

# St. Theresa Point First Nation

Elders are warning that there may be no winter next year – their warnings are being taken seriously by the community.

## 1. Observed Changes

Community members from St. Theresa Point in Island Lake Manitoba have observed changes in the weather, ice and winter road conditions in and around their community in the last decade.

### Seasonal Changes in Weather

There has been a gradual change in the weather that has become noticeable in the last ten years. All seasons are warmer than they used to be. The warming trend is particularly noticeable in the winter during which there are considerably fewer days of  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The winter season is shorter than it was in the past (i.e. it gets cold later and warms up earlier). The snow has also changed. For example, snow texture is softer and stickier than in the past, and snowfall patterns have changed.

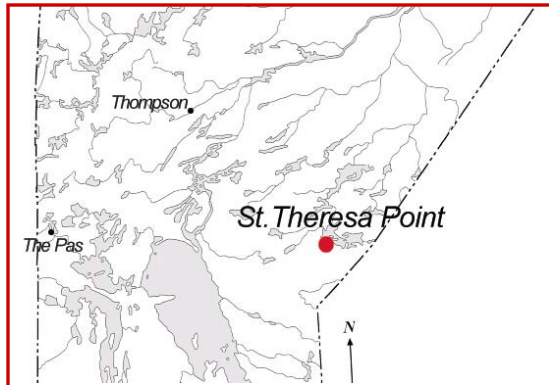
Community members also complain that it has become more difficult to predict the weather. Seasonal predictors such as the orientation of the moon and sun in the sky have changed.

### Water bodies

In the last two years, the water level on the lake has been very high in the summer and at the time of initial freeze-up, leading to ice shelves and ridges. The time of year when ice forms and remains on water bodies around St. Theresa Point has also changed. Ice now forms approximately one month later and melts one month earlier than it did in the past. One community member joked that Santa Claus almost came by boat this year. Ice composition has also changed. Blue ice does not form as it did in the past, there are bubbles in the ice, and there is now a lot more slush. As well, ice is not as thick as it once was (it used to be 3-4' thick). As a result of these changes, the ice is not as strong as it used to be. The ice is no longer as suitable for travel or for ice harvesting.

### Winter Road and Land

Changes in ice formation and strength are impacting the quality of the winter road. Over the past several years, the winter road route has changed in an effort to move it off of lakes, rivers, and streams wherever possible, and onto a more land-based route. Despite these efforts, the winter road season is still considerably shorter now (three to four weeks versus eight weeks). Fast-flowing rivers and large muskeg areas are not freezing early enough in the season or to the same extent that they used to. There are concerns about the strength of the road, as well as the presence of high quantities of slush and potholes on its surface. Large trucks driving on the road now cause more damage to the road since it is so soft. Trucks also spill gas and oil on the road, but there is no clean up undertaken.



## Quick Facts

On-Reserve Population: 2972

Total Population: 3182

Reserve Area: 2885 hectares

Primary Winter Road Network from north to south:

St. Theresa Point to Pine Dock along the east side of lake Winnipeg

Length: 360km

Other local Networks:

- Between St. Theresa Pt., Wasagamack, Garden Hill
- North from Garden Hill to God's Lake Narrows to Oxford House to Cross Lake
- Potential route- Wasagamack to Norway House

Winter Activities: Trapping, hunting, snowshoeing, ice fishing, snowmobile

Summer Activities: Fishing, hunting, boating, swimming, Bannock Festival

Users of the Winter Road: Community members, hunters, trappers, Northern store (supplies and fuel), school, nursing station, housing department, capital projects office (for any project), Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba Conservation, Manitoba Transportation, RCMP

Image 1:  
St. Theresa Point First Nation, Island Lakes Region.



## Animals

Hunters, trappers, fishers, and other community members identified changes in animals and vegetation in the area. The amount of vegetation and some of the animal species (such as fish, rabbits, wolverine, otters, moose, and wolves) have decreased in number, whereas some animals (e.g. mosquitoes, beaver) have increased in number or are new to the area entirely (e.g. marten). The quality of furs has decreased and fish are smaller. The migration patterns of birds has also changed since birds now stay in the south for longer periods of time.

## 2. Perceived Causes

Community members attributed the changes they have observed to a number of factors. Some individuals attributed the warmer temperature to climate change and pollution from the south. Changes in the ice conditions (e.g. delayed freezing of water and muskeg areas, weaker ice, and change in ice and snow texture) were attributed to the warm weather, high water levels, stronger currents, and the insulating effect of high snow pack on the ice. High water levels are thought to relate to increased precipitation (rainfall and snowfall) and subsequent runoff from the surrounding land.

Changes in animal number and movement were attributed to several factors including the change in weather patterns (e.g. affecting migration of birds), interference by man-made technology (such as power lines, air traffic, satellites, and winter roads), natural disasters (such as earthquakes), and the introduction of new predators (e.g. martens) to the area.

## 3. Roles and Impacts of Observed Changes

Changes in the weather, ice, winter roads, and other trails around the community can have a considerable impact on lives of individuals from St. Theresa Point.

### Social / Cultural

The winter road network is important for linking the people of Barren Lands to those in surrounding Island Lake communities. Approximately 10,000 people in the Island Lakes area are connected via this network. These communities are physically close to each other and there is a high degree of intermarriage amongst community members. The roads allow neighbours, friends, and families to visit and come together for other social purposes (e.g. gatherings, births, and deaths). In years when the winter road season is short, people feel disconnected from those in their neighbouring communities.

Community members also cross bush trails and frozen water bodies to access and conduct traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, and fishing. Wild meat still forms part of the diet of many community members, especially Elders.

Image 2: A helicopter is used to transport people from the airport to St. Theresa Point and other Island Lake communities.



### Financial Role

The winter road plays an important role in the finances of community members. Operation of the winter road helps to decrease the cost of many goods (e.g. food, wood, fuel, electrical supplies) and services (e.g. taxi) within the community. For example, fuel costs twice as much when brought in by air cargo compared with the winter road. Community members also use the winter road themselves to travel to Winnipeg to stock food and other household goods, and to have their vehicles serviced.

Operation of the winter road also provides opportunities for short-term work (unloading of trucks). The shortened season has decreased the number of trucks coming into the community, and hence the opportunity for employment. Personal transportation costs also increase when the road season is short, since individuals have to rely on a helicopter to fly them between communities or to the airport at a cost of \$175/ride.

The winter road is also important for transporting resources (e.g. fish) out of the community for sale. Some individuals also arrange with suppliers to import goods that the store doesn't stock (such as propane) over the winter road into the community for use in their homes.

Traditional activities such as fishing, hunting, and trapping are important from both a subsistence and commercial perspective. Changes in ice conditions, slush levels, and weather have shortened the season and made it more difficult to access resource areas using trails around the community. Equipment and fuel costs are high and machinery is damaged due to wear and tear on parts due to slush. In some cases, individuals have decided not to go to their trap lines at all. This results in diminished access to wild meat (for families trying to supplement their diet and offset the high cost of food at the local store) and decreased earnings for individuals undertaking these activities as a source of income. Community members now rely more frequently on food bought from the store, rather than on 'country food' from the land.

### Community Operations and Projects

Shorter winter road seasons are also impacting community operations. Project planning and development is determined in accordance with opening and closing of the winter road since it is used to bring in materials and equipment for capital projects. When the road opens late or closes early, fewer materials can come into the community. This impacts economic development, local businesses, housing, capital and special projects, and deadlines for time-sensitive funding.

Upkeep of heavy machinery requires parts from southern dealers. Airfreight charges for bringing in these parts is high and can be prohibitive. As a result, heavy machinery in the community falls behind in maintenance, and ultimately breaks down.

### Personal Health and Safety

Reliable ice conditions on winter roads and other routes in and around the community are vital to the health and safety of community members. For example, the winter road provides access to the medical centre in Garden Hill. As well, unreliable and unpredictable ice conditions in recent years have led to a number of accidents (i.e. community members falling through the ice). Most of these accidents have been non-fatal in nature, but have led to the loss of snowmobiles or the need for extensive repair work.

Community members have increased stress levels due to anxiety about changes in the climate and the winter roads. There are concerns that high stress levels can lead to other illnesses as well. There are concerns about the high level of Diabetes in the community. One individual suggested that this is related to a movement away from traditional activities, resulting in a change in diet and a sedentary lifestyle.

The community electrician also highlighted that changes in the weather (increased freeze-thaw cycles) pose a threat to household and personal safety in other ways. For example, increased moisture and frost on wires and a build-up of moisture/water in the basement or crawl spaces can cause shorts in old wiring (and subsequently an increased risk of fire) and increased potential for electrical shock while conducting work in people's homes.

## 4. Strategies, Capacity, Drivers, and Barriers

Community members identified a number of strategies that are currently used or could be used to address some of the issues related to changing conditions and decreased community access.



Image 3: The local radio station in use to provide information and send messages to community members.

### Physical Infrastructure / Winter Road Construction

The major strategy for dealing with unstable ice conditions on frozen water bodies has been the gradual movement of the winter road off the ice and onto the land. However, portions of the new route still rely upon muskeg as a base. In seasons of warm winter weather (such as this year), the muskeg poses a barrier to road construction since it does not freeze extensively or early enough to allow for a long winter road season.

In addition to the winter road route currently being used, there are two alternate routes to the Island Lake area that may become more widely used in the future should the need arise. One route is north to God's Lake Narrows, Oxford House and Thompson via a winter road that was first established in 2005. This network is seen as a potential future route for transporting freight into the community due to its more northern location. At the present time, however, community members from the St. Theresa Point area still prefer to travel along the current route that runs south to Winnipeg.

There are also plans for a route that runs west from Wasagamack to Norway House. This route will primarily be land-based and may allow for more stable access to the community, although there is no guarantee of this.

### Financial

Community members described several strategies for offsetting the financial challenges associated with living in St. Theresa Point.

In order to address the high fuel prices, the community buys fuel in bulk in December and sets the rates for the year at that time. However, fuel prices are still high and the community sometimes runs out before the roads are open. Communities in the Island Lakes area share fuel with each other wherever possible when situations such as this arise.

To address financial concerns with living in a remote community, some community members subsidize their living by hunting, fishing, and trapping. Unfortunately, poor conditions on trails, increasing fuel costs, and decreased value of furs and fish have made these activities increasingly difficult to undertake. There is a concern that this will decrease the interest and/or ability of young people to participate in this way of life. The Band and the Aboriginal Human Resources Development program provide some funds to support these activities, but these are quite limited. Community members feel that there is a need for greater subsidies to help youth and others acquire the necessary tools (e.g. traps, nets fuel, ATVs, snowmobiles) to participate in this traditional lifestyle.

The Northern Store is currently the only store in St. Theresa Point. Locally run businesses have generally not been successful. The short winter road season is increasing the cost of goods and making it difficult for small local stores to operate. Since these stores do not buy and transport large quantities of goods, they cannot compete with the prices at the Northern Store. Some community members suggested that a subsidy program to decrease the freight costs would

allow for the operation of local stores (such as a community co-op).

Community businesses and band administration often buy their necessary supplies right when they know that the winter road is about to open. For this reason, the community is reliant on obtaining goods from whoever has available stock at the time. If materials were purchased earlier in the season, it would provide an opportunity to take advantage of competitive pricing. However, early purchasing would also require short to long-term storage of materials while waiting for the winter road to open. This could offset the savings associated with purchasing items at lower prices.

### **Personal Health and Safety**

Community members are using various strategies to address safety concerns associated with winter travel. For example, people now wait longer before travelling on ice-based routes and stop travelling earlier in the season. One trapper indicated that he uses the safety guidelines set out in the Manitoba Trappers Association Guide. Some trappers now use longer land-based routes (via snowmobiles) or fly by helicopter rather than crossing frozen water bodies to access their resource areas. Other community members also use the helicopter more frequently for travel between communities and the airport. These strategies all address concerns about equipment and personal safety. The major barrier to using these strategies, however, is the financial cost associated with them.

### **All-Weather Road**

One of the strategies has been suggested to address the isolation of the Island Lakes communities is the construction of an all-weather road. The route of the all-weather road could be a direct route to the south along the route of the current winter road or it could be west to Norway House from Wasagamack.

Community members see many benefits associated with the construction of the all-weather road. For example, there could be an increase in tourism and growth in economic development projects. As well, it might allow the community to undertake local business ventures such as a community-operated co-op, a sawmill, or an outfitter lodge. The access of an all-weather road would also allow the community to access education programs in larger centres, while remaining in their community or returning home more frequently if the distance is too great.

In the past, Elders expressed concerns that an all-weather road would impact the environment (e.g. plants and animals) and introduce drugs and alcohol into the community. However, with increased concerns about the future of the winter road, there is now more support for the all-weather road. One community member believes that planning of the all-weather road needs to get underway now in order to determine who will build the road, when will it be done, and how the environment will be protected.

### **Training and Programs**

Community members from St. Theresa Point indicated that solutions to their problems need to come from within the

community, but training and subsidy programs are required. For example, the youth need to learn how to survive on the land. This can only be done by increasing their participation in traditional activities (such as hunting, trapping, and fishing). Herman Harper (Zone President of the local trapper association) indicated he is looking for ways to subsidize traditional activities and means for increasing youth involvement. If the all-weather road is approved, community members will also need training so that they can participate in its construction. A barrier to implementing programs is lack of financial support from the government and/or difficulties finding funding partners.

### **Communication**

Many people within the community have valuable information, but it is difficult to get people to speak out or to provide feedback. Community participation at meetings is low. One suggestion for increasing community involvement was to coordinate meetings regarding issues of concern with social events such as Bingo night. Providing door prizes would further increase participation. Having a call-in show on the radio was also suggested as a means for fostering communication on important issues.

With the change in climate, there has been increased discussion around the community about ice conditions. However, no formal system for reporting conditions is in place. Some individuals recommended that the local radio station be used to provide information about ice conditions and to issue warnings about problem areas, particularly when conditions are changing rapidly.

## **5. Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Community Members**

- Don't wait to be saved - get involved
- Be united and voice concerns with a strong voice
- Trust each other and support community-based projects
- Work together (with Chief and Council and Government)

### **Chief and Council**

- Look for potential problems before they occur
- Be more proactive and less reactionary
- Take action based on ideas from community meetings
- Set up a committee to address ideas
- Address the larger issues (not just the symptoms)
- Communicate and explain issues to the government
- Work together (with community and Government)

### **Tribal Council**

- Listen to community concerns
- Take action to address concerns of the community

### **Government (Federal and Provincial)**

- Listen to community concerns
- Provide funds for local initiatives
- Work together (with each other and with Chief, Council and community members)
- Move more quickly on matters in order to prevent delays (especially important for federal government)