

Thousands lose their homes in Alberta wildfire

By Roger Jordan
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In the wake of the first tour by media representatives through Fort McMurray Monday, it is clear that many thousands of residents have been left homeless by the catastrophic wildfire which forced close to 90,000 to evacuate the city May 3.

The Alberta government confirmed that 2,400 structures, between 10 and 15 percent of the city, were destroyed outright by the fire, close to five times more than the 2011 blaze in Slave Lake, Alberta, Canada's worst wildfire disaster prior to this month. An additional 12 homes were burned down in the small community of Anzac, south of Fort McMurray.

This only gives an indication of the worst of the damage, since many of the buildings left standing will have suffered partial fire damage, and/or severe water and smoke damage. Officials confirmed that large areas of the city are without water, gas and power.

Reports suggest that at least 12 of the houses that burned to the ground belonged to firefighters involved in fighting the blaze. Around 700 firefighters from across the country continue to work on containing the fire.

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley has said that it will be two weeks before an announcement is made on when residents can return to Fort McMurray. It is likely to be many months, if ever, before the thousands whose homes have been destroyed have a place to return to in the city.

The fire has grown to over 230,000 hectares in size, but is now largely removed from residential areas. It did not reach the Saskatchewan border, 90 kilometers (56 miles) to Fort McMurray's east, as earlier expected.

Insurers estimate that total damage caused by the fire could top \$9 billion, making it the most expensive disaster in Canadian history. Indications are that insurers will respond by increasing premiums for homeowners in areas close to forests or at high risk of wildfires. "It's quite possible we could see some rate increases, possibly regionally," Jason Mercer of Moody's Canada said

Wednesday.

As well as residential properties, many businesses were destroyed in the flames, leaving hundreds, and possibly thousands, of workers without jobs. Economist Herb Emery told the *Globe and Mail* that the fire would likely cause the provincial jobless rate to spike in the short term from 7.2 to 10 percent.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau plans to visit the region tomorrow. He has explicitly refused linking the wildfire to climate change or any other "political" explanation, describing such approaches as "not helpful." The Trudeau government is anxious to push ahead with its support for further expansion of Alberta tar-sands oil production, above all through the construction of pipelines to transport oil to tidal water.

Notley met with oil executives in Edmonton Tuesday to discuss restarting production at facilities around the devastated city. Some operations have already started pumping oil at lower than normal rates, and Suncor Chief Executive Steve Williams confirmed that others could be ready to operate at full capacity within 24 to 48 hours of a decision to resume production. Others located south of the city could take a week or two to restart.

Oil facilities have suffered only minor damage, including to some electrical infrastructure. But Williams maintained, "We don't believe at the moment that the electrical infrastructure issues are going to be big enough to stop the industry ramping up."

This underlines the basic fact that the wildfire that destroyed much of Fort McMurray was no natural disaster, but the product of the capitalist system's reckless drive for profit at all costs. Fort McMurray was expanded exponentially over recent decades to serve the needs of the oil giants exploiting the Alberta tar sands, but unlike the large fire breaks and specially trained fire crews in place to guard oil production facilities, few precautionary measures were taken to protect the people

of Fort McMurray and their homes. Only one road out of the city existed for a population that surpassed 100,000 at the peak of the oil price boom, and fire breaks to deprive flames of fuel close to residential areas were lacking.

The official indifference to the fate of the population is made even more outrageous by the repeated warnings issued by scientists about the increased risks of wildfires in Canada's boreal forest. Experts have long warned that the combination of climate change, a larger human presence in the boreal forests due to the oil, mining and logging industries, and a lack of precautionary measures were creating the conditions for a disaster on an unprecedented scale. Over two decades ago, scientists predicted the lengthening of the fire season, and more recent studies estimated the area burned in Canada by fires will continue to increase in coming decades.

Just months prior to last week's fire, the incoming federal Liberal Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr was warned in his briefing papers that governments at all levels have insufficiently funded programs to combat wildfires. In 2005, the provincial, territorial and federal governments agreed on a Canadian Wildlands Fire Strategy urging the improvement of community resilience, better fire management and the implementation of modern business practices. "Governments remain supportive of the strategy," said Carr's briefing notes, "but progress towards implementation over the past decade has been limited, primarily due to fiscal constraints."

Even as signs grew of the mounting threat, with 2015 witnessing a record fire season, successive provincial governments in Alberta cut the firefighting budget. The result of the latest cuts imposed by Notley's NDP government is that the province will be without air tankers to fight blazes from mid-August, even though the fire season, which began a month early this year due to warmer temperatures, runs through October.

Those displaced by the fire have largely relied on the generosity of the local population for support, with many residing with friends and family. The Red Cross has received at least \$67 million in donations from across the country and is preparing to disperse \$50 million of this to the evacuees, \$600 for every adult and \$300 for dependents.

The Alberta government began handing out financial assistance to evacuees yesterday in the form of pre-loaded debit cards, with \$1,250 for every adult and \$500 per dependent.

Thousands lined up for hours at four distribution sites in

Edmonton. Residents at the Northlands evacuee camp started lining up at 6 a.m., eight hours before the card distribution was slated to begin, only to be told they were in the wrong place. Due to the length of the lines, some ultimately left empty-handed.

The evacuation centres where several thousand are being housed are showing signs of strain. At least 50 people were taken sick at Northlands in Edmonton Monday and had to be segregated from the rest of the camp's residents.

The camps are dependent on volunteers, but this is proving insufficient. "We need more volunteers to help, we need every hand," Dalia Abdellatif of Edmonton Emergency Relief Services told CBC. "Without volunteers, we would not be able to run this place." She added that a centre set up at a former Target store in the city required more resources.

Distress Centre Calgary, which provides support to people with trauma and other mental health problems, reported that it received over 180 calls to its emergency line related to the wildfire between May 4 and 8. Many of those evacuating the city were already suffering the effects of the economic downturn, which by April had driven the official unemployment rate in Fort McMurray to almost 10 percent.

On top of this, Fort McMurray was home to refugees from around the world, including Syrians who recently fled the civil war. "To me when I do go back I will probably have to go see a counsellor, because ... just seeing all those homes burn down brings back a lot of my past," Godelive Ohelo, who fled the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo after losing relatives, told CBC.

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