

Western Canada wildfires force tens of thousands to flee

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Canadian officials described the wildfire situation in the scenic Okanagan Valley as 'highly dynamic'

Officials in western Canada's British Columbia implored tens of thousands of residents to heed evacuation orders Saturday as "rapidly

evolving" wildfires threatened large parts of the scenic Okanagan Valley, including the city of Kelowna.

The situation in the popular boating and hiking destination was "highly dynamic," said Bowinn Ma, the province's minister of emergency management.

Around 30,000 people were under evacuation orders while another 36,000 were under alert to be ready to flee, she said.

"We cannot stress strongly enough how critical it is to follow evacuation orders when they are issued," Ma said at an afternoon news conference.

"They are a matter of life and death not only for the people in those properties but also for the first responders who will often go back to try to implore people to leave."

Kelowna, a city of 150,000, was choked with thick smoke as it became the latest population center hit by one of the many wildfires scorching Canada this summer.

British Columbia alone had 385 active wildfires by late Saturday night, according to government data.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said he had spoken with British Columbia Premier David Eby about the "rapidly evolving and incredibly devastating wildfire situation" and pledged federal resources in responding to the disaster.



A helicopter drops water as the McDougall Creek wildfire continues to burn in West Kelowna, British Columbia.

Yellowknife exodus

Blazes in the neighboring Northwest Territories have meanwhile prompted the evacuation of regional capital Yellowknife, leaving the remote city of around 20,000 largely a ghost town.

Overnight rains brought some relief to Yellowknife on Saturday, however, "a little rain does not mean it's safe to come back home," warned Northwest Territories environment minister Shane Thompson.

"Though the surface may not show fire, it's still active and it's huge," he

said at a Saturday evening news conference, noting that temperatures are expected to rise again Sunday.

Yellowknife official Chris Greencorn praised the work crews were doing to build defenses around the city, with large areas cleared to create firebreaks and pipes laid for sprinklers and water cannon.

"Basically this represents approximately two full Yellowknife construction seasons completed in less than six days," he said.



Canada is experiencing a record-setting wildfire season including British Columbia's Crater Creek Fire.

The exodus from Yellowknife and elsewhere means two-thirds of the near-Arctic territory's population has been displaced, Thompson said.

The fires have caused "terrible loss," Trudeau told reporters after meeting Yellowknife evacuees Friday as they arrived in Edmonton, Alberta, with no idea when they may return home.

Northwest US threat

In British Columbia, blazes have already destroyed several properties in West Kelowna, among them the Lake Okanagan Resort, according to local media.

The historic property is known for having hosted high-profile visitors such as British prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

"It's become evident that this event is going to leave a long-lasting scar on our community," West Kelowna Fire Chief Jason Brolund said at a news conference on Saturday.

He said the previous day had been "one of the most difficult days of firefighting our department has ever faced."



Residents in Canada's scenic Okanagan Valley were warned to be ready to evacuate with multiple fires roaring.

Eby announced on Saturday an emergency order halting non-essential visits to the area.

The order, which bans visitors from checking in at hotels and other temporary accommodations, covers Kelowna and the nearby towns of Kamloops, Oliver, Penticton and Vernon as well as Osoyoos near the US border.

"If you are currently in accommodations in these areas, we are asking you to voluntarily check out early and free up those spaces for evacuees and responders," Ma said.

Firefighters from Australia, Mexico, Brazil and Costa Rica, as well as eastern Canada, are assisting British Columbia to combat the blazes.

Across the border in the United States, several thousand people were forced to flee wildfires in Washington state, with at least one death reported, local media said.

An evacuation was ordered for Medical Lake, a town outside Spokane next to a US Air Force base, while a section of the vital I-90 highway was closed, authorities said.



Smoke hangs over the town of Osoyoos in the province of British Columbia on August 18, 2023.

Canada is experiencing a record-setting wildfire season, with official estimates of more than 14 million hectares (34.6 million acres) 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.

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