

Early start to wildfire season displaces 30,000 across Alberta

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Alberta Premier Danielle Smith announced a provincial state of emergency Saturday after an early season outbreak of wildfires across the western Canadian province. As of Monday more than 30,000 people had evacuated their homes under the threat of flames and choking smoke from more than 100 active fires.

An early May heat wave primed the province for a fiery explosion. Record high temperatures were smashed in both Edmonton, the province's capital, and Calgary, its largest city. In the former the mercury hit 28.9 Celsius (84 F) on May 1, while Calgary broke a 130-year record with a temperature of 25.8 C (78 F) recorded at the city's airport. Heat records were also broken in Red Deer, Vegreville, Fort Chipewyan and Rocky Mountain House. Warnings were made days ahead of time by meteorologists that the fire danger was exceptionally high and burn bans were put in place for much of the province.

"Much of Alberta has been experiencing a hot, dry spring and with so much kindling, all it takes is a few sparks to ignite some truly frightening wildfires," Premier Smith said at a press conference Saturday. "These conditions have resulted in the unprecedented situation our province is facing today."

Smith expressed shock at the number of people forced to flee their homes, stating, "I don't know that I ever recall seeing multiple communities evacuated all at once in fire season."

Alberta Wildfire spokesperson Christine Tucker told reporters Saturday that firefighters were confronting extremely difficult conditions, including high winds, which are fueling the flames. Tucker described the outbreak of wildfires across the province as "unusual" and "unprecedented."

The 7,300 residents of Drayton Valley, approximately

140 km southwest of Edmonton, were warned to continue to stay away Sunday as flames burned uncontrolled. Four homes have been destroyed by a fire which forced residents to flee Thursday night. Approximately three dozen residents took shelter at Edmonton's Expo Centre over the weekend, while others are in hotels or with relatives.

"This fire remains out of control and so it is imperative that people stay out of this area. I can't stress that enough," Brazeau County and Drayton Valley Fire Chief Tom Thompson warned. "The risk to the public is still extremely high and it is not safe to enter the community at this time."

Other areas under evacuation orders due to fires include: the town of Edson (population 8,000), northwest of Drayton Valley; Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation 154 (population 1,505) and Fox Lake Indian reserve (population 3,600), in remote northern Alberta; and Rainbow Lake (population 500), in the province's northwest corner.

More than 20 homes, a store, an RCMP detachment and the community's water treatment plant have been destroyed in Fox Lake. Photos and video posted on social media show the small community surrounded by billowing smoke. A GoFundMe set up to aid residents with purchasing essentials has raised nearly \$12,000.

The fires have also triggered the widespread idling of oil extraction operations, resulting in 145,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day being "shut in." Alberta is the center of petroleum extraction in Canada, and one of the largest oil-producing regions in the world, with approximately 120,000 workers employed in the process of oil drilling and surface mining of bitumen oil-tar sands. The oil and gas industry accounts for a quarter of the province's annual economic output.

The burning of oil and other fossil fuels, which emit

carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, is the major factor in man-made climate change. Scientists have warned that climate change is the driving force behind the increasing intensity of wildfires and the expansion of the fire season beyond its historic range.

“We’re almost moving to fire years instead of fire seasons,” Mike Flannigan, the research chair for Predictive Services, Emergency Management and Fire Science at Thompson Rivers University told Edmonton AM last week. “That’s the result because we’re getting warmer.”

Climate change has also facilitated the spread of the mountain pine beetle, which has killed over 20 million hectares of forest since the 1990s, leaving standing forests like candles waiting to be lit by a lightning strike. Declining spring rains and rapidly warming temperatures from the winter make grass and undergrowth perfect tinder.

Making matters worse, cuts to public funding for firefighting and prevention have hampered efforts to respond to the increasingly destructive impacts of climate change.

Former Premier Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party (UCP) government cut the number of wildfire lookouts, firefighters, and forest service personnel while contracting out some services to private firms. The UCP also axed the province’s Wildland Firefighter Rappel Program, which trained firefighters on rappelling from helicopters to reach remote fires before they spread.

In 2016 then-premier Rachel Notley and her New Democratic Party (NDP) government defended slashing \$15 million from the base firefighting budget, reducing tanker operations from 123 to 93 days and reducing fire prevention operations.

The latest eruption of fires recalls the 2016 inferno that consumed much of the city of Fort McMurray, forcing the disorganized evacuation of its 88,000 residents and destroying 3,244 buildings. Two people were killed in a traffic accident during the evacuation. And in 2021 the village of Lytton, British Columbia, was mostly destroyed by fire amid an extreme heat wave, killing two people. The British Columbia Coroners Service estimates that 619 people died from extreme heat between June 25 and July 1, 2021.

The latest fire outbreak and state of emergency come amid campaigning for the May 29 Alberta provincial

election. The principal party leaders, UCP Premier Smith, a climate-change denier who boasts of her close ties to the “Freedom” Convoy, the anti-vaxx movement and other far-right and outright fascist forces, and NDP leader Notley have cynically postured as sympathetic to the wildfire refugees and concerned about helping Albertans confront the dangers posed by wildfires.

“I want Albertans to be assured that there is a stable, functioning government that is here to support them throughout this unprecedented crisis,” Smith said Sunday.

For her part, Notley, a seasoned hand in controlling popular anger over government mismanagement, offered her assistance to Smith. “We are quite sincere in our offer to participate in the emergency planning committee,” said Notley. “I think that we have experience and advice that we can offer and I think it helps depoliticize what should be a laser focus on public safety.”

However, it is clear from the records of the UCP and NDP in government that both parties are entirely subordinate to the profit interests of big oil. Neither will take the measures necessary to protect communities from destruction and combat global climate change. The expansion of wildfire season and extreme heat is not limited to Canada. The same effects of climate change are being seen throughout the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia. Extreme weather can only be confronted by a movement of the working class united internationally on the basis of a socialist program to transform society to meet human needs rather than private profit.



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