

Mass evacuations in western Canada due to forest fires

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10 July 2015

Massive forest fires have engulfed large parts of northern British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alaska. Across north-western Canada, more than 450 fires are burning, enveloping some 2.3 million hectares (8,800 square miles).

Saskatchewan is hardest hit, with 115 fires raging. Fifty-eight of these are over 100 hectares in size and some as large as 26,000 hectares. Only 10 fires have been contained. Saskatchewan has seen 582 wildfires this year, compared to a total of 210 last year. Large parts of the province's north are currently blanketed in smoke.

So far, 54 communities have been evacuated, forcing 13,000 people to flee their homes without many of their belongings or animals. Evacuees have been moved like refugees to shelters in Prince Rupert, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, Regina and Cold Lake. Some 600 firefighters and 200 support workers have battled the fires for weeks using 40 helicopters and 19 planes.

Thousands were evacuated from the town of La Ronge last weekend, including residents of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. Fire crews are currently battling to prevent the flames from engulfing the town, which normally has a population of 2,700.

Residents of Montreal Lake First Nation were given just two hours' notice of their evacuation, and 15 families' homes burned on Saturday. Residents say they were told they were safe even though the fire was just two kilometres away, only to be instructed soon after to quickly board buses, with many not knowing where they were going.

Residents have been left to rely on the generosity of local communities and Red Cross volunteers. Several Facebook groups have sprung up to help the evacuees and to coordinate volunteer efforts, including "Sask Evacuations—Helping One Another" and "Families Helping Families Donation Warehouse."

In Cold Lake, where the Red Cross has set up a centre for evacuees, reports indicate that the charity is struggling to cope with the arrival of over a thousand people. Local residents have opened their houses to evacuees and are

trying to support them by cooking food and organizing camp sites. "We're in need of help!" said Nancy Scannie from the Cold Lake First Nation. "They're overcrowded, short of food and even shoes!"

The resources allocated by the provinces and federal government are utterly inadequate, as demonstrated by the fact that Saskatchewan had used up its entire annual fire budget before the La Ronge evacuation. The wildfire season runs until October.

The Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, the national body that brokers requests for firefighting personnel, equipment and aircraft across Canada, is inundated with requests for additional resources. National supplies are running thin, and programs are over budget, although the fire season is just starting. The Centre is operating at its highest level of preparedness, yet it says, "national resource levels are insufficient to meet occurring and anticipated wild land fire activity." Personnel and equipment have been called in from the US and even Mexico.

The federal Conservative government has deployed 500 soldiers from Edmonton to northern Saskatchewan, following a request last weekend from the province's premier, Brad Wall. It was also announced Wednesday that federal supplies of beds and blankets have been shipped to evacuation centres in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

With 866 fires since April 1, British Columbia has seen twice as many wildfires as last year. On Sunday alone, 27 new fires were reported and over 220,000 hectares are in flames. The Vancouver Island community of Port Hardy and the Squamish Lillooet Regional District issued states of emergency, and local mines and power projects have been evacuated.

BC authorities say their resources are at breaking point, and are anticipating that 30 new fires will start every day due to extremely dry conditions. The provincial government has already spent \$90 million fighting the fires, surpassing the \$63 million budgeted for the year.

"The availability of resources is at a critical level, and any significant increase in fire load will be difficult for us to

manage,” said Curtis Isfeld of the BC Wildfire Service. He added that all available crews were currently deployed around the province.

Tragically, John Phare, 60, a father of three who lived in Robert’s Creek, BC, died when struck by a falling tree while fighting a fire near Schelt. He had been a logger for 40 years and is now considered a local hero. The BC Coroner’s Service, WorkSafeBC, the Wildfire Service and the RCMP are investigating his death.

The fires have produced serious air quality warnings in the Metro Vancouver region. Babies and anyone with allergies or breathing problems were advised to stay indoors on Sunday, as a thick blanket of haze covered the sky.

The health risks from smoke and flames are compounded by food, fuel and water shortages, with many elderly people reportedly panicked about the availability of their medications and worried about loved ones living and working in the bush. Many highways are closed due to smoke conditions and fire threats. Families are registering with the Red Cross, searching for missing family members and posting photos on line. The fact that Red Cross workers do not speak Dene or Cree is hampering the search.

A significant number of the communities hardest hit by the wildfires are inhabited by First Nations peoples, who confront face high levels of poverty and government neglect.

Criticism has grown of Saskatchewan’s “let it burn” policy, under which the province allegedly only fights fires within a 20 kilometre radius of communities. Northern residents say this is unacceptable, because it leaves out valuable areas such as trap lines and associated cabins and structures, endangers their health and destroys their territory. Officials have denied such a policy exists, but admit that fires are being prioritized based on their proximity to communities.

Saskatchewan’s new 2014 Wildfires Act, which came into force on April 1 this year, actually makes it easier to burn areas. For example, burning permits are no longer required to burn within 4.5 kilometres of the provincial forest during the wildfire season. Instead, only burn notifications are required, which the government described as being “simpler” and “more flexible.” This “reform,” which included new regulations devolving responsibilities from the provincial government onto local municipalities, was hailed by the government as “a modern regulatory framework that ensures public safety while fostering sustainable economic growth.”

In neighbouring Alberta, 95 wildfires are currently raging. Last year, 1400 fires burned 230 square kilometers. In 2011, the Town of Slave Lake was destroyed by fire.

Alberta’s Firesmart Program’s wildfire-fighting budget was slashed this year by \$6.5 million. The program clears

brush around rural towns and hires air tanker groups to drop water on fires. Cuts to the Environment ministry’s budget total \$35 million.

Media reports on these fires barely mention climate change, as if the protracted dry weather that has marked most recent years was entirely natural. In truth, the lack of preparedness at all levels of government is all the more damning given the widespread warnings by scientists of the impact of dryer climates as a result of global warming and, in this year’s case, a strong el Niño effect.

The wildfires are part of a global trend. The Union of Concerned Scientists reports that the average length of the wildfire season in the Western US grew from five months in the 1970s to over seven months today. They attribute the fires to an earlier snow melt in spring, due to hotter spring temperatures. The effects of global warming on temperature, precipitation levels and soil moisture are turning forests across the globe into kindling.

2013 was the hottest year ever recorded on the Australian Continent, with nine of the 10 warmest recorded years occurring since 2001. The Australian Climate Council issued a report linking global carbon emissions, worldwide temperature increases and the number and intensity of heatwaves, drought and fires. Heatwaves are being experienced across the southern hemisphere, from Africa to South America.

Meanwhile, Canada’s Conservative government is not sending anyone to the Climate Summit of the Americas being held in Toronto next week, even though cabinet members will be in the building that day attending other big business events. The Conservatives are notorious for their close ties to the major oil corporations and indifference to the threat posed by climate change.



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