

Wildfires in Canada have broken records for area burned, evacuations and cost, official says

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Smoke billows from the Donnie Creek wildfire burning north of Fort St. John, British Columbia, Canada, Sunday, July 2, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger, File

Wildfires raging across Canada have already broken records for total area burned, the number of people forced to evacuate their homes and the cost of fighting the blazes, and the fire season is only halfway finished, officials said Thursday.

"It's no understatement to say that the 2023 [fire](#) season is and will continue to be record breaking in a number of ways," Michael Norton, director general, Northern Forestry Centre, Canadian Forest Service, said Thursday during a briefing.

A health expert also warned that smoke from the fires can cause [health problems](#) for people living in both Canada and the United States.

"When you're emitting large amounts of fire smoke into the air, and that smoke is reaching populated areas, there will be [health effects](#)," said Ryan Allen, a professor of health sciences at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Norton said [warm weather](#) and dry conditions across Canada indicate the potential for higher-than-normal fire activity through July and August.

"Drought is a major contributing factor affecting parts of all provinces and territories, intensifying in some regions," he said. "When coupled with forecasts for ongoing above normal temperatures across most of the country, it is anticipated that many parts of Canada will continue to see above normal fire activity."

As of Wednesday, there were 639 active fires burning in Canada with 351 of them out of control. So far this year there have been 3,412 fires, well above the 10-year average of 2,751, said Norton.

The fires have burned 8.8 million hectares (27.7 million acres) an area about the size of the state of Virginia. This already exceeds the record of

7.6 million hectares (18.7 million acres) set in 1989 and is 11 times the 10-year average experienced by this date.

"The final area burned for this season may yet be significantly higher," said Norton. "What we can say with certainty right now is that 2023 is a record-breaking year since at least since 1986 when accurate records started to be kept."



U.S. Forest Service smokejumper Mike Dunn steps through a puddle while exiting a plane in Fort St. John, British Columbia, Wednesday, July 5, 2023. His crew is assisting Canadian firefighters battling fires throughout the region. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

Allen said the [fine particles](#) found in fire smoke not only have the ability to penetrate deep into airways, they also can travel long distances meaning they could drift far into the U.S.

There have been reports that fires in Eastern Canada and Quebec are affecting air quality in Europe.

Allen said higher concentrations of smoke increases [health risks](#) to the lungs, brain, cognitive functions and even fetal development.

"As you get very far away, it's unlikely the concentration would be as high as they are in [close proximity](#) to the fire and therefore the health risk would be lower, but the health risk is probably not zero," he said.

Norton said the fires have forced an estimated 155,856 evacuees, the highest number in the last four decades. Currently about 4,500 people remain under evacuation orders across the country with about 3,400 in Indigenous communities.

Fighting the fires has taken on a global proportion.

There are about 3,790 provincial firefighters battling the blazes across the country being assisted by Canadian Armed Forces personnel. Another 3,258 firefighters from Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, the U.S., Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, South Korea and the European Union have travelled to Canada to fight fires.

Norton said the cost of fighting wildfires has steadily grown and is approaching about CDN\$1 billion (US\$750 million) a year.

"With the scale of this year's activity and the fact we've still got three months left, there's no question in my mind the direct cost of suppression will be a new record," he said.

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