

From Maui to Pacific Northwest, climate change-fueled wildfires continue to rage

Jacob Crosse
20 August 2023

As the official death toll continues to slowly rise in Maui, reaching 114 as of this writing, over 500 active wildfires in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and the Northwest Territories have destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses, prompting government officials to order hurried mass evacuations throughout the region. The Canadian government has yet to officially acknowledge any deaths from the fires or provide an estimate of how many homes have been destroyed.

Major wildfires are also burning in the state of Washington, just across the border from British Columbia. Washington state officials have confirmed that two major blazes, the Gray Fire and the Oregon Road Fire, have destroyed more than 100 structures, including homes. At least one person has died due to the fires in the state.

In Maui, which is set to host President Joe Biden on Monday, residents continue to speak out about the inadequate and indifferent government response to a preventable catastrophe. Over 1,000 people remain missing nearly two weeks after the eruption of the fires, which appear to have been started by downed Hawaiian Electric power lines sparking non-native grasses that burned with the aid of wind from Hurricane Dora.

In an interview with the *Daily Mail*, Maui resident Allisen Median said the government response had been “too slow,” adding, “People have been doing their own recovery.”

She said, “The government, relief organizations—they’re not doing anything. We’re only 100 miles from Oahu, which has several military bases.

Why is the response so lacking? Why are they doing so little? Why is nothing else being done?”

Median denounced the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and questioned why the government refused to update the death toll. She told the newspaper, “I know there are at least 480 dead here in Maui, and I don’t understand why [the authorities] are not saying that. ... I do know they ran out of body bags by the first or second night and had to ship some in from the mainland.”

A similar catastrophe is unfolding in Canada. Wildfires continue to bear down on Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories and home to 20,000 residents, who were ordered to evacuate last week. At the same time, massive wildfires to the south in British Columbia have forced government officials to order another 35,000 people to evacuate.

Over the weekend, Yellowknife Mayor Rebecca Alty confirmed that approximately 1,000 residents still remain in the city. While some are assisting firefighters, others are forced to stay behind because they have nowhere else to go. On Saturday, Northwest Territories Health Minister Julie Green confirmed that one of the 39 hospital patients evacuated from Stanton Territorial Hospital died while being transported on Friday. She said the death had been “expected.”

Unlike the situation in sparsely populated Yellowknife, the evacuations in British Columbia are centered in significant population centers, including Kamloops, Shuswap and Kelowna, located in the interior of the province. It is unknown how many people have been able to heed the evacuation orders.

A state of emergency was declared in British Columbia on Friday due to the roughly 380 wildfires that are currently active throughout the province. Partial evacuations have been ordered for West Kelowna and Kelowna, home to some 190,000 people. The *Globe and Mail* reported on Friday that West Kelowna Fire Chief Jason Brolund confirmed a “significant” number of buildings, including homes, had already been burned in the city.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday on the out-of-control spread of wildfires throughout the region, British Columbia Premier David Eby stated bluntly, “The current situation is grim.” He cited the “dire need” for shelters for the thousands forced to flee their homes, including some 4,500 students at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Campus, and imposed a “nonessential” travel ban, along with a request for tourists to stay home so as to free up hotel space for evacuees. Eby said on Saturday that another 30,000 people were currently under evacuation alerts, meaning they had to be ready to drop everything and leave at a moment’s notice.

On Friday, two major wildfires north of Kelowna, around Shuswap Lake, converged into a single 400-plus square kilometer fire, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. The newly named Bush Creek East wildfire continued to threaten the region, and, according to firefighters, remained “out of control” as of Sunday.

It appears that government evacuation orders came too late for many trying to escape the Shuswap area by road on Friday night. As was the case in Lahaina on Maui, many residents who attempted to flee in their cars were reportedly blocked by flames. The inferno burned down bridges in and out of the town, forcing evacuees to take long back roads or flee to the water and use private boats to escape. Pictures have emerged of burnt out cars, blackened trees and destroyed homes throughout Shuswap.

Dustin Carlisle and Dan Malanowich were ordered to evacuate their home in Scotch Creek on Friday afternoon. “I believe the [evacuation] order was a bit late,” Carlisle told the *Vernon Morning Star*. Malanowich described the evacuation as

“frantic.”

“All alerts and everything were very slow. There was nobody doing door to door whatever, telling people to evacuate or anything,” he said.

On Sunday, the *Vancouver Sun* reported that nearly 5,000 properties were still under evacuation orders in Shuswap, which is located about 150 kilometers north of Kelowna. Government officials have yet to offer a firm number but have confirmed that multiple homes and buildings have been destroyed in the region. As of Sunday morning, over 4,000 customers were without power.

Thick black smoke from the hundreds of fires has blanketed much of Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest in the US. On Twitter, Canadian engineer and scientist Nicolas Smit noted that “1000s—10,000s of people could lose their homes & jobs from the wildfires spreading across Canada.”

He questioned why government officials were not distributing elastomeric respirators that would not only protect from COVID-19 but also “protect firefighters & the public from the dangers of particulates, gases and organic vapor.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last month, “The capitalist profit system, which organizes society on the basis of the self-interest of the capitalist class, is organically incapable of the massive level of social planning and organization necessary to address the climate crisis.”

Therefore, “the fight against climate change is fundamentally a class question,” which can only be resolved through a mass movement of the working class armed with a socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)