

Much of Jasper, Alberta destroyed as Canada's climate-change fueled fire season flares

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Canada's wildfire season—which got off to a relatively slow start, especially when compared with last year's record-breaking coast-to-coast mega fires—has now flared, with a rapidly advancing inferno destroying much of Jasper, Alberta. According to the latest estimates, about 30 percent of structures in the town, one of Canada's most popular and iconic vacation resorts, were wiped out as a wall of fire rushed through the Athabasca River valley.

Approximately 25,000 residents and tourists in the town and surrounding Jasper National Park were ordered to evacuate earlier this week. Kayakers were rescued from the wilderness and roads out of the mountain community were packed as people escaped to surrounding communities in Alberta and British Columbia. Firefighters, who lacked respirators, were also forced to flee as smoke choked the town.

The official account for Jasper National Park reported on X/Twitter Thursday night that firefighters were able to protect critical infrastructure, including the hospital, schools and the wastewater treatment plant. But many homes have been razed to the ground. Parks Canada reported earlier in the day that work was underway to protect the Trans Mountain Pipeline, which carries crude oil and petroleum products through the park from Edmonton to Vancouver, British Columbia. As much of Jasper burned Wednesday, Alberta called in the Canadian Armed Forces to help contain the wildfires.

The Jasper Wildfire Complex, which began on July 19, had consumed an estimated 36,000 hectares as of Thursday. Rainfall Wednesday night was expected to tamp down the blaze into the weekend, though conditions remain primed for the resurgence of flames and the eruption of new fires. 173 active fires are burning across the province, and more than 550,000 hectares have been consumed so far this year.

According to the Canadian Wildland Fire Information System, fires are currently burning out of control in every province and territory save for Nunavut and the Maritimes.

While the current season pales in comparison to last year's record-shattering fires, which choked the continent with smoke, it still ranks as the fifth worst on record with more than 2.7 million hectares burned.

All of the worst wildfire years on record have come in the last decade, with the warming effects of capitalist-induced climate change priming Canada's forests to erupt at the first spark—whether from lightning or a wayward spark from a campfire.

“There's a recipe for a wildfire and it's a simple recipe. It applies in Jasper, it applies in California, it applies all over the world,” Thompson Rivers University professor Mike Flannigan told CBC News.

“You need three things. Vegetation, we call it fuel. How much, what type, how dry? It was really dry. Ignition, people and lightning. Then weather, hot dry, windy weather. There has been an incredible stretch of hot, dry weather. Fires love to run up and down valleys.”

The 2022 Management Plan for Jasper National Park noted that climate change has facilitated the spread of the mountain pine beetle into the park. The beetle has been moving farther north and into higher elevations as temperatures warm, killing large stands of trees, creating the fuel for intensifying fires. Efforts to combat the beetle in Alberta have cut its population by 94 percent from a peak in 2019, but significant damage has already been done across the province and in the park, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of dead trees.

Two foresters and researchers, Emile Begin and Ken Hodges, told CBC News in 2018 that Jasper National Park was due for a catastrophic forest fire as a result of long-standing management practices—which focused on mitigation instead of logging dead trees—combined with the impacts of climate change. They reported that their warnings had gone largely unheeded by Parks Canada, the federal agency which manages the 11,228 square kilometer park in southwestern Alberta. Fire suppression efforts had ironically created

conditions for the eruption of even more devastating fires, they said, threatening the existence of the town.

“You have fire suppression that has occurred for many years—therefore, you get a lot of dead fuel that would have been consumed by a natural process,” Hodges told CBC. “The mountain pine beetle adds even more fuel to the situation.” Hodges went on to note, “The potential that’s out there is actually scary. Hopefully we’re wrong.”

Parks Canada’s fire management budget for the whole country was \$65 million in 2021, with 660 personnel deployed across 34 parks and sites as of 2023, covering 342,456 square kilometers. Despite their limited resources, including the inability to fight fires at night, federal Parks Canada did not reach out to Alberta for provincial support with the Jasper fire, underscoring how overlapping jurisdictions undermined the firefighting effort.

“We can’t just send equipment into federal airspace without co-ordination, you can’t send unmanned aerial vehicles which we use with infrared, we can’t send in helicopters with night vision, we can’t send in water bombers, without being integrated with them,” Premier Danielle Smith told a press conference Thursday night. “We are also very quick to respond with dozers to be able to create fireguards and we can’t do that without them giving the order to assist in bringing in those dozers and building fire guards around.”

While Smith shed crocodile tears over the destruction in Jasper, the climate change denier and her hard-right United Conservative Party government have slashed millions from the province’s firefighting budget in recent years. This included the axing of the Wildland Firefighter Rappel Program in 2019 by her predecessor Jason Kenney. Last year, as fires burned across the province, Smith denied the link between climate change and wildfires and announced that her government was calling in “arson investigators” from outside the province to investigate the cause of the blazes.

The undermining of wildfire budgets has been a bipartisan affair. The New Democratic Party (NDP) government under Premier Rachel Notley cut \$15 million from the 2016 firefighting budget.

The last decade has seen numerous cities across Western Canada evacuated under threat of intensifying fires:

- Yellowknife, the largest community and capital of the Northwest Territories, was almost completely evacuated in August last year as fire bore down on the town and threatened to cut off evacuation routes. Thousands of people were displaced for more than two weeks, forced to seek shelter hundreds of kilometers from their homes.

- Lytton, British Columbia, a village of 250, was almost completely burned to the ground in June-July 2021 amid a

record-shattering heat wave, with temperatures approaching 50 Celsius (121 F). Two people were killed. Fire again destroyed homes in 2022, hampering rebuilding efforts.

88,000 people were forced to flee Fort McMurray, Alberta, in May 2016 as flames consumed the city located in the centre of the province’s tar sands fields. The wildfire destroyed over 3,200 structures and resulted in \$9.9 billion in damage.

Alberta’s economic growth has been fueled by the exploitation of the Athabasca tar sands over the last quarter century. Elevated prices have made the energy-intensive extraction of oil from the tar sands profitable for Big Oil. The burning of fossil fuels, which emits carbon dioxide, in pursuit of corporate profit, has been one of the main drivers of climate change since the industrial revolution. In an ironic feedback, it is the areas of oil production, like Alberta, which have been among the most immediately impacted by climate change.

Despite the recent string of disasters and near disasters, and the record fire season in 2023, there has been no significant action by the Liberal/union/NDP alliance, which currently controls the Canadian government, to dramatically expand firefighting and management efforts or confront the problems of climate change. While it squanders tens of billions of dollars in arming the military to wage war on behalf of Canadian imperialism around the world, the union-backed Liberal government cites the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments to justify its inaction. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has focused on defending his wholly inadequate, market-driven carbon tax from populist attacks by hard-right Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, who resides comfortably in the pocket of oil interests.

Climate change, while impacting particular regions in specific ways that must be combatted appropriately, is a global problem which requires a global solution. And the situation is urgent, with global temperature records broken on two consecutive days this week. It is only through the united international mobilization of the working class, marshaling the world’s resources on a scientific basis without concern for national divisions, that the problem can be confronted and brought under control, so it doesn’t continue to destroy communities and displace millions across the planet.



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