

Firefighters in east Canada battle 'unprecedented' blazes

May 31 2023, by Michel COMTE



Firefighters with Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency work to put out fires in the Tantallon area of Nova Scotia.

Firefighters on Wednesday faced a grueling uphill battle against wildfires in Canada's Nova Scotia province, including one threatening suburbs of Halifax.

Federal help was coming, officials said, along with firefighters from the United States.

"We're in a crisis in the province and we want and we need and we will take all the support we can get," Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston told a news conference. "These fires are unprecedented."

Already, additional kit have been shipped in from Ontario, and a dozen water bombers from neighboring regions and the Coast Guard joined efforts to douse the flames and assist with evacuations.

Houston said he has also asked for the military to help out.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the wildfires "heartbreaking," and vowed unlimited support.

As of Wednesday, 14 wildfires were burning in Nova Scotia, including three out of control. They've so far destroyed or damaged more than 200 homes and other structures including a wooden bridge, but no injuries have been reported.

One couple described to public broadcaster CBC having lost both their home and their childcare business. "That's my life," a tearful Terri Kottwitz said.

Others said they saw trees on fire in their backyard as they fled with just a moment's notice.

Evacuee Janis Churchill-Moher told CBC that she didn't know if her

home in the picturesque rural south of the province was still standing.

"Our neighbors have working farms and they just had to pack up their kids, pack up as many animals as fast as they could and run," she said.

More than 2,000 residents of the area were ordered to evacuate earlier in the week as fires swept through the area.

"It's a devastating situation for everybody," she said.



More than 16,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes in Canada's eastern province of Nova Scotia.

'Frustrated and frightened'

Smoke from the wildfires blew down the Atlantic coast, prompting air quality alerts for the US state of New Jersey and parts of Pennsylvania, including the Philadelphia area.

David Meldrum of the Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency, pointing to record-high temperatures forecast this week, warned of "a prolonged operation" to bring under control a large fire northwest of the port city that has displaced more than 16,000 residents.

"People are understandably tired, frustrated and frightened," said Halifax Mayor Mike Savage, adding that "some have no home to return to."

Houston announced a ban on all activities in Nova Scotia forests, including hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, the use of off-road vehicles and logging.

"For God's sake, stop burning. Stop flicking cigarette butts out of the car window. Just stop it. Our resources are stretched incredibly thin right now fighting existing fires," he pleaded after several illegal burns were reported by conservation officers.

Government data shows a decline in the number of wildfires in Canada since the 1980s, likely due to improved fire prevention.

But the past decade also saw more disastrous wildfires scorching a lot more land and displacing many more people—problems set to worsen with climate change.

In recent years western Canada has been hit repeatedly by extreme weather, including floods and mudslides, forest fires that destroyed an

entire town, and record-high summer temperatures that killed more than 500 people in 2021.

On Tuesday, 800 residents of Fort Chiepwyan in northern Alberta had to be airlifted to safety as fires beared down on the remote hamlet.

Earlier this month, wildfires in Alberta burned nearly one million hectares of forests and grasslands, and at one point displaced 30,000 people.

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