

A quarter of Canadians report being impacted by record-breaking wildfire season

Niles Niemuth
21 June 2023

More than one-quarter of Canadians report being impacted directly or indirectly by the record-breaking wildfire season, which has ravaged communities across the country and sent choking smoke across the North American continent. The Leger poll, conducted online last week, also found that 23 percent of US residents also report being affected by the fires.

Driven by the effects of capitalist-induced climate change, fires are continuing to burn out of control across the country, from Quebec in the east to British Columbia in the west and the Yukon and Northwest Territories in the north. As of Tuesday, 409 fires were burning, with 202 deemed by the Canadian Wildland Fire Information System to be out of control.

An evacuation order was put in place Tuesday night for those residents of Val d'Or, Quebec, living in the rural communities of Lac Gueguen, Lac Matchi-Manitou and Lac Villebon. The mining town in western Quebec is home to more than 32,000 people. Another community, Lebel-sur-Quévillon, approximately 160 kilometers north, was on standby for possible evacuation as smoke choked the sky. The city's mayor has advised its 2,000 residents to keep their doors and windows closed and wear N95 masks if they have to go outside. Across the province, the use of fireworks has been banned ahead of June 24 Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day celebrations and Canada Day festivities on July 1.

So far this year, 2,700 wildfires have consumed more than 59,000 square kilometers of land, roughly 10 times the size of the province of Prince Edward Island, and forced tens of thousands to flee their homes.

Hundreds of structures have been destroyed since fires began erupting in early May, including 100 homes on the Fox Lake 162 reserve in northern Alberta and 150 homes in rural subdivisions of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The Donnie Creek fire in northeastern British Columbia has grown to be the largest individual fire in the province's recorded history, having consumed more than 5,344 square kilometers of boreal spruce forest. The fire has burned through an area more than twice the size of Metro Vancouver and is continuing to burn out of control.

More than 1,900 international firefighters have deployed to assist in fighting the blazes, including 100 from Mexico, who arrived Monday, in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Firefighters have also been sent to assist from France, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Chile and the United States. Moreover, 350 members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) were deployed for six weeks to help with the battle against blazes in Alberta and the evacuation of stranded residents.

Meteorologists expect that the record-breaking heat and dry conditions which fueled the early eruption of Canada's wildfire season will continue through July and August, meaning that there will be further events like the smoke event which sent the air quality index soaring to extremely toxic levels, and blotted out the sun in New York City and across the northeastern United States. Smoke from Canada's fires has spread as far south as Florida and been carried across the Atlantic Ocean to northern Europe.

The inhalation of the fine particulates of wildfire smoke is known to cause immediate negative health impacts—including asthma attacks and heart attacks—and contributes to the development of lung cancer. It can also exacerbate conditions for those who recently suffered pneumonia or myocarditis, common conditions for those infected by COVID-19. At least 6 million people globally die due to the effects of poor air

quality every year, making it one of the leading causes of death.

It has been well established that climate change is driving both the growth of the size of extreme wildfires and the length of the annual fire season. This year's massive fires and their international impact clearly demonstrate that the effects are not a long way off in the future but are being felt now.

As Ryan Ness, director of adaptation research at the Canadian Climate Institute, recently explained to CTV, "In addition to a warmer overall climate, which creates a greater risk for things to dry out and to ignite in the case of wildfires, we're also seeing drier weather and we're seeing more weather that creates lightning as a result of more energy in the atmosphere, which drives more wildfires as well." Furthermore, insects which kill trees, including the mountain pine beetle, have been able to move further north and thrive as the climate warms, creating more fuel for fires.

Despite the clear connection between climate change and the growth of wildfires, far-right Alberta premier Danielle Smith, who has taken anti-scientific positions on the COVID-19 pandemic and supports Big Oil's right to unhindered profits, has dismissed the issue, instead focusing on arson as the cause of the fires. "We are bringing in arson investigators from outside the province," Smith announced earlier this month when she was asked about the role of climate change. Smith was also playing to far-right conspiracy theories, which posit that the fires across Canada have been intentionally set. While a significant share of fires are sparked by human activity, it is almost always unintentional.

Meanwhile the Liberal Trudeau government has raised the potential for establishing a national force to coordinate firefighting. Currently, each provincial government is responsible for their own wildfire response and coordinating with each other. However, the prime minister has reassured the public that there will be enough resources to fight the fires this year despite "very serious projections."

While the Trudeau government has pledged billions of dollars to combat climate change, a review by the *Toronto Star* published last week found that it has not been following through on its announced initiatives. The paper found that out of \$15.03 billion budgeted for climate programs between 2016-17 and 2021-22, \$7.78

billion went unspent or was used at a slower rate than projected. In one example, the \$455 million Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund saw only 23.5 percent of its budget spent by 2022.

Meanwhile, amid the raging fires, the Conservative opposition leader Pierre Poilievre has continued his calls for the end to Canada's carbon tax, which puts a cost of \$50 per tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions, one of Trudeau's main initiatives in relation to climate change that is supposed to curb the emission of greenhouse gasses.

However, as climate change is a global problem, there will be no national solution. Consumption taxes like the carbon tax disproportionately impact the working class while big business continues polluting with impunity. The only solution to Canada's wildfire crisis and to combat climate change is through the development of an international movement of the working class fighting for socialism, placing social and economic development and environmental protection on a scientific basis to meet human need, rather than the current destructive drive for profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact