

Milder weather brings relief from 'apocalyptic' Canada wildfires

August 21 2023, by Paula RAMON, with Michel COMTE in Ottawa



The McDougall Creek wildfire burns in the hills of West Kelowna. Evacuation orders were put in place in the area of Kelowna, with a population of 150,000, as the fire threatened the city.

Cooling weather on Monday gave firefighters a slight edge against what

the prime minister described as "apocalyptic" wildfires blazing across western Canada, after tens of thousands were evacuated or put on alert.

Two fires threatening large parts of the scenic Okanagan Valley, including the cities of Kelowna and neighboring West Kelowna in British Columbia, merged over the weekend.

Around 30,000 people in the province where 385 fires are now burning—out of almost 1,040 nationwide—had been under evacuation orders while another 36,000 were under alert to be ready to flee.

British Columbia's emergency management minister, Bowinn Ma, warned that the situation was "highly dynamic."

West Kelowna Fire Chief Jason Brolund, however, sounded a note of optimism, telling a news conference late Sunday: "We're finally feeling like we're moving forward, rather than we're moving backwards."

Temperatures in the major wine-producing region around Kelowna were expected to stay cool through Monday, creeping into the low 20 degrees Celsius (68 Fahrenheit) in the afternoon.

There was also some rain forecast starting Tuesday.

Officials said it was too soon to start planning a staged return of evacuees as thick smoke continued to choke the area.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a cabinet retreat in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, to discuss the national fire crisis said Canadians "are watching in horror the images of apocalyptic devastation."



Boats sit amongst smoke from the nearby Bush Creek East Wildfire on Shuswap Lake in Gleneden, British Columbia. Two fast-moving "extreme" wildfires merged overnight in western Canada, threatening hundreds more homes and forcing continued evacuations in a wide swath of British Columbia province.

"It's a scary and heartbreaking time," he said as "people flee for their lives and worry about their communities."

This summer in Canada, more than 14 million hectares (34.6 million acres) has already burned—roughly the size of Greece and almost twice the area of the last record of 7.3 million hectares. Four people have died so far.

Scientists say human-caused global warming is exacerbating natural

hazards, making them both more frequent and more deadly.

'Horrible to breathe'

Kelowna, a city of 150,000, has become the latest population center hit.

"It has been horrible to spend the week with this air. It is horrible to breathe," Mary Hicks, a 29-year-old IT worker who had been visiting the region from Montreal, told AFP on Sunday. "I really want to go home."

But she was stuck for now, with her return flight canceled. The airport hopes to resume flights this week, depending on visibility.

"When I had to pack, in the moment I was crying, crying, crying," said April, 39, who with her two small children fled her home east of Kelowna and was staying in a hotel outside the city.

On the other side of Okanagan Lake, a number of homes on the outskirts of West Kelowna had been burned.



Charred remains are seen on the side of the road on the highway in Enterprise. The tiny hamlet, a key junction on the road south from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, has been almost completely destroyed by fires.

"My sister's boyfriend's house has burnt down. He lives in the West Kelowna side and it was so windy that the fire was spreading and they couldn't control it," said Bogi Bagosi, a 16-year-old student.

"It's kind of heartbreaking to watch the city burn down. They are doing their best to stop it but it is not enough."

The confusion and terror of the fires and evacuations have been compounded by Meta's blocking of Canadian news on Facebook and Instagram, in response to a new law requiring digital giants to pay

publishers for articles.

"It is inconceivable that a company like Facebook is choosing to put corporate profits ahead of (safety)... and keeping Canadians informed about things like wildfires," Trudeau said Monday.

Cooler with rain 'a bit of help'

In Canada's far north, crews held back a massive fire threatening Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. They were helped by some rain over the weekend.

Yellowknife—now a ghost town, except for [emergency personnel](#) who stayed behind to build fire barriers and lay out sprinklers—and many small communities in the near-Arctic region have been evacuated, leaving two thirds of the population of the Northwest Territories displaced.

"With a little bit of help from the weather over the past few days and a lot of good firefighting work we've been able to keep this thing at bay for the time being," local [fire](#) information officer Mike Westwick told a briefing.

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