home!

Aasma Amin

Heart Drive

I am a survivor.	So, relax, my love	as alive as the moment they happened.
Now, I store my memories where fire cannot touch them—	No need to pull me into another photo.	
deep in my mind, locked in my heart.	I've already clicked it.	A reel of laughter, faces,
	It's saved in my heart drive—	sunlight on your cheek, playing every time I close my eyes.
	always open,	
Not in an album—	no login,	
flames can eat those.	no forgotten codes.	So, my dear—
Not on Facebook—	No filters. No edits.	I am at peace.
passwords can vanish.	Perfect as they were—	My memories are safe,
	crystal-clear,	written in my head,
		kept warm in my heart.

Paul Curtis

Paul was one of nine employees who stayed to operate the Water Treatment Plant in the early days of fighting the Horse River Wildfire.

Here is part of his story:

I was one of nine Water Treatment Plant employees who stayed. We were filled with a resolve to return to the Water Treatment Plant as soon as possible, to continue to assist and fight with our weapon of choice: water.

Once the opportunity to return to the plant came, thankfully shortly after our evacuation to a camp 30 kilometres north of the community, we returned and pushed our plant to limits it had never experienced before.

We maintained this intensity for days and nights, splitting into two shifts, working 12 hours or more at a time, doing our part to fight this fire threatening to take our community. Some of us learned we had lost our homes. Many of us, residents of this community for decades, could not

believe the devastation happening around us. There is simply no way that a single column can detail the scale of the event or chronicle the individual or combined efforts of the many who stayed and of those who selflessly joined in the efforts against “The Beast.”

We had tools “The Beast” did not. One of our operators had the foresight to bring his laptop, which we used to monitor the plant when we were at Noralta Lodge. We had other operators to assist us from afar, who had gathered in Red Deer and assisted us with monitoring our plant, using codes provided by Associated Engineering, the company who had designed the systems used to monitor and run our Water Treatment Plant. These operators who had gathered in Red Deer, helped those of us in the plant, by monitoring and pointing out failures we couldn’t see in the community, during the abundant power bumps the first few days.

After the first few initial days, we had reserves arrive in the form of more operators, laboratory technicians, and our automation technician, who gave the original crew a much needed break. Further volunteer assistance came from Red Deer, Calgary and Epcor. We were extremely grateful for their professionalism and assistance.

There is simply no I in TEAM. I hope we can all take comfort in the knowledge that the first responders, members of REOC, municipal employees on the ground, municipal employees evacuated and working out of hotel rooms across the country, volunteers from Red Deer, Calgary, the oil sands companies, and construction companies will all take on any beast that may threaten the region, as we did for this Beast.

This article was intended to be about the nine of us that stayed, but it was the entire team that fought “The Beast”.

Dennis Warr

What still resonates with me is the human factor. I was seconded to the Wildfire Recovery Task Force where I spent five years. In that time working with residents that suffered great loss and them sharing their stories and listening to them was remarkable!

I wasn't trained to be a counsellor or a psychologist, but still listened to residents who lost everything and cried their hearts out and just appreciated someone listening to them. To this day, it still haunts me – but knowing I somehow was able to comfort them just by listening to their story is gratifying.

It was the most fulfilling part of my career to date with the RMWB and I'm always reminded of the resilience of the whole community.

I still share our story with anyone who asks about it because it touched so many, and I'm very proud of what we were able to endure.

Saboor Nasir

One lesson that stays with me is how strong and resilient a community can be during difficult times.

Even though I joined the organization after 2016, hearing other experiences has shown me how much people supported each other and came together.

What stands out most is the sense of growth, there's a stronger focus now on preparedness, communication, and looking out for one another from both a municipal and individual perspective. It reshaped how people think, work, and support each other today.

Alicia Hubert

Although I joined the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in late 2022, the impact of the 2016 wildfire remains deeply felt. At the time, I was working with the City of Edmonton, where municipalities came together to support Fort McMurray evacuees. While I was not directly involved in response efforts, it was clear that this event affected not only RMWB residents, but communities across Canada.

Since joining RMWB, hearing colleagues' firsthand experiences has reinforced important lessons that continue to resonate:

1. Tell your loved ones you love them often.
2. Be prepared and have a plan before an emergency happens.
3. Keep your gas tank full and know your evacuation routes.
4. Support first responders, including clearly marking unoccupied homes and pets.
5. Maintain an emergency kit and family plan with essential supplies and documents.
6. Create an inventory of your assets such as furniture, clothing, and personal belongings for insurance purposes, and store it somewhere safe and accessible.

The 2016 wildfire is a powerful reminder of this community's resilience and the importance of readiness, compassion, and connection, values that continue to shape the RMWB today.

Join us on May 3

Community members are invited to join together for a gathering at Doug Barnes Cabin from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on May 3 to recognize the 10-year anniversary of the Horse River Wildfire.

Free activities focusing on reflection, connection and well-being:

- This gathering is meant to be a welcoming and respectful space where everyone can take part in a way that feels right for them.
- There will be space to spend time reflecting and remembering, to learn about traditional medicines, share or listen to community stories and activities for families and youth.
- There will also be opportunities to support well-being, including yoga, meditation, and guided hikes along the Birchwood Trails.

All activities are free of charge.

Shuttle service will be available between Father Mercredi High School and Doug Barnes cabin on May 3 between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. The public can park in the school parking lot and take the shuttle to the event as parking at the Cabin is limited.

Upcoming rural anniversary gatherings

Events to commemorate the wildfire anniversary will be taking place throughout May in Anzac, Conklin, Janvier, Saprae Creek Estates, Fort McKay and Fort Chipewyan.

- **Fort Chipewyan:** Friday, May 8 at Mamawi Hall from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.
- **Anzac:** Tuesday, May 19 at Camp Yogi from 1 to 3 p.m.
- **Janvier:** Saturday, May 30 at the Municipal Office from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- **Conklin:** Saturday, May 30 at the Conklin Multiplex from 2 to 4 p.m.

Learn more at rmwb.ca/anniversary.

Resources

We acknowledge that this may be a difficult time for many of us. To support you, we've highlighted a few resources available through our EFAP providers and the Calm app:

Calm

[Caring For Your Grief](#): In this 10-part nourishing meditation series, hosted by renowned author and Dharma teacher, Lama Rod Owens, you'll be supported through times of loss and change.

[Bearing Tragedy](#): In this collection, Jay Shetty and Tamara Levitt offer us practical tools for managing the heavy emotions we can be faced with when we are faced with tragedy.

[Grieving](#): In this program of talks and meditations, renowned grief counselor Dr. Joanne Cacciatore, PhD helps us to grieve with love and honesty.

Dialogue

[Stress Management and Well-Being Program](#): Through this Dialogue program, you'll have access to a dedicated team of mental health professionals and resources to help you be healthier and happier.

[Coping Strategies for Traumatic Events or Natural Disasters](#): Join psychotherapist Mamy Kalambay as she explores the effects of stress from traumatic events or natural disasters on the body - and discusses helpful strategies to cope with the effects from these events.

Homewood Health

[Self-Care Kit](#): In this kit, learn why self-care matters, why it's important to take time to look after yourself, and how you can build a self-care plan to improve your quality of life.

[Experiencing a Community-Based Natural Disaster](#): This resource may help you better understand and cope with natural disasters in your community.

[Understanding and Managing Vicarious Trauma](#): This resource provides a comprehensive guide to understanding, recognizing, and managing vicarious trauma, a condition resulting from empathetic engagement with individuals who have experienced trauma.

For more resources and access instructions, visit [Employee Well-being on My RMWB](#).
