

Canada's wildfire season off to record start, with fires burning in the East, West and Far North

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6 June 2023

The wildfire season is off to an unprecedented start across Canada, with significant fires raging out-of-control in regions across the country, from British Columbia and Alberta in the West, and the Northwest Territories and Yukon in the Far North to Quebec and Nova Scotia in the East. Fires are also active across Ontario, the country's most populous province.

Canadian Wildland Fire Information System data shows that more than 3 million hectares have burned across the country through the first week of June, nearly 12 times the ten-year average for this point in the fire season and nearly on par with the entire 2021 fire season through to October. In recent years, Canada's wildfire season has not significantly taken off until July, putting this year's fires more than a month ahead of what is typically expected. Significant fires were already raging in Alberta in the first weeks of May.

It is increasingly apparent that capitalist-induced climate change is dramatically increasing the intensity and extent of wildfires across the country due to increasing temperatures, dryer conditions, and mountain pine beetle infestations in western Canada. This is impacting remote rural communities, including impoverished First Nation reserves, as well as major urban centers and pushing Canada's firefighting resources past their limits.

The onset of an El Nino weather pattern is expected to bring higher temperatures and drier weather to western Canada for the remainder of the year, meaning conditions will remain primed for the eruption of massive fires.

As of Sunday, there were 413 fires burning across the country, leaving more than 26,000 people under evacuation orders in Alberta, British Columbia, NWT, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Saskatchewan.

Smoke from the fires have dramatically degraded air quality across the country, including in the capital Ottawa,

where air quality has hit 10+ on Environment Canada's Air Quality Health Index. This is highest possible level, at which point outdoor activity is hazardous. The impact of the fires has also been felt in the United States where smoke reached deep into the Midwest and across New England on Monday and Tuesday.

Hundreds of firefighters have been mobilized from out-of-province and internationally to fight the infernos, including 443 from the United States, Australia and New Zealand and 200 from South Africa. French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron has promised his government will deploy 100 wildfire specialists to Canada. Water bombers and helicopters from Montana were assisting with firefighting in Nova Scotia on Sunday. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has also deployed 200 Canadian Armed Forces personnel to assist with firefighting efforts in Quebec, after 300 were deployed to Alberta for firefighting duties last month.

"Climate change has been implicated in worsening wildfires across North America," Kristina Dahl, principal climate scientist for the climate and energy program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, told CTV News. Records for heat and lack of precipitation were shattered across the country last month, with communities in Alberta and across Nunavut reporting their warmest May ever.

Another problem putting people at risk from wildfires is the extension of urban development into previously rural and forested areas on the fringes of urban centers. "We also know that there are a lot more people living in wildfire-prone areas," Dahl explained to CTV. "And so that means that there are more people to potentially spark fires and more people affected when the fires do occur."

Unusually warm and dry weather saw the eruption of unusually intense fires in Nova Scotia at the end of May, including the Tantallon fire, which ripped through

Westwood Hills and other newer rural subdivisions in Halifax, destroying 150 homes and 50 other structures. After having forced the evacuation of 16,400 people in the province's largest city, the Tantallon fire was largely contained by firefighters by June 3.

The wildfires have tested Nova Scotia's firefighting abilities like never before. Resources to fight fires have been cut in recent years by municipalities and the provincial government in a ruthless austerity drive to protect capitalist profits at the expense of social programs. The Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) council voted to cut fire services by \$3.5 million alone in 2020, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a cover.

These cuts from 2020 which closed one fire station and cut staff across the city's fire service have had a devastating impact on Halifax's ability to fight and contain this year's wildfires.

In September of 2021 the HRM's auditor general (AG), Evangeline Colman-Sadd, published a report scrutinizing Halifax Fire's inspection program. Colman-Sadd concluded Halifax Fire failed to meet its legislated obligations. Among her findings were that Halifax Fire failed to complete 40 percent of its inspections on time. She found the fire inspection program was inadequate overall and that Halifax Fire lacked enough staff to complete the inspections.

Halifax Fire had conceded to the AG that several subdivisions were "built without appropriate fire safety specifications." The subdivisions of Indigo Shores, Westwood Hills and White Hills were identified as being built without necessary infrastructure to fight fires and have now been destroyed.

Despite the dramatic and record breaking onset of the wildfire season, which has already displaced thousands from their homes, Prime Minister Trudeau remained positive about the ability of Canada to fight the blazes. "With the given projections, it is expected that we have enough resources to cover the summer," Trudeau told reporters. "If things get worse, we're developing contingency plans and we will of course make sure that we are there ... to ensure that all Canadians are protected right through this summer."

Without a national fire service, the provinces and territories of Canada have typically relied on each other's fire services to battle blazes as the fire season shifted from west to east. However, as the scope of fires has grown to encompass the whole country at once, the Canadian government has increasingly relied on deploying the military to fight fires, and summoning international aid.

"Now you start to get into this quandary where there's not enough resources for the amount of fire on the ground, and the larger jurisdictions, who are typically the ones that are going to be providing lots of resources outside, are starting to pull back because they're starting to either get fires or they're imminently going to have [them]," Brian Simpson, the former head of B.C.'s Wildfire Service, explained to the *Globe and Mail*.

Mike Flannigan, a professor at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, told the *Globe* that the government should consider establishing a national force of firefighters and water bombers to stamp out fires before they get too large.

While all the major parties have raised the issue of a national fire service, none of them will take any serious steps to confront climate change, the underlying cause of the intensifying fire season. The Trudeau government has promised to reduce carbon emissions, including through the so-called "carbon tax," but it has repeatedly failed to meet even its inadequate goals. Meanwhile, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre has promised to scrap the carbon tax if he is prime minister, allowing for virtually unlimited pollution by Big Oil and other corporate interests. As for the New Democrats, despite their posturing about taking tougher action on climate change, in last month's provincial election in Alberta they promised that the oil corporations and other businesses would continue to experience the lowest taxes in the country. They also joined Alberta Premier Danielle Smith and her far-right United Conservative Party in attacking Ottawa's plan to cap the oil sector's net carbon emissions.

There is no solution to climate change and its effects, including increasingly devastating wildfires, on the national level and within the confines of the capitalist nation-state system. Only an internationally coordinated, scientifically based movement for socialism led by the working class will be able to confront the global disaster being wrought by climate change.



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