

Wildfires rage across British Columbia, forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes

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Wildfires are tearing through wide swathes of the western Canadian province of British Columbia as the country confronts the most devastating wildfire season in its history.

According to the BC Wildfire Service, there are 382 active wildfires burning across the province. This includes 157 deemed out of control, and 14 “of note,” meaning they are highly visible or threatening public safety. Over the past couple of days, the number of people under evacuation orders has soared to more than 15,000. An additional 35,000 more are on evacuation alert.

Distressing scenes of chaos, confusion, and catastrophic damage are being shared on social media by affected residents. In some instances, footage was captured as they fled for their lives. Numerous homes and other properties have been destroyed by the flames, with the precise number unknown. Despite the scope of the fires, there have been no reported civilian deaths reported so far.

Eleven of the wildfires of note are burning in the Kamloops and Southeast regions. These are some of the hottest places in western Canada, where record-breaking temperatures were registered this summer.

In the Central Okanagan, the McDougall Creek wildfire, first identified last Tuesday northwest of the city of Kelowna, has exploded in size to 110 square kilometres. Parts of the area surrounding Kelowna, a region with a population of 235,000, have been badly devastated. Ten thousand residents have been forced to evacuate, including students at the local university and residents of seven care homes.

Footage of escaping locals jumping into Okanagan Lake as the flames travelled down the ridge from West Kelowna has been shared widely on social media. Flights have been cancelled and the airspace closed at Kelowna International Airport to prioritize aerial firefighting.

Ten kilometres south of Kamloops, the massive Adams Complex wildfires continue to rage out of control. The largest of the fires, the Bush Creek East fire, which has been burning since mid-July, has exploded to 300 square kilometres in size. Friday was declared by the regional district as the most devastating wildfire day in its history. Some 3,500 residents in several communities around the Shuswap Lake were evacuated amid conditions described by one local as a “scene of

Armageddon.”

In Cathedral Grove National Park, southwest of the town of Keremeos, the out-of-control Crater Creek fire has ballooned to 410 square kilometres. Evacuation alerts and orders have been issued for nearby First Nations communities. On Wednesday, 70 people under evacuation order were rescued from a remote guest home when the only road access for escape was cut off by the raging fire.

In the Fraser Canyon, wildfires are again ablaze near Lytton, the village destroyed by wildfire in 2021, when two people were killed and several injured. Two years later, many of the town’s 200 residents are still displaced.

On Friday, premier David Eby (NDP) declared a province-wide state of emergency in response to what he called an “unprecedented” fire threat. The announcement came after forced evacuation orders for over 10,000 more people were made in the space of one hour. An order to restrict non-essential travel to fire-affected areas has been issued to ensure accommodation is available for evacuees and emergency personnel.

Air quality in the areas near the fires is extremely dangerous, rated at the maximum 10+ on the Air Quality Health Index—meaning very high risk. In mid-July, a nine-year-old boy in the town of Hundred Mile House tragically suffered a fatal asthma attack that his parents suspect was exacerbated by wildfire smoke.

Emergency accommodation is becoming scarce. Sympathetic residents are generously offering their homes to victims of the wildfires. Out of those who have lost their homes, many are renters who will have no other choice but to move to larger urban centres, which have a near zero percent rental vacancy rate and little affordable housing. Many uninsurable properties have been lost and those homeowners left without the means to replace their house.

On Sunday, a brief reprieve for firefighters came in southern British Columbia as the weather brought cooler temperatures and calmer winds into the area. However, the Northern Forestry Centre at the Canadian Forest Centre warns that there continues to be an “extreme risk” for more fires in British Columbia, the Prairies, the Northwest Territories and northern Ontario for weeks to come.

Over 1,800 wildfires have burned about 1.61 million hectares of land throughout BC since April 1—almost four times the 10-year average and a catastrophic new record. The immediate general causes are forests made tinder-dry by extreme and extended heat waves. According to the BC Wildfire Service, around 80 percent of the current wildfires in the province have been sparked by dry lightning in a tree or other fuels.

In March, scientists warned that Canada was experiencing record-breaking heat two months earlier than usual—brought on by the effects of capitalist-induced climate change—placing it on track for the worst wildfire season on record. By June, a quarter of Canadians reported being impacted by the record-breaking wildfire season. At the time, more than 5,500 fires had broken out, affecting every province and territory, burning approximately 13.4 million hectares—a shocking ten times more than the 10-year average, and surpassing the record set by the 2020 California wildfires. On June 25, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre declared the 2023 wildfire season was the worst in Canada's recorded history.

Last Wednesday, close to 22,000 residents fled the town of Yellowknife, capital of the Northwest Territories. The mandatory evacuation order came as wildfires burned out of control and encroached on the northern hub city from three sides. Fires remain about 15 kilometres from the deserted, smoky city with firefighters working day and night to beat back the flames and fortify firebreaks. Currently, another 236 fires are burning across the territory.

The climate change disaster continuing to unfold in British Columbia and across the country was both foreseen and preventable. It is the devastating consequence of capitalist governments throughout Canada and internationally doing nothing to effectively fight climate change while ramping up decades-long austerity policies to pay for imperialist war abroad and the enrichment of the ultra-wealthy.

Governments of all political stripes in Canada have razed fire prevention, firefighting and other emergency relief budgets to the bone to pay for imperialist wars against Russia and China and feed the corporate profit-gouging at the expense of the well-being and safety of working people.

For decades, scientists have been warning authorities about forests littered with millions of hectares of dead or dying trees that turn into highly combustible fuel in drought conditions. Recommendations to governments to clear the forests of debris stretch back decades, yet only a small fraction of forests have been treated for fuel suppression.

The pro-business BC NDP government has shown time and time again its callous indifference to public safety. It slashed its summer wildfire emergency budget from \$801 million in 2021 to a meagre \$204 million in 2023. The budget was already depleted by June, less than a month into summer. Over the past two years, with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning that rising greenhouse gas emissions are pushing the world to the brink of disaster, the provincial

government handed out \$1.3 billion in fossil fuel subsidies.

In 2021, then-premier John Horgan, adopting the homicidal let-it-rip strategy of the ruling class, denied that COVID-19 was airborne and forced kids into infected schools, then covered up the outbreaks. His government then scrapped all pandemic restrictions and protections including vaccine and mask mandates and regular reporting. When a record-breaking deadly “heat dome” settled over British Columbia in late June 2021, resulting in 619 heat-related deaths mainly of vulnerable seniors, Horgan made the callous remark that “fatalities are a part of life.”

The Trudeau Liberal government, backed by its trade union and New Democratic Party allies, offers no way out of the devastating consequences of the capitalist system's destruction of the environment. On the contrary, its ruthless pursuit of the interests of big business, including through corporate deregulation and tax exemptions for Canada's oil firms, has fuelled climate change.

In British Columbia, four firefighters have died needlessly this summer as many resource-strapped volunteer and composite crews risk their lives battling fires of monstrous scale. Many volunteers lack adequate training and experience. In a belated tweet Sunday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the military would be deployed to British Columbia “to help with evacuations, staging.”

Trudeau's indifference is of a piece with US President Joe Biden, who responded with “no comment” when asked about the hundreds of deaths produced by the devastating fire that ripped through Maui. He then boasted of pathetic one-time payment of \$700 per household for those who have lost everything in the disaster.

Action to end the climate crisis in all its manifestations, including the climate-change-induced wildfires raging across Canada, the US, and parts of Europe, will not come from an appeal to capitalist governments which have shown time and time again their disdain and indifference to public health and safety. What is necessary is a rational, scientifically guided program for the reorganization of society's vast resources on a global scale on the basis of social need and not private profit. This requires a political fight led by the working class against the capitalist profit system and for socialism.



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