

Thousands ordered to flee advancing wildfires in Quebec

June 2 2023, by Michel COMTE



An aircraft drops a mix of water and fire retardant over the fire near Barrington Lake, Shelburne County, Canada.

Canada is facing a catastrophic spring wildfire season with massive and powerful blazes out of control in all corners of the country, and thousands more people displaced on Friday.

"This is a scary time for a lot of people from coast to coast to coast," said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, alluding to the vastness of a nation on fire stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic to the Arctic oceans.

Some 10,000 people on Friday were ordered to evacuate from Sept Iles in Quebec in the face of advancing wildfires.

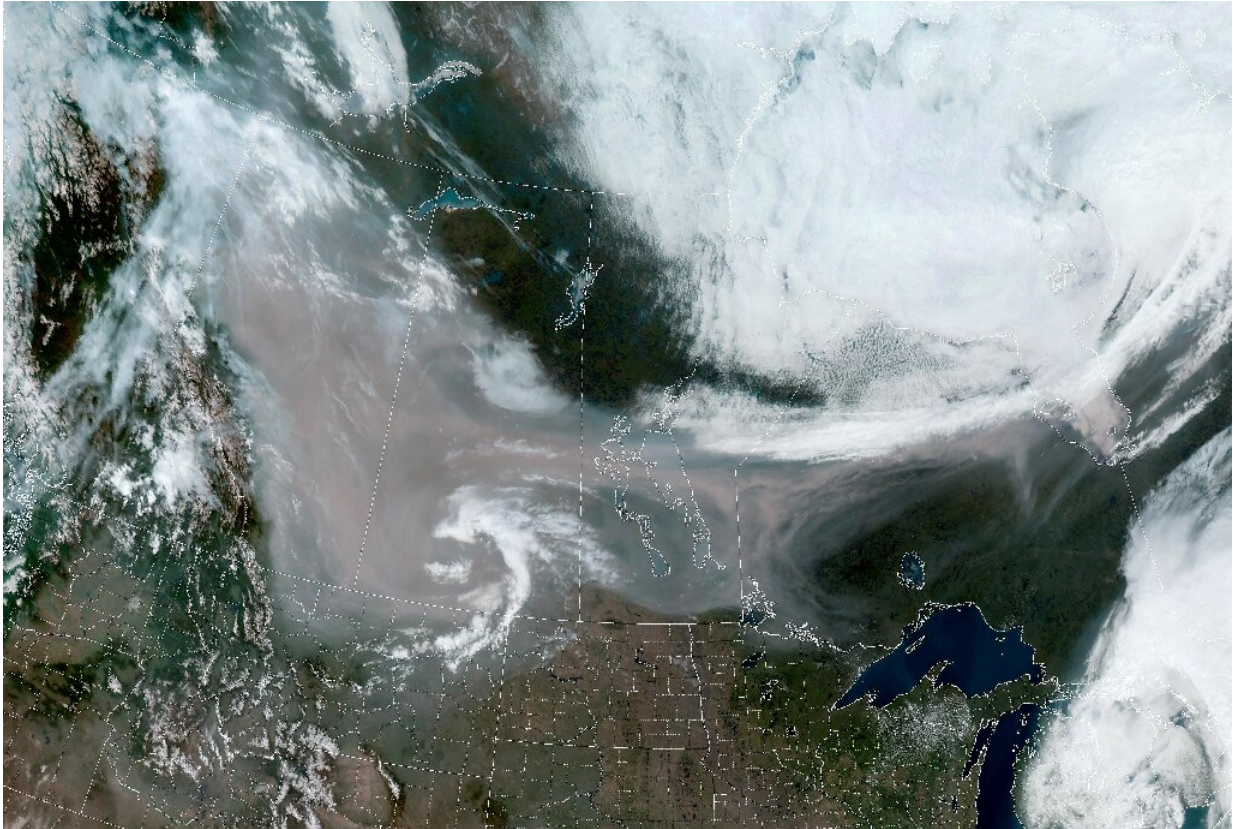
Steve Beaupre, mayor of the small city on the St. Lawrence River, declared a local state of emergency and announced the mandatory evacuation after nearby wildfires "advanced very quickly" overnight.

Residents were told in the morning to vacate their homes by 4 pm local time (2100 GMT).

Stephane Lauzon, a member of Parliament from Quebec, told a news conference in Ottawa that as many as 10,000 residents, or one-third of the population of Sept Iles, would be displaced.

This followed the evacuation on Thursday of 500 residents of Chapais in the north of the province.

"The situation is quickly changing in Quebec," Lauzon said, adding that about 100 fires, "many more than yesterday," were burning in the province, including about 20 out of control.



This image obtained from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows smoke from wildfires in Canada's western Alberta province moving east on May 20.

'We need rain'

Canada has been hit repeatedly by extreme weather in recent years, the intensity and frequency of which have increased due to global warming.

Across Canada more than 210 fires were burning on Friday after scorching more than 2.7 million hectares (6.7 million acres). A total of 29,000 people had been evacuated before Friday's order.

After major flareups in the west of the country in May, notably in the Prairies provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, firefighting shifted in the past week to Nova Scotia on the Atlantic coast.

Officials hoped rain and cooler temperatures in forecasts for the weekend following a record-breaking heat wave will bring relief.

"Weather has favored the fires all week, not the firefighters. We're hopeful that this will soon change," Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston told a briefing.

"We need rain. Hopefully that rain comes in sufficient amounts this weekend."

Almost 1,000 firefighters from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States also arrived or were en route to bolster firefighting efforts.

And Ottawa was deploying the military in Nova Scotia and Quebec to help out, officials said.



This May 31, 2023, image courtesy of the Nova Scotia government in Canada, shows the collapsed bridge between Clyde River and Port Clyde smoulders.

'The house is gone'

In Halifax, the largest city in Nova Scotia, busloads of suburban residents were taken on tours for a first glimpse of devastated neighborhoods.

In a video shared by local media, people on the bus could be heard trying to identify items burned or melted. "I think that was my car," a woman says when it stops at the end of a long driveway.

Jason Young told reporters it was "pretty surreal" to see the blackened wooded lots and smoking debris.

"The house is gone. The shed is gone. Everything's gone. On our property, there's nothing left. It's completely gone," he said.

Others weren't ready yet to take it all in. "If I see my property I want to do it with my family, by ourselves, and be able to physically go in and (maybe) sort through stuff," Jody Stuart said, aware that he has lost everything.

About 200 homes, as well as a wooden bridge and a historic private Halifax club founded in 1908, have been destroyed and nearly 20,000 residents have been displaced by wildfires in Nova Scotia.

A few were allowed to return home on Friday after more than a week away.

Houston lamented the "many, many lives turned upside down" by fires, noting a number of people "responding to the fires are evacuees themselves and it's absolutely heartbreaking."

But he also expressed solace: "Though all this despair, zero deaths, zero missing persons, zero serious injuries."

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