

Wildfires continue out of control across British Columbia as Canada's record-breaking fire season shows no signs of abating

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Wildfires continue to devastate parts of the western Canadian province of British Columbia in the worst fire season on record for the province and the country.

Although recent cooler weather and firefighting efforts have halted the rapid growth of many of the fires that were sparked during July and August heat waves, high winds and hotter weather at the beginning of this month caused fire activity to flare up on several active blazes in the province's central fire zone.

These include the Wells Creek wildfire, which has grown to 79 square kilometres and forced the evacuation of remote areas north of Burns Lake including the Cheslatta Carrier Nation. The Rossmore Lake fire, burning since July 21 approximately 10 kilometres south of the city of Kamloops, has grown to an estimated 110 square kilometres in size and is considered "out of control."

The Great Beaver Lake wildfire burning in the Fraser-Fort George region since early July has grown to 107 square kilometres. New evacuation orders have been issued for the second time in a month.

The government has extended the Provincial State of Emergency to September 14 as hundreds of wildfires—almost half of the 415 active fires scattered across the province—are designated "out of control" and dozens of new wildfires continue to ignite every week.

The current 14 wildfires "of note," which pose a serious threat to life and property, are mainly concentrated in the central and southern regions where hundreds of residents remain on evacuation order and over 20,000 on evacuation alert.

In the Shuswap area northeast of Kamloops, some residents have been allowed to return to a charred landscape described by one local firefighter as "pure hell," after the Adams Complex wildfire sparked in mid July rampaged through the towns scattered around the lake, destroying some 200 properties.

To date, more than 2 million hectares of land have been

destroyed by fire across the province. Roughly three-quarters of the fire damage—around 1.7 million hectares—has been in northeast British Columbia, which is covered in tinder dry boreal forest.

The Donnie Creek wildfire burning near the BC-Alberta border, the largest wildfire ever recorded in British Columbia, has burned more than 553 square kilometres of forest—an area larger than Prince Edward Island. According to the BC Wildfire Service, the fire is still "out of control" and is expected to burn through the fall and winter.

This year's wildfires in British Columbia have contributed to a record-setting increase in carbon emissions from wildfires in Canada. According to a recent report from the European Union's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service, between January 1 and July 31, Canada's carbon emissions from wildfires totalled 290 megatonnes, already more than double the previous record for an entire year set in 2014. The emissions represent over 25 percent of the global total for 2023.

The wildfire smoke from BC has drifted eastward, prompting poor air quality advisories in prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba and as far east as western Ontario. Forest fires can have a significant impact on local air quality and visibility and even at a low concentration are harmful to human health.

Capitalist-induced climate change producing extreme heat and extended droughts has weakened the resilience of forests already ravaged by the decades-long infestation of the invasive mountain pine beetle. These conditions, coupled with years of cost-cutting to fire emergency preparedness and response budgets, have led to an explosive increase in the scope and intensity of fires across the province.

In mid July, David Eby, premier of BC's pro-business New Democratic Party (NDP) government, called fire conditions in the coming months the "worst in a century" as fires sparked by lightning sprouted up in almost every corner of the province. Yet his government did nothing to prepare

for the record-breaking fire season scientists had forewarned of as early as March.

Instead, 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.

Decades-long funding cuts have resulted in a woefully inadequate amount of firefighters to battle the increasingly monstrous fire season. Only a third of the province's 126,000 firefighting jobs are permanent. The remainder are volunteers recruited on an ad-hoc basis, often lacking the training and skills critical to fighting fires safely and effectively. Already this year, four firefighters have needlessly lost their lives in Canada.

In August, the province allowed contracts for hundreds of critical international firefighters to expire. According to the Canadian Interagency Fire Fighting Centre, there are only 680 international firefighters left to battle the province's wildfires, compared with a peak of 1,754 in early July, even though wildfires remain an extreme threat.

This year is Canada's worst-ever wildfire season on record, with more than 6,000 wildfires reported across the country. More than 15 million hectares of land have burned, shattering the previous record of 7.6 million hectares in 1989 as well as the 10-year average of 2.5 million hectares. Nearly 200,000 Canadians have been placed under an evacuation order this season.

In early August, when the province was being devastated by hundreds of fires during an extreme heat wave, the BC NDP announced that it would provide an insulting \$880,000 in funding to help communities improve evacuation plans and local emergency alerting systems.

When it comes to protecting the population from climate related disasters, the BC NDP has adopted a policy of malign neglect together with its Liberal allies at the federal level. The ruling class as a whole in Canada is determined to make the working class pay for its imperialist war against Russia and China while underwriting the personal accumulation of wealth by the ultra-rich. Whether it is allowing the elderly and immuno-compromised to die needlessly from the COVID-19 pandemic or allowing fires to spread unchecked through vulnerable communities, the government's homicidal policy is the same.

In the aftermath of fire devastation in West Kelowna, big-business Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau visited the area's evacuees who had lost their homes to the blaze. He was careful to avoid any commitment of any new federal

spending or announce initiatives to help communities prepare for future fires.

In his signature hollow and sanctimonious manner, Trudeau announced that the government has "a lot to learn," ignoring the glaring fact that for decades scientists have been warning about forests littered with highly combustible fuel in drought conditions that governments of all political stripes willfully ignored. When he took office in 2015, Trudeau neglected to reinstate the emergency preparedness funding that was eliminated by the right wing Conservative government under Stephen Harper in 2012.

The right wing BC United Party, formerly the Liberal Party, is exploiting the difficult situation to cynically advertise its own pro-business policy toward firefighting by peddling the "Stay or Go" model, a criminal program pioneered in Australia which effectively absolves the government authorities of any responsibility for evacuating residents threatened by fire or providing a fully professional, technologically advanced emergency fire service for all citizens. BC NDP premier Eby stated that his government is also considering "better models" to fight fires including Australia's "Stay or Go" model.

The efforts of BC United to attack the NDP are thoroughly hypocritical. The social democrats are, after all, continuing the former BC Liberal government's policy of brutal austerity for public spending enforced by BC Liberal premiers Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark. When the NDP was elected after 15 years of Liberal Party rule in 2017, then NDP leader and subsequent Premier John Horgan boasted repeatedly that the NDP was sticking to the Liberals' "fiscal framework."



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