

Government inaction exacerbates BC wildfire disaster

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Over 50,000 people have been forced from their homes over recent weeks by wildfires that are still raging in British Columbia. Air quality alerts have been issued as far away as Manitoba.

As of yesterday, thousands still remained homeless, while a further 20,000 were on evacuation stand-by. Those able to return home in recent days have confronted widespread destruction, including the loss of their homes, livestock, and agricultural equipment, and major damage to public infrastructure. Many have seen their livelihoods wiped out. The fires have burned some 377,000 hectares of land, meaning that ranchers will have the added expense of purchasing feed for those animals that survived.

Emergency Management BC deputy minister Robert Turner said EMBC is gearing up for a “prolonged” wildfire season. The long term forecast is for more hot and dry weather.

In Williams Lake and numerous smaller communities surrounding it, thousands of residents were ordered to immediately evacuate July 16 as fire threatened to cut off a nearby highway, the only remaining exit route. An area southwest of Prince George was also evacuated.

The chaotic evacuation of thousands of people in the face of rapidly expanding wildfires is the direct result of the failure of successive federal and provincial governments to act on warnings issued by scientists and other experts. BC has experienced a dramatic increase in large wildfires over the past decade, with the province overspending its wildfire management budget every year except one.

Following the last major wildfires to affect urban areas in BC in 2003, when over 300 homes were destroyed in Kelowna, the BC Liberal government commissioned former Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon to investigate. The Filmon “Firestorm 2003 report”

made a series of recommendations, including altering land management practices to include community protection among its goals and the hiring of additional fire experts.

But many of these were not carried out. According to Phil Burton, co-editor of the *Canadian Journal of Forest Research*, adequate safety measures would require establishing fire protection zones of between 5 and 20 kilometers surrounding at-risk communities, in which trees would be thinned out, parks created, and/or deciduous trees planted to cut down the fire risk.

“There was funding for this sort of thing 10 years ago,” Burton told the *Vancouver Sun*, “but then funding fizzled, with only a small proportion of the needed work done.”

In the 11 years following the publication of the Filmon Report, the province invested just \$100 million in wildfire hazard mitigation.

On top of budget cuts, part of the reason for the government’s failure to make such changes is bound up with the impact they would have on logging, a major BC industry and export. Burton pointed out that logging in fire protection zones would not be possible given the changed nature of the trees grown there. A failure to plant new trees in areas already logged has helped fuel wildfires. It also should be noted, logging large trees which are more resilient to fire is more profitable than cutting down smaller and dead trees.

Filmon’s report included 41 recommendations for governments at all levels over a wide range of areas, all of which were described as “urgent.” “We believe that governments have a once in a lifetime opportunity to implement risk-reduction policies and legislation while the devastation of Firestorm 2003 is fresh in the public’s mind and the costs and consequences of various choices are well understood,” the report noted.

Close to a decade-and-a-half after these stark warnings were made, the inadequacy of government preparation has left charities like the Canadian Red Cross to fill the gap. The BC government has provided \$100 million in funding for the Canadian Red Cross to provide assistance to communities, with direct financial assistance of just \$600 to each evacuee. The funds began to be distributed last week.

Notwithstanding their best intentions, charities are unable to cope with such large-scale disasters. Jamie Hughes, an evacuee from 105 Mile House, told CTV she attempted to contact the Red Cross for three days to obtain the \$600 payment without success. “Other communities have had forms filled out and they’ve been given food allowances and such and our community didn’t have any of that,” Hughes said. “They were not prepared.” She added, “There has been a lack of organization and information and people are getting really stressed out.”

A representative of the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, one of the areas most affected by the fires, acknowledged that hundreds of people had to wait for hours to be registered at evacuation centers and that the location of one of the main centers in Kamloops had to be moved.

The lack of government preparedness, at both the federal and provincial levels, is made all the more scandalous by the inevitability of larger blazes breaking out due to ever longer fire seasons caused by climate change. BC’s fire season now runs until the end of September, with the most devastating fires typically breaking out at the end of July, meaning the worst could be yet to come.

Last year a wildfire engulfed Fort McMurray, Alberta, forcing 90,000 people from their homes and burning more than 2,000 properties. The fire was exacerbated by the fact that the city, at the heart of Alberta’s tar sands operations, had virtually no protected areas between residential buildings and dense forest, and only one exit highway out. Just weeks before the inferno erupted, the newly-elected NDP provincial government cut the wildfire management budget.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is set to visit the BC Interior next week to tour areas impacted by this year’s wildfires. The federal government’s principal role so far has been to send hundreds of police officers and

military personnel to BC.

The scale of this year’s blaze in the BC Interior has even created difficulties for trained firefighters, many of whom have been treated for smoke inhalation. A team of 50 highly-trained personnel recently arrived from Australia in response to BC’s request for aid.

Oil and gas companies are taking steps to protect their operations as pipelines are predicted to be within the fire perimeter within the coming days. Lumber mills have closed. Mount Polly mine, located 56 km northeast of the Williams Lake, ceased operation on July 17.

While all sections of the population are hit hard by the destruction wrought by wildfires, poorer layers of society are most at risk. Low-income households and families with a history of trauma struggle to bounce back, according to Jeremy Stone, a researcher with UBC’s School of Community and Regional Planning. “People with money, resources, and time, they generally fare better,” he said.



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