

# The 2024 wildfire season in Canada: Climate catastrophe and capitalism converge

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The 2024 wildfire season and many other capitalist-induced climate change disasters that battered Canada last year highlight once again the serious dangers posed by the accelerating climate crisis and the criminal indifference of capitalist governments to the basic needs and protections of the population.

Although the year saw average rates of fire ignitions, 2024 proved the worst year this century in terms of area burned, outside of the unprecedented 2023 wildfire season. Over 5.3 million hectares (13 million acres), an area the size of Nova Scotia, were incinerated. Swaths of Western Canada, suffering from extreme heat and prolonged drought conditions, were particularly hard hit. Roughly 70 per cent of fires—most caused by dry lightning—were located in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories.

British Columbia faced its fourth largest wildfire season on record. The BC Wildfire Service documented more than 1,688 wildfires over 1.08 million hectares—comprising almost a fifth of the country’s total area burned. In total, 51 evacuation orders affecting more than 4,100 properties were issued. In the Northwest Territories, just under 1.7 million hectares burned, the third-highest amount in a season since 2005. Over 300 residents were evacuated out of a total population in the territory in Canada’s far north of just over 40,000.

Alberta experienced its worst season on record in terms of fire ignitions, surpassing the historic 2023 season, despite less area burned. According to the Alberta Wildfire status dashboard, firefighters responded to more than 1,210 wildfires, which burned more than 705,000 hectares. Included in these figures is the Jasper wildfire, which swept through the northern tourist town in a matter of hours, forcing over 20,000 residents to flee on a moment’s notice in the dead of night. At least one-third of the town’s structures were destroyed, making it one of the most expensive natural disasters in Canadian history.

In Manitoba, over 266,000 hectares of forest burned last year—over 60,000 hectares more than the previous year—and only slightly fewer ignitions, 291 as compared to 300. The first major fire of the year was in early May, when a massive 37,000-hectare blaze tore through the area near Cranberry Portage, forcing the evacuation of 675 residents.

In the Atlantic province of Newfoundland and Labrador, a

fire burned more than 24,000 acres and forced 7,000 residents to evacuate Labrador City, the largest-ever evacuation in Newfoundland and Labrador’s history.

The unprecedented early start to the 2024 wildfire season in Canada was due to continuous drought in parts of Western Canada, which created conditions for overwintering fires from the previous season to reignite. By February, at least 100 holdover wildfires, known as “zombie fires,” were still smouldering underground, primed for re-ignition. By early May, large wildfires had broken out in Alberta, British Columbia, and Manitoba, followed by significant fires in Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Wildfires continued at high intensity throughout the rest of the summer and by the end of the typical fire season Canada had recorded the second-highest wildfire carbon emissions since measurements began in 2003—trailing behind only 2023. Smoke from fires reduced air quality through the United States and Canada, reaching as far as Mexico and Europe.

For decades, scientists have been sounding the alarm of the snowballing effects of the capitalist-induced climate crisis, which is primarily caused by the burning of fossil fuels. In Canada, due to its size and northern location, climate warming has been developing at twice the global average and in the Canadian arctic, the warming has been about three times higher. In October, federal climate scientists determined that of the 37 hottest heat waves in 17 regions across Canada between June to September 2024, “human-caused” climate change made twenty-eight of them much more likely to occur.

Last week, Canadian scientists published a study which identified “widespread increases” in high-burn severity days from 1981 to 2020. Xianli Wang, the study’s co-author, made the striking point that Canada’s historic 2023 season was not simply an aberration, but a “glimpse into the future,” citing last summer’s devastating wildfire in Jasper, which grew rapidly to a shocking 60 square kilometres in a matter of hours.

The social and economic damage caused by the 2024 wildfires was but one tragic event in a barrage of climate-related crises, escalating in intensity and frequency as the Earth rapidly warms. The summer of 2024 was the Earth’s hottest on record, fuelling conditions for extreme weather phenomena that

impacted millions across North America and around the world.

In Toronto, Ontario, nearly 10 centimetres of rain fell in three hours last July, leading to massive flooding across the city. The following month, in Quebec, 55 communities were inundated with record-breaking flooding from the remnants of Hurricane Debby, leading to the most costly weather event in the province's history. In October, a "bomb cyclone" battered the coast of British Columbia downing trees and leaving tens of thousands without power.

Beginning in March, a deadly heat wave swelled over the Eastern half of the United States, followed by Hurricane Helene—one of the deadliest hurricanes to strike the mainland in the last 50 years. Currently, California is facing its most devastating wildfire in history, as fast-moving wildfires quickly overwhelmed inadequate emergency resources and engulfed residential areas of Los Angeles County.

In line with the homicidal response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, capitalist governments at all levels, dedicated to the enrichment of the corporate and financial elite no matter the social costs, have done nothing to prevent wildfires and assist those already devastated by them.

Funding to prevent and fight wildfires, under both Conservative and Liberal federal governments, has been systematically eroded for decades. Since 2019, an NDP/union-backed Liberal government dedicated to militarism, imperialist war, and corporate enrichment, has invested just \$800 million for initiatives that support wildland fire response, prevention, and mitigation—a miserable pittance when compared to the \$650 billion corporate bailout package issued during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the \$41 billion for military expenditure in 2024-2025, or the \$8.5 billion in fossil fuel subsidies in 2024.

A study by the Great Canadian Fire Census determined there were over 2,000 fewer firefighters mobilized last year than in 2022. Of the 123,608 active firefighters, 71 per cent (90,000) were volunteers. Moreover, the census revealed that almost 50 per cent of departments across the country are using out-of-date apparatus and nearly one-third feel they do not have adequate training to respond to wildfire threats.

In this context, the installation of AI-powered wildfire detection systems planned for later this year for ten towns throughout Alberta and British Columbia will be undermined by the inadequacy of preventive and emergency measures and will ultimately be used to impose further cuts on fire departments and their skeleton crews.

The growing dominance of the far right in official politics, which represents the direct control of the financial oligarchy over the capitalist economy in terminal crisis, is creating the conditions for the destruction of what remains of social welfare—including nominal environmental protections.

Alberta premier and far-right ideologue Danielle Smith has recently pledged to "triple down" on her climate denial and opposes any regulation on the oil and gas industry, and in

British Columbia, Conservative Party leader, John Rustad, who gained a significant amount of seats in the recent provincial election, has called global warming due to carbon emissions "a lie."

Such figures, on the political fringes in the past, can operate and speak ever more brazenly, because of the utter bankruptcy of the "left" political parties, whose orientation to the ultra-wealthy and upper middle class is detached from the social concerns afflicting the vast majority of the population.

Smith and Rustad are acolytes of Conservative Party leader and frontrunner for the prime ministership, Pierre Poilievre, who has spearheaded the dismantling of COVID-19 protections and promised to tear up nominal environmental regulations.

In the United States, the second victory of the would-be dictator Trump, who has appointed fracking magnate and climate change denier Chris Wright as Energy Secretary, is the outcome of the political bankruptcy of the Democratic Party, which is hell bent on escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and backing the Gaza genocide to the hilt.

This massive social retrogression taking place in Canada and globally, spearheaded by the far right and taken up by all the official political parties, prevents any progressive approach to the climate catastrophe and all other vital social issues. What is urgently needed is the independent mobilization of the international working class against the capitalist system itself, the source of the climate catastrophe and all other forms of social misery, and its replacement with a rational and scientific plan for the world economy based on socialist principles.



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