



FOOD MATTERS MANITOBA

APRIL/MAY 2025

# THE NORTHERN SUN

**“THE MERCURY LEVELS ARE  
CLOSE TO DOUBLING FROM  
SAFE EATING LEVELS”**











# THE NORTHERN SUN

ISSUE 6  
APRIL/MAY 2025

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Transitional Executive Director CYNTHIA NEUDOERFFER

## CONTRIBUTORS

LAWRENCE SAUNDERS JR.

CHERYL ANTONIO

VIVIAN LIN

PAUL NICE

HELPING HANDS 4-H CLUB

CHANTAL M. SCHROMEDA

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INFO@FOODMATTERSMANITOBA.CA

The Northern Sun is a quarterly publication designed to inform and educate readers about Food Matters Manitoba's efforts in Indigenous food sovereignty. Articles reinforce these values, efforts, and highlight our Northern partners' work in their communities.

Online [www.foodmattersmanitoba.ca](http://www.foodmattersmanitoba.ca)

Email: [info@foodmattersmanitoba.ca](mailto:info@foodmattersmanitoba.ca)

Phone 204 - 943 - 0822

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DESIGN (ABOVE) BY DILAXSHY SIVAGURUNATHAN





## FEATURE

# MERCURY HEALTH THREAT

*Manitoba Hydro's keeyask project leaves fish inedible for locals in Makeso Sakahikan (Fox Lake/Gillam).*

**BY CHANTAL MARIE SCHROMEDA  
&  
LAWRENCE SAUNDERS JR.**

As traditional harvesters pack their fishing gear with youth in tow, they prepare for a long commute 50 kms south of Makeso Sakahikan (Fox Lake/Gillam) to harvest and process healthy fish they can bring back and distribute amongst the community.

With high mercury levels in the Nelson and Stephen's waters due to Manitoba Hydro's flooding from the reservoir for the hydroelectric keeyask project, the fish are no longer safe to consume.

"This is our new normal for the next 15-20 years," says traditional harvester Lawrence Saunders. "This is the distance we must travel now just for fish and further."

The keeyask project is a 695 megawatt renewable hydroelectric energy generating station near Gull Rapids on Nelson River that will be integrated into Hydro's electric system for use in Manitoba and for export outside the province, according to the Keeyask Environmental Impact Statement. The project consists of principal, supporting, and permanent structures - a powerhouse and service bay complex, dams, dykes, roads, communication tower, work areas, etc. Mercury levels in species such as Lake Whitefish, Northern Pike, and Walleye are expected to increase around two to five times from the 45 sq km of flooded land from the reservoir in Gull and Stephen's Lake.

Long-term flooding of lands following the construction of reservoirs accelerates the conversion of naturally occurring inorganic mercury to methyl-mercury, according to the Manitoba Government. Methyl-mercury is an organic and more toxic form of mercury that accumulates in fish. While methyl-mercury levels eventually decline, it takes 20-35 years to do so.

"The mercury levels are close to doubling from safe eating levels," says Saunders. "Every lake has mercury but there's certain levels that are considered safe to consume, and ours in the Stephen's Lake and Nelson River are way too high right now."



While there has been debate on safe fish consumption levels, there is a 0.5 ppm (parts per million) consumption guideline set for commercial fishing by Health Canada for the general population. A threshold of 0.2 ppm has also been utilized by Canada as a safe consumption limit for those eating large quantities of fish, according to the Fox Lake Cree Nation's Environment Evaluation Report. According to the Manitoba Government, the 0.2 ppm threshold also holds for safe methyl-mercury consumption guidelines for the sensitive population - women of childbearing age and children under 12. Mercury concentrations for the keeyask project are expected to exceed the 0.5 ppm recommendations by Health Canada.

According to recent post-impoundment mercury concentration results in Gull Lake provided by Hydro, average mercury concentrations in pickerel and jackfish are 1 ppm. Average 2024 concentrations in Gull Lake whitefish were 0.19 ppm, while mercury concentrations of pickerel and jackfish in Stephen's Lake were 0.5 ppm.

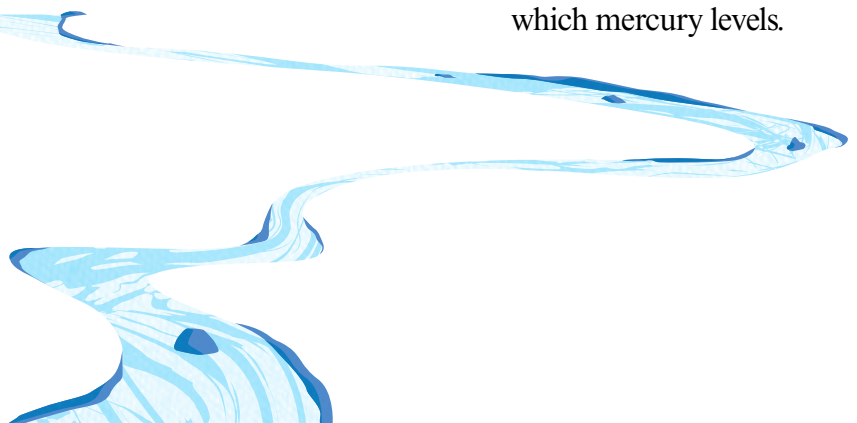
*Harvesters like Saunders are concerned about the community's health, eating less wild food, having to rely on southern buyers, and needing to travel further to lakes and rivers that don't flow into the Nelson.*

According to Health Canada, methyl-mercury can cause personality changes, tremors, deafness, memory loss, changes in vision, etc. Children are especially vulnerable and could experience a decrease in IQ, delays in walking and talking, blindness, seizures, etc.

And while no one in the community is believed to have been sick from mercury recently, Saunders is hoping it stays that way.

To determine community members' mercury levels, north and south consultants have been coordinating yearly mercury testing.

According to 2023 mercury test results provided by Hydro, approximately 67 participants from Kiscewaskahikan (York Factory) and Makeso Sakahikan provided 122 hair samples and 58 food surveys to measure their mercury levels. Of those, 54 per cent were non-sensitive adults (men over 18 and women post-menopause), 34 per cent were sensitive adults (women of child bearing age and all minors), and 12 per cent were sensitive minors. Of the participants, 70 per cent ate fish, 13 per cent did not eat fish, and 16 per cent were unknown (did not provide a food survey). The results range from 0.0051 to 5.13 ppm found in participants. While Hydro states that 0.39 ppm was the average mercury level found in participants, the results do not specify which test group acquired which mercury levels.





Hydro states they are working on obtaining more recent mercury test results from the community.

Hydro also provided results for a wild food survey showing most participants do continue to harvest, share, and eat fish from non-keeyask impacted water, with some limited fishing on Stephen's Lake.

When prompted about efforts Hydro has taken to work in collaboration with the community, Hydro spokesperson, Peter Chura, points to the project's mercury fact sheet.

"This document speaks to the efforts taken to address potential and expressed concerns," he says.

The document addresses Hydro's ongoing mercury tests, the hiring of mercury community coordinators to serve as local information resources about mercury and health, coordinating hair sampling and information sessions with youth, fishing events, and the preparation of Cree-informed communication materials such as a food web poster and calendars, along with the Healthy Food Fish Program.

Updated "Safe Catch" signage and government issued public notices were also installed in 2023 at two Stephen's Lake boat launch locations in the Gillam area, and at upstream and downstream keeyask boat launch areas.

But many people in the community are still unaware of the mercury levels.

"There's lots of new people moving here and plus, all the contractors fishing all summer," he says. "There's signs at the fishing spots but nobody reads them."

The Healthy Food Fish Program is a part of the Adverse Effects Agreements, which Hydro states they had negotiated with each partner Indigenous community. The program is intended to provide opportunities for the community to continue fishing by paying for the cost of a cabin, dock, ice house, storage shed, and fish cleaning table at Waskaiowaka, Recluse, Pelletier, Myre, and Limestone, according to the Keeyask Environmental Evaluation. While the evaluation shows there are four snow machines and sleds, four boats and motors, and fishing nets available, they must be purchased.

Proper transportation is a necessity to reach healthier waters, and Saunders wants to see a collaboration to meet halfway on coming up with an accessible solution.





“I’d like to see a collaboration where Hydro and Fox Lake meet halfway on making a positive way for us to get fresh fish all year round from the southern areas until our waters are healthy again because it’s a main part of our Indigenous diet,” he says. “Our future generation needs to know our ways of life but we can’t teach that part of it right now due to insufficient transportation out on the land to get to the healthier waters.”

**L**ocal non-profit Food Matters Manitoba (FMM) helps support community-led food initiatives and has provided harvesters in Makeso Sakahikan with nets, fishing rods for summer and winter, and line. FMM has also supported community fishing events and the building of smokehouses to smoke fish.

“Most of our support goes to rental and fuel costs associated with getting onto the land to places where fish can be harvested,” says Northern Programs Manager, Myles King.

Despite offering transportation support, FMM would need a significant amount of funding to create routine trips to healthier waters, he adds.

“Some funders restrict funding to not be used for fuel or the rental of personal vehicles for this type of work,” he says.

FMM also helps coordinate other ways for the community to access healthy fish. The annual trip to Kinosao Sipi (Norway House) is an opportunity for harvesters and the youth to harvest fish unaffected by Hydro development.

“It’s cost extensive but participants love the experience, and the fish is well received when brought back to the community,” adds King.

Last year in March, harvesters from Kinosao Sipi, Kisipakamak (Brochet), and Makeso Sakahikan spent two days ice fishing with youth. Over 50 walleye were brought back to the community to hand out and have a fish fry.

**T**he relationship between Hydro and the community has been one of exploitation since Hydro development began in the early 1960s. The keeyask project is seen as an additional development tallied onto decades worth of damage, states the Fox Lake Cree Nation Environment Evaluation Report.

For Leslie Dysart, CEO of the Community Association of South Indian Lake (CASIL) and traditional harvester, mercury concerns in Makeso Sakahikan parallel how his community has been impacted by Hydro.

“We here in the community of O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (South Indian Lake) have ongoing concerns of mercury levels,” he says.

The community was flooded in the early 1970s as a result of the Churchill Diversion Project, continually experiencing excessive water level fluctuations that can be described as additional flooding annually. The initial flooding and annual fluctuations contribute to added mercury in the food chain, explains Dysart.

The community was and is, a fishing community, and Dysart has heard many concerns over the years that remain unaddressed.

“Both Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro barely acknowledge the ongoing mercury contamination, and do not study or monitor the consumption and damage to the community,” he adds.



With no information programs or resources to inform people, Dysart explains that Canada and the Manitoba Government do not inform the community of health concerns and that there has only been two tests in the community during his lifetime, to date.

“When I was twelve, I was tested and had a high concentration of mercury. I was tested again in my 30s and told it was “normal,” but this leads to many questions and further concerns,” he continues. “I and my family continue to consume fish on a regular basis, perhaps more than the average resident.”

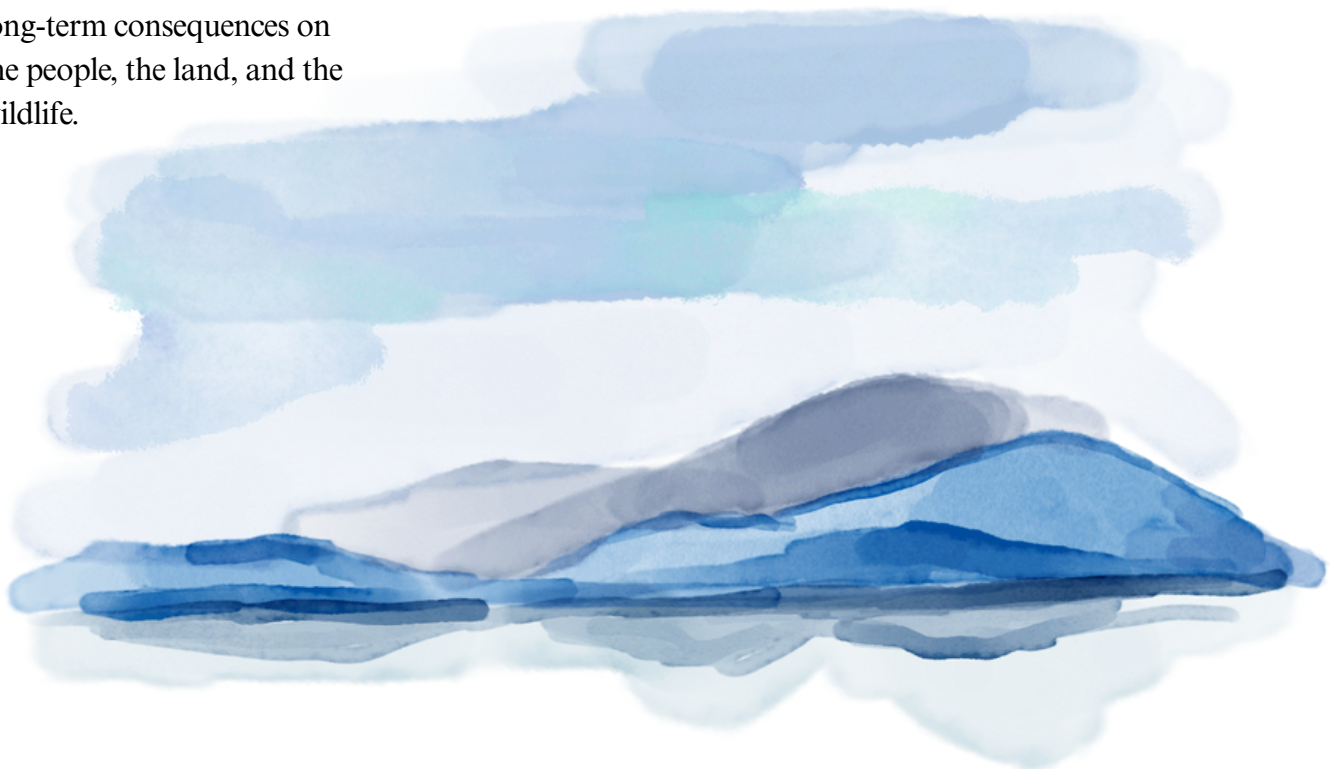
**T**he dangers from high mercury levels have short and long-term consequences on the people, the land, and the wildlife.

“In the short term, this issue can disrupt people’s daily lives by forcing communities to outsource food and resources that were once locally available,” says FMM’s Northern Coordinator, Morgan McCurdy. “It can lead to a loss of land use and increased reliance on expensive goods. If not addressed, the long term effects could be catastrophic.”

Continued exposure to contaminated fish and water from the polluted river can lead to mercury poisoning, which would create a greater need for a more robust and intensive healthcare system, she explains.

It’s important for Hydro to take a transparent approach on lasting impacts and new projects if any progress is going to be made, adds King.

*“Hydro has left its impact on the territory, so finding new ways to restore, access, and preserve the land for future generations must be done through honest dialogue,” he says.*









## COMMUNITY

## SPRING BITES

*Helping Hands 4-H Club in The Pas heads out to the Saskatchewan River for ice fishing.*

**BY CHERYL ANTONIO**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHERYL ANTONIO**

**S**pring in the north usually means the fish are biting!

Our club headed out to the Saskatchewan River, along with our friends Edith and Shawn from Round the Bend Farm to try our luck on the ice.

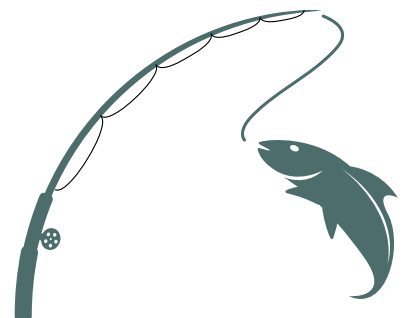
The Pas/Opaskwayak are situated along the river and many access it yearlong for fishing, hunting, and plant harvesting. Edith and Shawn have a nice ice fishing shack just a short walk down the river from town and we were able to get all our chairs and ice fishing equipment easily down to the spot by skidoo and walking.

It was a beautiful evening, the temperatures and the wind were kind to us. Shawn had pre-drilled several holes and had started a fire by the time we all got there.

The fish are beginning to feel the warm temperatures from the sun and are surely starting to feel hungry for the spring food! We eagerly dropped our baited hooks with the hopes of catching the big one! We learned the fish also like to bite in the spring because of the increased daylight and because it is the beginning of spawning season for many of the species. The warmer temperatures also cause the fish's metabolism to speed up, leading to increased activity and hunger. The fish are returning to shallower waters.

**A**s the sun began to set, we felt the need to stretch our legs and to have a bite to eat. Shawn supplied the snacks, and we all enjoyed a hot dog cooked over the fire. Toni, a roofer from Germany, showed us how to roast both your wiener and your bun at the same time!

***We were  
skunked this time  
but will not give  
up! We will return  
and try our luck  
again!***







## COMMUNITY

## CULTURAL CAMP TEACHINGS

*Helping Hands 4-H Club in The Pas attends culture camp.*

**BY CHERYL ANTONIO**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHERYL ANTONIO**

**E**arly April, 20 high school students and three chaperones from The Pas attended the Simon Nabess Wayside Park near Cormorant for Culture Camp. The kids had an amazing time on the land learning from skilled knowledge keepers.

The first day consisted of learning how to make a rabbit snare and then a hike through sometimes knee deep snow into the bush to set them. Although the trail had been packed over the winter, warm temperatures and many feet made it soft in some places. It was shared how to tell where a good spot to put the snare was, and there were many stories about the different animal and bird tracks seen along the way.

Back at camp, attendees began many different activities including loading wood, chopping wood, getting fishing gear ready, and story sharing. After a hearty lunch, everyone headed out onto the lake for some ice hole making and fishing. The wind was cutting and cold but the kids were having a great time. One fish was caught by a young person who had never done so before!

Camp chef Doris had an amazing supper ready when everyone got back.



Most were ready to enjoy sitting around the fire for the evening, swapping stories and making s'mores, but some hardy fishermen went back out!! Another first time fisher caught a nice one! Both fish were used to show how to clean them. The trout was scaled and gutted while the walleye was cleaned into fillets and cheeks. It wasn't long after the camp was quiet as everyone was tucked away and sleeping!

**D**ay two was filled with many fun events and activities. There was fire making, wood chopping, snare checking, bannock on a stick making, duck plucking, duck singeing, duck gutting, and duck chopping before they went into the pot for soup. There was also a great presentation on the beaver and how to clean a beaver pelt.

By this time, all the participants were willing story sharers and much was learned from each other.

Later in the day, everyone set out onto the lake again where it was shown how a commercial fishing net was dropped and lifted. Everyone was super impressed with the skills required to do this. Holes were again chopped and lines went down. The snow was perfect for making large snowballs, larger than you could even use to make a snowman! The boys had a great time rolling on them and breaking them down when it was time to pack up and go. That evening, those who didn't go fishing played Cree bingo.

On the last morning of the camp, after cabin inspection, the group had a closing circle. Everyone held the feather and shared their thoughts about the camp, including the staff who were now like family.

Gifts were given from the heart to the Nabess family and their helpers. Many hugs and handshakes were shared and the students were seen waving from the bus windows until you could see them no more.

*It was an amazing camp, the first overnight one held by MBCI. The first of many, if all things work out.*













## FIRST PERSON

## GREEN GIVEAWAY

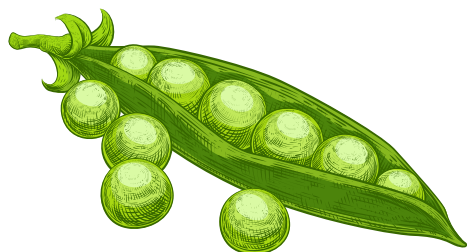
*Teacher Vivian Lin in Tataskweyak (Split Lake) reflects on her end of school year garden plans.*

BY VIVIAN LIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIVIAN LIN

In the middle or end of May when the weather is warmer, I am going to have a giveaway event. Students and staff have been asking about it. I was planning to give away coleus and some flowers like marigolds, pot marigolds, cosmos, etc.

Now, I am thinking of giving away some vegetable plants like cherry tomatoes, green onions, basil, chard, kale, peas, and beans. This may happen in May and in June before we close school for the summer. The plants from the grow tower will be given away in June as well.



Our music teacher Dieter Beardy is a true coleus gardener now, he has the biggest collection in town and all grow well in his house and in his classroom. He is going to expand it in his classroom next year. He said, “I’d never thought that at this age I’d be growing plants as a hobby.”

I told Dieter that he is a great great great grandfather for all his baby plants.

We also have some gardeners in the community taking care of the coleus I gave away last year. If I have time and space to grow more, I am even thinking about bringing some to York Landing since some Yorkers are asking about the plants.

We are also going to build a small outdoor garden. Manitoba First Nation’s Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) supported us with some funding to start an outdoor garden in the front of the school. The industrial arts teacher, Rosemary, is in charge of it. She wants to put some plants and flowers in front of the school. She also wants to build some benches for kids to sit and enjoy the outdoor view. She has a nice plan in mind. My job is to get some flowers ready for June.

We are also still working with the breakfast program weekly. We make salad with all the greens from the growtowers.

I have added more varieties to the salad. In addition to lettuce and tomatoes, we have added kale, chard, and dill to go with chicken breast and homemade croutons.

We possibly will stop at the beginning of June because we need to get the towers cleaned and put away for next year.

**W**e have been providing green onions and dill to the land based program for their egg salad and dill sauce for fish!! It's good. I was told they harvested a lot and froze it for later use.

Landbase teachers are also thinking about getting a garden close to their landbase cabin. I told them I have seeds from Food Matters and they are very welcome to use them.

We also have thrips on two of the towers but it's under control since I'm able to wash the whole plants once a week and spray with soapy water heavily.

**S**urely we have some sad news. After the Christmas vacation, thrips appeared again. They attacked the green onions in soil even though I had been spraying them with soapy water mixed with rubbing alcohol. I finally had to discard the whole table of green onions and start from scratch again in the grow towers. Now, the thrips are attacking coleus but not so bad. I am using the End-All that I got from Food Matters last year and it's working so far.

The strawberries are also growing poorly. The leaves and flower buds are drying up, and the roots are rotting. Last year the strawberries were in good pots, we may try different varieties - some in aerogarden and some in pots. It will be a learning curve in the future.

*I am hoping next year there will be more teachers to participate in indoor gardening. I am also hoping we can engage more students in gardening.*











## FIRST PERSON

## SPRING HARVESTING

*Youth harvester Paul Nice's update on his harvesting over the spring months.*

**BY PAUL NICE**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL NICE**

**A**s the month of March comes to an end, I've been slowing down on my hunting.

Spring is coming and the animals are slowly going to be having babies soon, so instead I've been focusing on fishing. The warm weather is a nice breath of fresh air after a cold harsh winter.

As mid April rolls around, snow is dropping faster than ever. Pretty soon I'll have to put the snow machine away.

**B**efore that I've still gone out for a lot of ice fishing. Getting the most out of the warm weather before the ice melts too much.

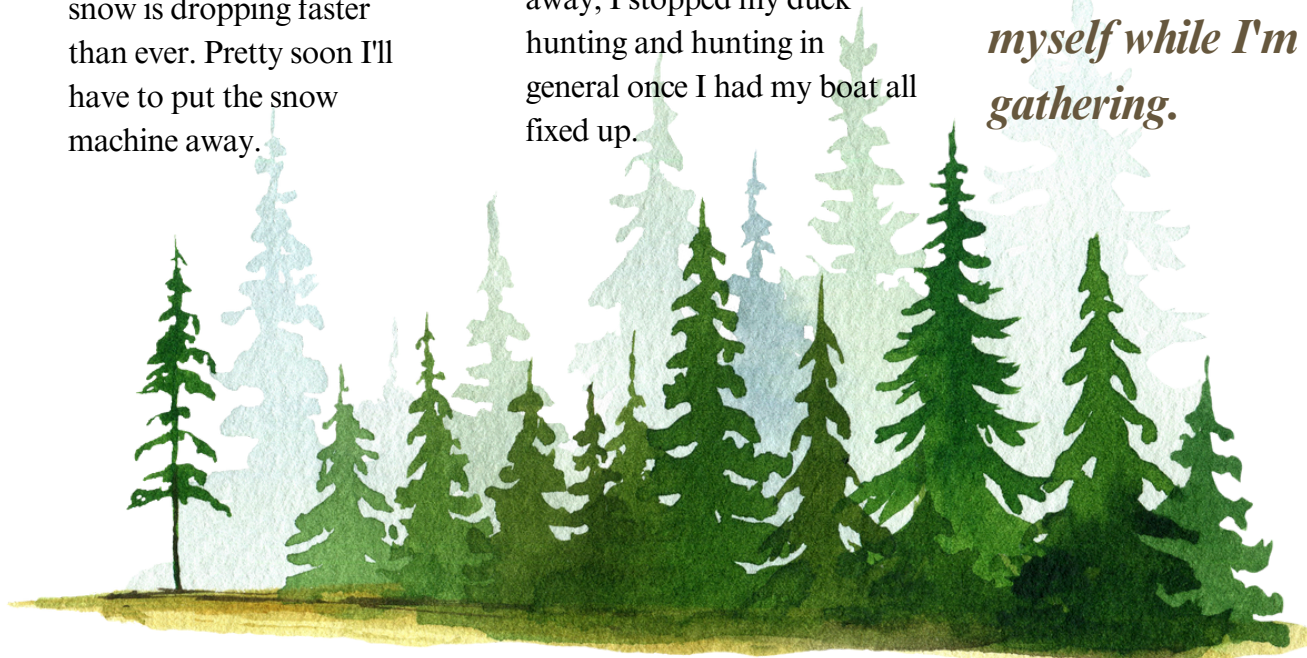
With the ice melting comes open water, and more opportunities for hunting and fishing. I've started practicing my waterfowl calls for when the ducks and geese come on down.

As the ice finally melted away, I stopped my duck hunting and hunting in general once I had my boat all fixed up.

**I**'ve been spending all my time on the water soaking up the warmth and watching the land come to life again after the harsh winter months.

I can't wait to start working on my boat to get ready for boating season and spend more time out on the water.

*I am looking forward to what the future holds for myself while I'm out gathering.*









**FOOD****WALLYBOBS****RECIPE BY HELPING HANDS 4-H CLUB**

Fishermen across the north are enjoying their spring catch in many delicious ways. Here is one of our favourite recipes for Walleye - a northern favourite combined with local birch syrup (bbq sauce), harvested by Rocky Lake Birch Syrup just north of The Pas. Owners Alan and Johanna McLauchlan, have been long- time supporters of Helping Hands, inviting us to tour their birch syrup making facility and to learn how to prepare this dish!

Ingredients

- Fish fillets cut into bite size pieces (your choice of fillets, about 1 pound)
- Salt, pepper, lemon pepper
- Bacon
- 2 tablespoons soya sauce
- 1 tablespoon mustard
- 1 ½ tablespoons ketchup
- 1 teaspoon each of minced garlic and ginger
- ¼ cup of Rocky Lake Birchworks breakfast syrup

Directions

1. Wash and pat dry the bite sized pieces of fish. Season with salt, pepper, and lemon pepper. Wrap each with bacon and thread several onto a skewer. If using wooden skewers, soak them for at least an hour ahead of time so they won't burn.
2. Combine the remaining ingredients for the bbq sauce, adjusting to your tastes.
3. Heat a bbq or turn on the broiler to high. Add the wallybobs and turn the heat down to medium-high. Keep a close eye on it so it doesn't burn or start a big fire!
4. When the bacon is almost cooked to your liking, start basting with the bbq sauce and continue to rotate the bobs and adding sauce until they are cooked through.

**You can find out more about birch syrup on their website:**

<https://rocky-lake-birch-syrup-2.myshopify.com/>



## GAMES

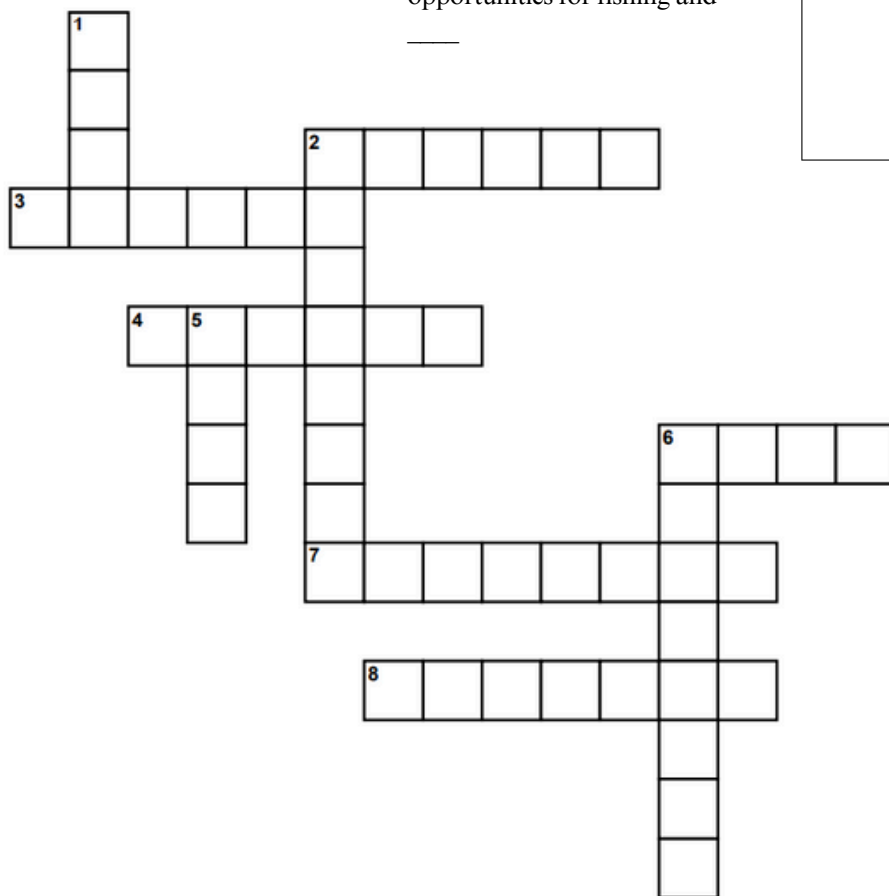
# THE NORTHERN SUN CROSSWORD

PRESENTED BY **FOOD MATTERS MANITOBA**

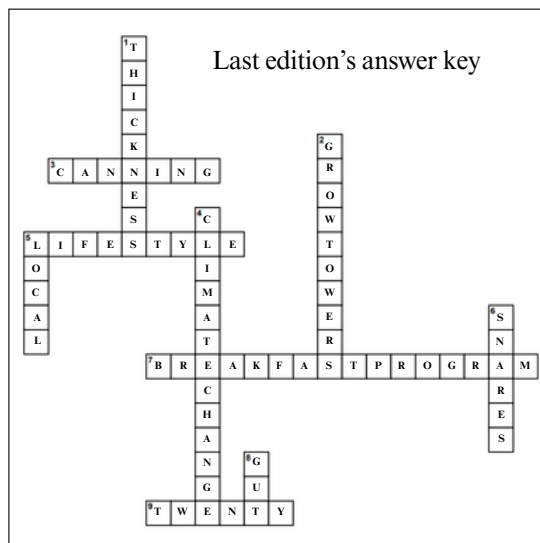
## ACROSS

2. Youth harvester Paul Nice can't wait to see what the \_\_\_\_\_ has in store for him
3. \_\_\_\_\_ mercury causes serious health effects

4. Plants and flowers will be planted in front of the \_\_\_\_\_
6. Harvesters must travel \_\_\_\_\_ distances for healthy fish
7. Vegetables and flowers for the community
8. Melted ice means more opportunities for fishing and \_\_\_\_\_



Last edition's answer key



## DOWN

1. Increased daylight and the beginning of spawning season in the spring means fish \_\_\_\_\_
2. Inedible fish from high mercury
5. Students learning land-based skills
6. Sharing stories enables \_\_\_\_\_

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# CALL FOR DONATIONS

Food Matters Manitoba is committed to supporting Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) and evacuees during this wildfire crisis.

Your funds will go directly towards helping to support children, elders, families, and their communities during this difficult time.

Any funds are appreciated.

**Donate Today**



