

Fort McMurray residents return to badly damaged city

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Over the past two weeks, as thousands of Fort McMurray families have returned to their homes, many to dig through the rubble of what remains of their neighbourhoods and possessions, the full scale of the destruction wrought by modern Canada's worst ever wildfire is only now becoming clear.

Around 90,000 residents were forced to flee their homes May 3 as the wildfire entered Fort McMurray. Slightly more than 10 percent of the city, 2,432 buildings, were destroyed by the fire and many hundreds more are unusable due to smoke damage or the presence of toxic materials.

Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Mayor Melissa Blake said it is not certain that the most damaged neighbourhoods, including Beacon Hill, Abasand, and Water Ways, will be rebuilt. Charred foundations are all that remains of most houses in these areas.

According to test results seen by the *Globe and Mail*, levels of benzene and arsenic in these three neighbourhoods are 20 times higher than the limit deemed safe by the Alberta government. Fully 19 different metals and compounds were found to be above recommended limits. Reports have suggested that the cheap materials used to build many of the properties exacerbated the problem.

Environmental testing of the ash in hundreds of homes and buildings has established toxin levels 200 times higher than safe exposure amounts. Despite the obvious health risks, the provincial government authorized a phased reentry of Fort McMurray residents beginning June 5. If residents had not been allowed back, the province would have had to provide them with additional financial support.

While the wildfire was the immediate cause of the destruction of thousands of homes, the terrible conditions to which many are returning are the product of the capitalist profit system. Fort McMurray emerged over

recent decades as a boom town to serve Alberta's oil tar sands. In stark contrast to the multibillion-dollar profits extracted by Big Oil on an annual basis, virtually nothing was done to prepare the residents for an event which had been predicted by scientists for at least a decade, in part due to the effects of climate change.

Costs for rebuilding and supporting returning residents are largely being met by generous donations from people across the country. The Red Cross reported at the beginning of the month that \$125 million had been raised for reconstruction. Total damages were estimated by one insurer at \$9 billion.

Returning residents face a series of threats to public health. During much of the last two months air quality contamination rates were off the charts, reaching thirty-eight on a scale that normally goes from one to ten.

Dr. Irena Buka, the director of the Edmonton Children's Environmental Health Clinic, has announced a clinical assessment trial to gauge how Fort McMurray's bad air quality is affecting the lungs of children. Dr. Buka said the goal of the assessment was to ensure children receive good clinical care and to plan for a better response to future fires. "We need to plan for these types of fires," she said, "This is not going to be the last time there is a fire in Alberta."

Experts are also deeply concerned about the impact toxic ash will have on the water supply as it enters the Athabasca River. Recent rainy weather resulted in sediment lying on the ground being washed into the river, and specialists are still testing to find out what chemicals are present.

All Fort McMurray schools will remain closed until September; the school year has been ended early, and several schools may never be deemed fit to reopen. An environmental assessment found that Beacon Hill School was structurally sound, but due to the lack of notice to evacuate, windows were left open exposing the school's

interior to smoke and ash.

Public School Board Chair Jeff Thompson announced on June 9 that the approximately 200 Beacon Hill school children will have to attend a school in another neighbourhood next year, as it will take till the end of 2016 to clean the school.

Fort McMurray Catholic School Superintendent George McGuigan announced two schools will remain closed next year, Father Beauregard School in Abasand and Good Shepherd School in Beacon Hill. While both are structurally sound and smoke damage is minimal, the potentially toxic environment around the schools makes them unsafe for human habitation—displacing approximately 450 more students.

Due to fire damage, the city's only Francophone school, Ecole Boreal, also in Abasand, will also remain shut in September. McGuigan and Thompson said the schools may be forced to remain closed for good if the neighbourhoods are rebuilt elsewhere due to soil contamination.

There have been reports of families pushing past the security fences to search contaminated areas as secure perimeters were not enforced by the municipality or the province.

Many working-class families are experiencing grave hardship. The Wildfire Donation Centre in Edmonton is appealing to the public for donations of basic items such as canned meat, peanut butter, baby food and formula, baby bottles, pillows, towels, first-aid kits, children's shoes, antiseptic wipes and bottled water. Several Facebook groups of people offering and needing assistance have sprung up.

The Fort McMurray food bank reopened June 11. A manager at the food bank said it is planning to feed 1,000 families a month, twice as many as before the fire. The organization expected to continue handing out a week's worth of food to residents until September. One day after opening, it was forced to impose a cap of 150 hampers per day as it could not keep up with demand.

Until June 16, Alberta Health Services had advised that children under the age of 7 should not return to Fort McMurray. It now says the Air Quality Advisory has been lifted and that it is safe for most residents to return. Only those on dialysis, receiving cancer treatments, who are more than 36 weeks pregnant or who have complications related to pregnancy are being told to stay away, as the hospital has not fully reopened.

Alberta's New Democratic Party (NDP) government has so far refused to put an estimate on the cost of the

disaster in terms of property destroyed or in terms of costs to extinguish the fire and respond to the evacuation.

In April 2016, the NDP budget set wildfire management expenditures at \$86.3 million for 2016-17, along with \$200 million for unallocated disaster and emergency assistance. In 2015-16 actual wildfire fighting costs in Alberta were \$500 million, although there was no fire on the scale of that experienced in May of this year. The fire season does not end until November. The April provincial budget also projected a shortfall of \$10.4 billion based on lower energy revenue from tax and royalties due to low oil prices.

The province's books will take another hit in May and June because oil-sand production was curtailed by the enormous fires burning out of control. Production was down by a million barrels of oil a day in May and by 500,000 barrels a day in June.

Meanwhile, Rachel Notley's social-democratic government was publicly embarrassed when it was revealed by the press that members of a 300-person South African fire crew brought over on a government contract with a company called "Work On Fire" were receiving just \$15.00 each per day, while the government was paying the company \$170.00 per worker per day, plus transportation, lodging and food for the workers. These workers met all the Canadian training requirements and went right from the plane to working in the bush. When the news broke the striking workers were promptly shipped back to South Africa. This incident reminded everyone that Notley has not made good on her election promise to raise the provincial minimum wage to \$15.00 per hour, a promise she reneged on calling it "only notional" in April when tabling her austerity provincial budget.

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