

# Ranchers fear for livestock as Canada wildfires rage

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Alberta rancher BJ Fuchs's paddocks sit empty and smoke fills the air after he was forced to move his cattle to safety as wildfires advanced.

Rancher BJ Fuchs hasn't been able to let his guard down as wildfires advanced in Canada's Alberta province, so far sparing his farm in Shining Bank but scorching forests and grasslands all around it.

Paddocks that usually hold up to 1,000 cows sit empty and a haze of smoke has reduced visibility to less than five meters (16 feet).

Fuchs and his son managed to evacuate his herd before the wildfires jumped a nearby river and arrived at his doorstep. Smoke now billows from piles of burnt trees on his wooded lot west of the provincial capital Edmonton.

The blaze that threatened his farm was powerful, he told AFP. "It's pretty scary stuff when fire's that close to your home."

"There're still [hot spots](#) and, you know, I don't think we're out of danger yet," he said, sporting a days-old beard and a cowboy hat. "So I don't think we can let our guard down."

Alberta is the largest cattle producing region in Canada, with almost five million head of cattle, according to government data.

Dotted with open ranges and rolling plains in the shadow of the majestic Rocky Mountains, it has been used as a backdrop for Westerns such as Oscar winners Unforgiven and Brokeback Mountain.

Over the past week, wildfires burnt more than 400,000 hectares (1,550 square miles), and forced almost 30,000 people out of their homes. Some 70 fires were still raging on Friday, including 20 listed as out of control.



BJ Fuchs seeks out embers on his property to stamp out after clearing brush and erecting fire barriers to slow the advancing fires.

"It's going to be an ongoing battle, in my opinion, until we get a lot more rain, that's for sure," Fuchs said as he busily stomped out embers on his property.

Fuchs and his neighbors despair over the hot, [dry weather](#) that has fueled the wildfires, only two years after a major drought slashed Western Canada crop yields by up to 40 percent.

"It's literally hundreds of thousands of animals that are potentially

impacted because the hectarage (burnt) is so huge," Alberta Premier Danielle Smith told a news conference.

## 'I felt hopeless'

Hosing down barns and other farm buildings, erecting fire barriers and clearing tinder-dry brush, farmers and ranchers have been hard at work.

"I felt hopeless, wondering when it would end," said Jesse Crowther, who at 37 years old runs a small beef cattle farm. "There's always something—drought, hail, [heavy rains](#)—you take what comes and keep on going."

This latest fire disaster—which authorities suspect was started by a combination of lightning strikes and human carelessness—has been "crazy," he said.



BJ Fuchs' cows are now safe in new temporary digs -- away from fire danger.

In recent years, Western Canada has been hit repeatedly by [extreme weather](#), the intensity and frequency of which have increased due to global warming.

Forest fires in Canada's oil sands region in 2016 disrupted production and forced out 100,000 residents from Fort McMurray, pummeling the nation's economy.

More recently in 2021, westernmost British Columbia province—which

neighbors Alberta—suffered record-high temperatures over the summer that killed more than 500 people, as well as wildfires that destroyed an entire town, floods and mudslides.

Over the past week, Alberta ranchers have scrambled to secure transportation to move cattle to fairgrounds and other locations that opened up emergency spaces for displaced livestock.

"Anybody that lives out here is prepared all the time," said farmer Trent Stanley, "because if your house catches fire, the local [fire](#) department, you know, they're volunteer guys that are going to take half an hour to get to the station and then another half an hour to get here (and) by the time that happens, your house is gone."

But in regards to livestock the situation is much more challenging—even dire. "I've got 850 cows calving. It's not like you can load them up in a few minutes," he said.

"I guess the plan was just to open the gates and maybe the cattle would know what way to run, but I doubt it."

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