

25,000 flee out-of-control wildfires in western Canada

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A smoke column rises from wildfire EWF031 near Lodgepole, Alberta, Canada May 4, 2023. (via Reuters)

Edmonton, May 8 (RHC)-- The Canadian province of Alberta announced a state of emergency over the weekend as 103 wildfires flared across the province, forcing 25,000 people to flee their homes in what a

top official said was an "unprecedented" crisis. Thousands more have been told to be ready to leave on a moment's notice.

"We've declared a provincial state of emergency to protect the safety, health and welfare of Albertans," Alberta Premier Danielle Smith told a news conference after a meeting of her government's emergency management committee.

Earlier Smith said the province -- one of the world's largest oil-producing regions -- "has been experiencing a hot, dry spring and with so much kindling, all it takes is a few sparks to ignite some truly frightening wildfires." "These conditions have resulted in the unprecedented situation our province is facing today," she said. According to Smith, more than 20 communities have been evacuated and some 122,000 hectares (301,000 acres) have burned so far.

Almost all of Alberta -- which is in the midst of an election -- and much of neighboring Saskatchewan province as well as a large swathes of the Northwest Territories face extreme fire risks, according to a federal government fire danger map.

Federal Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair tweeted that Ottawa stood ready to provide federal assistance, if needed. Drayton Valley with 7,000 residents -- about 140 kilometers (85 miles) west of Edmonton -- was among the communities evacuated as firefighters battled an out-of-control blaze.

Some 550 kilometers (340 miles) north of the provincial capital, a severe fire consumed 20 homes, a general store and a police station in the community of Fox Lake. Residents were evacuated by boat and helicopter.

Residents of the town of Edson, which has a population of more than 8,000, have also been ordered to "evacuate immediately."

In recent years, western Canada has been hit repeatedly by extreme weather, the intensity and frequency of which have increased due to global warming.

In 2016, forest fires in Canada's oil sands region disrupted production and forced out 100,000 residents of Fort McMurray in addition to pummeling the country's economy. More recently in 2021, westernmost British Columbia province suffered record-high temperatures over the summer that killed more than 500 people, as well as wildfires that destroyed a town.

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