Canada: Reports on Fort McMurray wildfire expose government culpability

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Alberta's New Democratic Party (NDP) government was forced to hastily release a consultancy report into its handling of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire earlier this month. The move came after CBC indicated it had obtained a leaked copy of the review, which harshly criticized the way Rachel Notley's government dealt with the blaze.

The wildfire entered Fort McMurray, a town at the heart of Alberta's tar sands operations, on May 3, 2016, and forced some 90,000 people from their homes. Over the following days, around 10 percent of the town was destroyed in the flames, while tens of thousands of people remained stranded to the north of the city. The fire took the lives of two young people—Emily Ryan, aged 15, and Aaron Hodgson, aged 19—who died in a highway crash as they fled Fort McMurray.

The report from consulting firm MNP bluntly warns that government inaction means Albertans confront the threat of an even bigger catastrophe. Unless more is done to combat the threat posed by wildfires, the public "can expect similar or worse outcomes on a more frequent basis," says the report.

Despite this stark prediction, which is hardly surprising given the repeated warnings issued by climate scientists over the past decade about the growing wildfire threat, the Notley government had been sitting on the report since March and only released it to avert a public relations disaster.

The reality is that the Fort McMurray disaster could have been significantly mitigated, if not prevented entirely. Successive provincial governments, led by the Progressive Conservatives and the NDP, with the full backing of federal Liberal and Conservative governments, encouraged the unchecked expansion of Alberta's tar sands industry with virtually no regard to the safety and well-being of the workers whose labour secured multi-billion profits for the major oil corporations.

Fort McMurray, located in the middle of the boreal forest and hundreds of miles away from other major towns, saw its population more than treble from 1990 to 2014. Yet there remained only one highway out of the city to the south and in spite of repeated warnings, no effort had been made to establish fire-breaks around the town by removing trees and other vegetation.

Critical public services, including health, education, and social services, as well as wildfire preparedness, were starved of cash, so as to offer a low-tax environment for the enrichment of the corporate elite. Incredibly, less than two weeks before the wildfire engulfed Fort McMurray, the NDP announced $15 million in cuts to the wildfire management budget.

In stark contrast to this, the ruling class deemed the oil facilities located close by valuable enough to be equipped with hi-tech firefighting equipment, including specially-trained teams, and fire-breaks of more than a kilometer in width. It is therefore no accident that virtually no significant, long-term damage occurred to the oil drilling facilities during the fire.

The indifference shown by the ruling elite to the lives of tens of thousands of Fort McMurray residents was illustrated in another report from KPMG Consulting also released by the NDP at a June 8 press conference. It examined the overall emergency response, noting that residents of Fort McMurray were told by officials during an 11 AM, May 3, news conference that evacuation was "a long way off." But just a couple of hours later, everyone was told to evacuate the burning town. The report outlined how people on social media saw residents' postings as to what parts of the town were burning and started running to inform and help their neighbours escape. Many shared all available space in their vehicles with strangers as getting out quickly had become critical.

The report said the relative young age of Fort McMurray's population, not government preparedness or

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action, was the major reason the death toll was not substantially higher. “Ultimately the success of the evacuation during the wildfire was largely due to the young demographics of the community, and how the community rallied together.”

The reports point to rudimentary emergency-planning failures. The two regional authorities engaged in fighting the two fires that broke out May 1—and this in a part of Alberta where the risk of wildfires is high–could not even communicate directly with one another. The rushed evacuation of Fort McMurray occurred because one fire chief failed to inform his colleagues in the Wood Buffalo municipality about the fire's rapid progress. Firefighters also lacked the ability to communicate with water bomber aircraft helping fight the flames, so they had to resort to physically signaling where the water should be dropped.

The MNP report said the fire was complex, with shifting winds changing the situation rapidly. Nonetheless, the report stated: “There is limited evidence that contingency plans were being developed and implemented during the first 36 hours aimed at providing opportunities to contain or minimize damage as the wildfire approached the community.”

In the wake of the fire, the NDP increased the length of its contracts with the companies providing water bomber aircraft to 120 days due to strong public criticism of a previous move to cut them to just 90 days per year.

But the 2017 wildfire management budget remains a paltry $133 million. This is part of the NDP’s overall austerity policy aimed at offloading the province’s economic crisis onto working people while ensuring that Big Oil and the corporate elite continue to enjoy the so-called “Alberta advantage”– Canada’s lowest overall rate of taxation.

The year since the disaster has been a tough one for Fort McMurray’s residents. Many have been diagnosed with respiratory problems, PTSD, anxiety, and depression. There is widespread concern about the environmental effects of the flame retardant chemicals sprayed in the town and the impact of smoke and water damage on residents’ homes, which the government declared fit to live in less than a month after the inferno. The province has done next to nothing to deal with this public health emergency. The Medical Officer of Health, which monitors health complaints, denies the existence of any spikes in respiratory problems.

Local doctors and health care professionals tell another story. Dr. Ghassan Al-Naami, a pediatrician who worked in Fort McMurray before moving to Edmonton in January told *Metro* he “definitely” saw more kids with respiratory issues after the fire and said more study is needed. Social media support groups for those ill as a result of the smoke and flames have sprung up on Facebook. Dr. Emmanuel Osebue, a family physician who has practiced in Fort McMurray for a decade, told *Metro* that the demand for mental-health services among his patients is up by about 25 percent, including among children.

Research based on the consequences of wildfires that burnt through homes and communities in California suggests such blazes leave a threatening legacy of caustic ash and toxic heavy metals. "There's no doubt, it is hazardous," Scott Stephens, a fire scientist at the University of California-Berkeley, told CBC. The US Geological Survey found ash left after California's home-destroying wildfires in 2007 and 2008 was far more alkaline than ash from wood fires. Mixed with water, the ash was almost as caustic as oven cleaner. It was also significantly contaminated with metals, some of them toxic. Arsenic, lead, antimony, copper, zinc and chromium were all found at levels exceeding US Environmental Protection Agency guidelines.

Prior to Fort McMurray, Alberta's worst experience with a forest fire destroying homes came in Slave Lake, where more than 400 homes and other buildings were razed in 2011, about one-quarter the number that burned down in Fort McMurray. Unlike the fire in Fort McMurray, authorities disposed of the ash from the Slave Lake fire as hazardous waste. Tests of the ash found lead, a powerful neurotoxin especially dangerous to children, was three times the recommended levels for residential soils. Dioxins and furans, some of which are highly potent carcinogens, were anywhere from 13 to 52 times the recommended levels.

The authors also recommend:

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