

British Columbia wildfires force 14,000 to evacuate their homes

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More than 14,000 people in the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) have been forced from their homes as hundreds of wildfires rage in the province's central and southern interior. Provincial authorities declared a state of emergency last Friday and military units have been placed on stand-by to intervene.

The fires have been fueled by several weeks of hot and dry weather. As of Thursday evening, the province reported 183 wildfires were burning, down from 220 earlier in the week. BC Wildfire Services has 1,000 firefighters tackling the wildfires, along with private contractors and several hundred firefighters from other provinces.

Darren Campbell, head of the emergency response centre for the Cariboo Regional District, said that strong winds forecast for the weekend could lead to the threatened areas expanding significantly, especially in Chilcotin and north Cariboo. "We might be dealing with some new situations in some new areas," he said Thursday.

Bob Turner of Emergency Management BC said that plans are being developed for mass evacuations, most likely from Williams Lake, with a population of over 10,000.

Those who were forced from their homes were given virtually no warning of the approaching blaze and some fear they have lost everything. "We're going back to nothing," one resident staying at an emergency centre in Kamloops told CBC. "All the trailers and everything are just laying flat. We probably won't even be able to save a picture."

Many people went to Kamloops in the south to escape the fire, but the city has become overwhelmed, so evacuees are now being told to drive to Prince George, several hours to the north. Most have left everything behind, including their animals.

BC Bus Service has stopped running into Williams Lake as an evacuation order was issued by Cariboo Regional District for Wildwood, Soda Creek and Fox Mountain, the Lakeside Area of Williams Lake, White Road, Ross Road, Glen Road, South Lakeside, Miocene, Wildwood and Lexington, and 150 Mile House. Ashcroft, Cash Creek, and Princeton have also been evacuated.

At least 60 homes have been destroyed in the village of Cache Creek.

Harrowing stories have emerged of families driving through fires to escape. Sally Aitken uploaded a video to Twitter showing the vehicle she was travelling in with her husband surrounded by fire.

Since April, 78,000 hectares have been burned by over 600 wildfires, according to BC Wildfire Services. The fires currently burning cover a total area of between 2,000 and 12,000 hectares.

The chaotic response to the wildfires, with many families being left to sleep in parking lots, is a damning indictment of governments at the provincial and federal level. Wildfires are not an unusual occurrence in BC, which has witnessed hot and dry summers over recent years. The last time a state of emergency was declared was in 2003, when the Okanagan Mountain and Barriere wildfires wrought substantial damage. 200 homes in Kelowna were destroyed.

Despite this, successive BC Liberal governments have restricted wildfire management budgets. Including 2015, the province overspent its wildfire budget in nine out of the 10 previous years.

In 2015, the BC government allocated a paltry \$63 million for fighting wildfires and had used up the budget in a matter of weeks. By mid-August the total bill for fighting wildfires had risen to over \$180 million.

Although wildfires are natural phenomena, measures could have been taken to mitigate the damage and disruption they have caused. Scientists were well aware that the Cariboo region represented a high risk and have been warning governments more generally across Canada about the increased danger of large-scale fires due to climate change.

Daniel Perrakis, a research scientist with the Canadian Forest Service, told CBC in an interview that a multi-year drought in BC's central and southern interior contributed to the blaze. "[T]he rain and snow that fell over the winter, was insufficient to saturate the soil and the wood fuels in the forest. And the other issue there is that the most heavily impacted area by the recent mountain pine beetle outbreak and so the forests in that area are dominated by Douglas Fir and Lodgepole Pine trees. And the Lodgepole Pine, the majority of the trees there, are dead, and they were killed probably between 10 years ago and five years ago, and so they are just like standing firewood in the forest and they are very, very dry and very susceptible to starting fires and spreading fires."

In a society capable of rational, scientific planning, such a state of affairs would be the occasion for vast resources to be made available to mitigate the dangers posed by fires. But under capitalism, virtually nothing was done to combat such risks. Forest fire specialists have repeatedly criticized provincial governments for spending too little on preventive measures and relying instead on emergency budgets to fight fires when they break out.

Lori Daniels, a fire expert at the University of British Columbia, told CBC in 2015 that while the government spent \$200 million on combating fires that summer, less than \$1 million was spent to take preventive measures in the high-risk southern interior.

In neighbouring Alberta, inadequate wildfire budgets and a lack of preventative measures played a significant role in the exacerbation of the catastrophic fire that engulfed Fort McMurray in May 2016, forcing some 90,000 people from their homes.

Fort McMurray, at the heart of the province's multi-billion dollar tar sands operations, only had one exit road and was surrounded on all sides by forest. Despite repeated warnings about the need to establish fire breaks, the only facilities accorded this protection were the oil companies' installations, which survived the

blaze largely intact. Over 2,000 buildings were destroyed in the city.

As in last year's disaster, stories coming out of the affected areas tell of many residents being largely left to fend for themselves.

Tl'etinqox First Nation Chief Joe Alphonse said Sunday his community made up of five bands near Williams Lake is preparing to protect itself, refusing to leave although under a provincial evacuation order. "We are bringing in machinery to build a fire guard. We have three firefighting unit crews registered with the province and we are going to set up our own internal firefighting crew that's not registered and starting fighting it on our own." The community has no power and is surrounded by wildfires, yet the residents refuse to leave except for those sick and elderly with respiratory problems who have been evacuated.

Historic Lee's Corner has been burned to the ground and homes and businesses have been lost in the village of Boston Flats, where 30 homes in the trailer park were burned to the ground. Fortunately everyone survived.

The loss to the town has been devastating. CBC carried an interview with dairy farmer Rob Donaldson of Bradner Farms who lost his 300 milk cow barn, a multi-million dollar operation, in a matter of 20 minutes. As the barn burned, 30 family, friends and strangers tried to save the trapped animals. Donaldson blew through the barn wall with a bobcat skid-steer loader and drove through flames to get most of his cows out to where they could make a run for it. "They are like my family," he said.

Farmers forced to evacuate have left behind an estimated 10,000-20,000 cattle. Ranchers could also face heavy financial losses because grazing areas are threatened by the fires, raising the likelihood that feed will have to be purchased for their animals at considerable cost.



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