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Wild Fires Thirteen Times Worse Than Ten Year Average
Deepest Sympathy and Concern for Residents
and Firefighters of Northwest Territories
and the BC Interior



Wildland fire in Northwest Territories

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Fighting wildland fires near Nadina Lake BC.

The Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) expresses its support and profound sympathies for the residents of Yellowknife, Hay River, Fort Smith, the K'atl'odeeche First Nation, Salt River First Nation and other communities in the Northwest Territories, and the people of Kelowna and BC communities, who have had to evacuate and are suffering the loss of their homes and entire possessions due to the extensive fires which are said to be "out of control." CPC(M-L) sends its deepest sympathies to the families, friends, co-workers and loved-ones of the four firefighters who have lost their lives fighting the devastating wildland fires.

We also express concern for the Indigenous communities where chiefs and residents have informed they are being left to fend for themselves. The Indigenous Peoples have lived with fire since time immemorial and they know how to keep fires under control but their knowledge is ignored and, too often, cultural practices which protect their communities are declared illegal and criminalized. They are not only criminalized for cultural practices which protected their communities but suffer the consequences of socially irresponsible economic use of the land and the forests which create conditions which exacerbate the problems when fires ignite.



Wildland firefighters in Northwest Territories.

We pay our respects to the firefighters who have poured in to help from across the country as well as many other countries. The Canadian Wildland Fire Information System informs that the destruction from these fires up to this point in the season has been 13 times worse than the 10-year average. A wildland fire research officer with the Canadian Forest Service informed the media that

Canada is currently at "national preparedness level 5," meaning Canada has fully committed all its national resources to mobilize the fight against the fires. Canadian firefighters have been joined by about 5,000 firefighters from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, France, Portugal, Spain, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica, and the United States.



The people of all these areas show their mettle when they come together to offer each other whatever assistance they can. But this does not condone the inaction of governments to deal with the climate crisis which is exacerbating the destructive effects of the reckless practices of the forest and other monopolies, compounded by the anti-social offensive and cuts to wildland fire services, creating conditions which are said to be out of control.

Human beings organized by a modern state are quite capable of humanizing the social and natural environment. They can get rid of the polluters and those who are diverting public funds into war spending and pay-the-rich schemes and putting environmental standards and regulations into the hands of narrow private interests. They can end the criminalization of those who oppose the despoliation of the environment, plunder of our natural resources and refusal to protect the populations concerned.

Wildland firefighters and their unions, scientists and researchers together with Indigenous and other communities in the forest are advocating for many immediate measures to better protect communities, provide what the firefighters and the Indigenous firekeepers need to do this work. This issue of *Workers' Forum* is dedicated to their efforts.



Our Respects for Wildland Firefighters Who Have Died



Left to right: Devyn Gale, Adam Yeadon, Ryan Gould, Zachery Freeman Muise.

Tragically, four workers have died in Canada while fighting wildfires since July 13, 2023.

Devyn Gale of Revelstoke BC was struck and killed by a tree while battling a fire near Revelstoke on July 13. Devyn was a nineteen year old nursing student at UBC's Okanagan campus, working her third season fighting wildfires. Devyn was a member of the British Columbia General

Employees' Union (BCGEU).

Twenty-five year old Adam Yeadon from Fort Liard NWT was fatally injured on July 15 while fighting fires near Fort Liard. Adam was a member of the Acho Dene Koe First Nation. Adam's death was the first fatality of a wild fire fighter since 1971 in the NWT. He had been a wildland firefighter for several years. He was a member of the Union of Northern Workers Local 13, a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC).

Days later on July 19, Ryan Gould, a 41 year-old helicopter pilot, died after his helicopter crashed while he was delivering water to a wildfire near Haig Lake, east of the town of Manning in the Peace River region of Alberta. Gould was a skilled pilot who had been fighting wildfires for around 20 years.

Zachery Freeman Muise, a 25 year old firefighter from Waterford, Ontario was killed while battling a wildfire in a remote area north of Fort St. John on July 28. He died when the UTV he was riding rolled over a steep drop on a gravel road.

Workers' Forum sends sincere condolences to the families, co-workers and friends of Devyn Gale, Adam Yeadon, Ryan Gould, and Zachery Freeman Muise. They show what the workers, youth and Indigenous Peoples are made of, and the urgency to protect those who are working in dangerous conditions in this unprecedented fire season.

The media and government officials acknowledge the risks workers face when fighting wildfires and that it is a dangerous occupation, and how the firefighters who lost their lives loved their work, and knew just how important it is. At the same time, the media speaks in a manner to suggest that they knew the risks they were taking and that this is "just part of the job." This cannot be accepted. The conditions under which the firefighters are working are extremely dangerous, that is a fact, but they are made all the more dangerous by the lack of experienced firefighters as a result of cutbacks to public services.

Paying tribute to those who lost their lives requires action to prevent more such deaths. The firefighters and the unions that represent them, the Indigenous Peoples with millennia of experience with fire in the forest, the scientists who are speaking out about the reality of 21st century fires in the boreal forest all understand the conditions and that the human factor in the form of the mobilization of all the resources available to society must be brought to bear. These are the people who must be entrusted with the decisive say in what is needed. They must be provided with the working and living conditions required for the services they provide.



About the Massive Wildfires Raging Across the Country

– Peggy Askin –

Wildfires continue to rage across Canada, with British Columbia and the Northwest Territories most affected at this time, while those in Quebec continue to burn and cause damage as well. The fires in the BC interior and Northwest Territories are the latest in an unprecedented fire season that has seen large fires in British Columbia, Alberta, the Northwest Territories, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia, with smoke blanketing not only large areas of Canada and the U.S., but as far away as Europe. The damage to communities, people's lives, everything they own and their livelihoods, local economies, the forests and environment continues at a very high level. Close to 200,000 people have been evacuated from their homes and communities, many more than once, and hundreds have lost everything.



Fire is a natural part of the boreal forest ecosystem, but 21st century fires are different. Fueled by global warming and governments in the service of narrow private interests, they are burning hotter, spreading faster, and happening more frequently, devouring vast tracts of land.

As of August 20, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, which maintains a live database of fire activity across the country, reported that there have been 5,832 fires in 2023, with 1,050 still active. Of these, 657 are rated "out of control," of which 382 are in British Columbia, 160 are "held," and 225 are "under control." The fires have consumed 15 million hectares of forest, (150,000 square kilometers), an area more than twice the size of New Brunswick, and the fire season is expected to continue into the fall. That is double the previous record of 75,596 square kilometers burned in 1989.



Natural Resources Canada stated in 2020 that, "Fire plays a significant role in forest ecosystems. An average of 9,000 fires burn more than 2 million hectares each year in Canada. This is twice the average area burned in the early 1970s, and various modeling scenarios predict another doubling or more by the end of this century, because of warmer temperatures expected as a result of climate change. The growth in fire activity will have major implications for forest ecosystems, forestry activities, community protection and carbon budgets."

Three years later, the area burned has surpassed this prediction for the end of the 21st century while government inaction continues, the conclusions and recommendations from previous fires like Fort McMurray and Slave Lake are largely ignored and sit on the shelf, and the conditions of firefighters deteriorate. The technology exists to protect communities but it is used by the big corporations to protect their facilities while the communities are left vulnerable and unprotected.

Firefighters are speaking out and demanding action regarding the dangerous and intolerable conditions under which they work. The valuable knowledge and practices of the Indigenous Peoples who have lived in the forests since time immemorial as to how to live with fire have been ignored and even criminalized. Communities are ignored by governments who continue their anti-social offensive, even cutting back firefighting services. They continue to serve the monopolies and

oligopolies and their destructive practices which contribute to the increased ferocity of wildfires. All are speaking out. Above all, this wildfire season has shown that the need for the communities, firefighters and Indigenous Peoples and Métis to exercise decision-making power and control is immediate and the greatest problem to be solved.



BC, Nadina Lake fighting fire

Indigenous and Métis Communities

Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected while they are blocked from exercising decision making power over their traditional territories. They only make up five per cent of the population of Canada, but 42 per cent of all evacuation events and 50 per cent of evacuations due to smoke are in Indigenous communities, and they usually last much longer than in non-Indigenous communities.

Northwest Territories

More than 200 wildfires are raging in the Northwest Territories and 70 per cent of the territory's 45,000 residents have been forced to evacuate, including from the capital Yellowknife, the cities of Hay River and Fort Smith, Yellowknife's Dene communities of Ndilo and Dettah, the K'atl'odeeche and Jean Marie River First Nations and Kakisa, located in the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation.

Those being evacuated by air are going to Calgary, while many others are making the long drive south to Edmonton and many other cities in Alberta where reception centres have been set up. The closest centres in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie are already at capacity, and many are making the 14 hour drive to Edmonton. Others are camping in the provincial campgrounds.

A massive effort to save the city of Yellowknife is underway, with a network of fuel breaks established on the city's west side, along with about 20 kilometres of hose and pipe feeding a network of sprinklers and water cannons. A 10 kilometre control line with fire retardant has been built through the bush.

Mike Westwick, NWT fire information officer, said at the daily news conference August 21 that the weather could push fire closer to Fort Smith as well as Hay River and there were tough days ahead. Fire suppression efforts have held in Yellowknife, but the situation remains very serious with the dry conditions and wind.

Previously, wildfires have also affected the communities of the K'at'l'odeeche First Nation and Smbaa K'e as well as the people of Hay River who have now been evacuated for the second time. Many homes and structures were destroyed in the K'at'l'odeeche First Nation, which is now again under evacuation.

British Columbia



Kookipi Creek wildlands fire near Boston Bar, BC

In British Columbia, around 35,000 people were under evacuation orders and a further 30,000 were under evacuation alerts as of August 19. The provincial government declared an emergency on August 18 and has restricted non-essential travel to BC's southern interior to make more temporary accommodation available for evacuees and firefighters and keep roads clearer. The two major areas affected are the city of Kelowna and the Shuswap region. Five hundred firefighters are battling the fires, working shifts as long as 48 hours.

The McDougall Creek wildfire, which is about 10 kilometres from West Kelowna, is still burning out of control. As well, Shuswap is facing an unparalleled crisis, with visibility so poor that the fire has had to be fought from the ground only. Three fires have merged into the Adams Complex. Homes and other structures have been lost in both areas, with the extent of the destruction not yet known.

BC has faced serious wildfires all summer, which earlier in the season were mainly in the Prince George Wildfire Service area, the most serious being the Donnie Creek Wildfire. Currently the Takla Nation has issued an Evacuation Order for several communities. Some communities like Tumbler Creek have been able to return home while others remain on alert.



The Donnie Creek fire continues to rage in an area between Fort Nelson and Fort St. John. It is the largest wildfire in the 102-year history of BC's fire service and had burned more than 15,000 square kilometers of boreal forest by the end of July. Extensive areas of BC are rated as at high or extreme risk of fire.

For updated map of fire danger [click here](#)

Alberta



Alberta has been severely affected, with about 1,000 fires since the beginning of the fire season and 81 active as of August 21. A provincial emergency in effect from May 6 to June 3 ended after heavy rains improved the situation. This year 1,754,656 hectares of forest have burned, twice the previous record set in 2019.

The Wood Buffalo Complex fire which straddles the border with the NWT is being jointly fought by crews from Alberta and the NWT. At present the fire is only four kilometres south of Fort Smith, and is 415,420 hectares in size. Another significant fire, the Basset Complex is out of control northwest of the Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement.

Thousands of people have returned home after evacuation due to fires earlier in the season, and in most communities the fires were contained through the tremendous efforts of firefighters who managed to prevent damage to most homes.

The experience of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation on the shores of Lake Athabasca mirrors that of many Indigenous nations and Métis communities with tremendous social solidarity as the people look after one another. Fort Chipewyan is only accessible by boat or plane once the winter ice road melts.

When Fort Chip had to evacuate, people from the Cree and Métis nations from Fort McKay piloted convoys of boats to safety on the 300 kilometre trip from Fort Chip to Fort McKay, against the current, with smoke so thick they often could not see. "We've got them, we will catch them and we'll make sure they're taken care of," Ron Quintal, president of the Fort McKay Métis Nation said.

Earlier this summer, the 1,600 members of Sturgeon Lake Cree First Nation, the East Prairie Métis Settlement of 300 people, and Little Red River Cree Nation with 3,700 members were forced to evacuate, with loss of homes, a bridge, water treatment plant and other essential infrastructure. Frankie Payout, a wildland firefighter with 14 years experience, was severely injured on May 14 after a tree fell on him. He was admitted to intensive care in a coma.

In most cases, people have had to make their own temporary living arrangements. The same generous spirit for offering help to those in need that existed during the Fort McMurray fire in 2016 has been seen from day one, as is the case right across Canada.

Meanwhile, governments refuse to uphold their social responsibilities to look after those affected by the wildfires and keep passing the buck to the municipal and community level. For example, the town of High Level has been asking successive provincial governments for a multi-use evacuation centre for years, Mayor Crystal McAteer said, but nothing has been approved. High Level has been used as an evacuation hub twelve times since 2003, but between hotels and cots in the town arena, the town can accommodate a maximum of around 1,600 people.



Ontario

There are currently 67 active wildland fires in the Northeast and Northwest Regions. Of these, 12 are under control, two are being held, and 53 are being observed. Ontario has had an average year for wildfires, with 660 to date, close to the 10 year average of 620 wildfires annually.

"In late spring and early summer, Ontario experienced an escalation in fire activity following what was actually a slower than average start to the fire season," Alison Bezubiak of Ontario's Aviation, Forest Fire and Emergency Services told CBC News on August 18. "But at that time, we were seeing warmer and drier conditions. Combined with heavy and widespread lightning, that contributed to an increased fire load."

The wildland fire hazard values are now considered low to moderate across the Northeast Region today with the exception of one pocket with a high fire hazard, located north of Kapuskasing. The most serious fires earlier in the season were in regions around Cochrane, Chapleau and Sudbury, and in close proximity to the communities of Attawapiskat, Lac Seul, Cat Lake and Poplar Hill First Nations.

Earlier this summer close to 500 residents of Fort Albany were evacuated by plane, while others were rescued by the people of Kashechewan who came by boat to bring them to safety. Apitipi Anicinapek First Nation near Lake Abitibi, and Attawapiskat, west of Moose Factory were also affected.

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia was hard hit early in the fire season with 20,000 people evacuated and over 200 homes destroyed. A fire near the town of Shelburne became the largest forest fire in the history of Nova Scotia. A smaller fire near Halifax was responsible for the evacuation of about 16,000 people.

In July, the province reported that all wildfires in Barrington Lake, Shelburne County and Tantallon and Hammonds Plains, Halifax Regional Municipality have now been extinguished. However, reported rainfall of up to 100 millimeters led to severe flooding across Nova Scotia which declared of a province-wide state of emergency from July 22 – 26.



Conditions of the Wildland Firefighters

– Peggy Morton –



Fire crew in Quebec plans for the next day's work

The wildland firefighters have shown themselves to be a precious resource, making outstanding efforts "above and beyond" to contain the wildfires raging across Canada. Just as the health care workers were called "guardian angels" by governments but treated as disposable, governments remain indifferent to the conditions of the firefighters and their invaluable experience and

knowledge of what is required in the face of 21st century wildland fires.

Wildland firefighters and their unions, Indigenous nations and other communities most acutely affected by wildfires, and researchers and scientists are all speaking out about what is needed. They are putting forward many proposals and solutions, calling not only for the restoration of all the wildland fire services which have been cut and destroyed by the anti-social offensive waged by governments across the country, but an approach to wildland fire suitable for the 21st century.

Working conditions have always been difficult, but they are now unsustainable. An immediate necessity is to solve the problems of recruitment and retention on the basis of respect for the workers and the enormous value they create, and the dangerous and difficult work they do.

This season began with a severe shortage of wildland firefighters. The "Hotshot Wakeup" podcast reports that upwards of 40 per cent of wildland firefighters in Canada have left because of unsustainable working conditions. This means that Canada has to rely on thousands of firefighters from across the world. Even with the tremendous assistance of the 5,000 plus firefighters who arrived from around the world this year, a severe shortage still exists. And their lives are also put in danger as a result of the lack of human and other resources in Canada.



Firefighters from South Africa, Costa Rica and Chile (top to bottom) arrive in Canada to fight the wildfires.

The majority of work in wildland fire services is declared seasonal and temporary. Wages are low, with most starting rates for wildland fire crews ranging from \$21 to \$24 an hour across the country. Earning enough to survive through the off-season depends on working massive amounts of

overtime, and earnings fluctuate wildly from year to year depending on fire activity. The need for training on a professional basis is ignored. In Alberta, firefighters have spoken out against the failure of the provincial government to send out offers of seasonal work as firefighters until less than a month before the start of the season. This resulted in an increase from 25 per cent to 50 per cent turnover, Mike Dempsey from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) reported.

Unlike firefighters in urban areas, there is no early pensionable age or acknowledgment of the impact of sustained exposure to intense smoke. And even in urban areas, firefighting is being increasingly reduced to a volunteer service. Many jobs have been contracted out to private companies, and even those working in the public sector who have pensions cannot survive in retirement on pensions based on seasonal work at low wages. Overtime hours are not counted as pensionable hours.

It is a similar situation in the U.S., where in early June the Deputy Chief of the Forest Service told Congress that if a pay solution was not passed, the forest service would not be surprised to lose 30-50 per cent of their workforce.

The British Columbia General Employees' Union (BCGEU) has called for full-time, year-round wildfire crews. "In order to expand and increase the effectiveness of wildfire fighting, we need a dedicated service with appropriate recruitment and retention that allows wildfire fighting leadership to live and work year round in these communities," Paul Finch, vice-president of BCGEU told Pique Newsmagazine in 2022. The BC government responded by hiring 100 permanent staff, which is clearly not enough.

Together with the needed increase in wages, full-time crews would help to recruit and retain workers, and provide time for proper training, with workers ready to go when the season begins early as is increasingly the case, workers and their unions say. At present, the training of new crew members is minimal, ranging from 40 hours in Ontario to eight days of 10-12 hours in BC. Losing experienced crews further increases the danger for firefighters, even as fires become more intense and difficult to control.

The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) which represents wildland firefighters is demanding an end to private contractors and full restoration of cuts made by the UCP government. AUPE stated that it has repeatedly urged the government to keep wildfire fighting services staffed and in-house. Instead, the government cut funding for this critical work and contracted some services to private companies. In May the Alberta Public Service Commission made a desperate call for any provincial government employees with experience in firefighting to volunteer, a move which AUPE said showed the government was desperate.



Trina Moyles, who spent six seasons working as a fire lookout in a fire tower in northwestern Alberta explained in the Narwhal podcast "Let's Talk about Wildfires" why establishing permanent, year-round crews is important. Large controlled burns under the right conditions when there is still snow on the ground, and both wind and temperatures are lower, are both an excellent way for firefighters to gain knowledge and experience, and important measures for controlling the size and spread of wildfires.[1]

Firefighters are also pointing out that because the intensity of fires have changed, and because nights are warmer, fires do not subside at night as they once did. As a result, crews are called on to work all night and then continue to work into the next day. This has created the necessity for two or more shifts, not the existing arrangement of sending one crew out to fight a raging fire.

Indigenous-led Fire Guardians

Many wildfire fighters are members of Indigenous nations. Dr. Amy Cardinal Christianson, a Métis Fire Research Scientist with the Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada, informed that most Indigenous firefighters are seasonal, even though many have worked as wildland firefighters for as long as 30 or 40 years. Indigenous peoples have long called for an Indigenous-led fire guardians program, which would include cultural practices, Cardinal says.[2]

The Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island have lived with fire from time immemorial, and developed cultural practices such as controlled burns to maintain the balance of the ecosystems. Burns were carried out cyclically depending on the conditions and were based on extensive knowledge held by the firekeepers. Subsequent governments have made these practices illegal, and even now they cannot be carried out without permits which are difficult to obtain. For example, retaining open meadows through controlled burns of dry grass in the spring turns the ground black, heating the soil and producing new grass earlier, thus reducing the amount of dry grass where fire can easily start. The firekeepers explain that this practice created conditions for medicinal and food plants, and for the return of animals such as elk, bison and big-horned sheep, as well as fire-breaks. They explain that when undergrowth and saplings are burned, the remaining trees grow bigger and more resistant to surface fires, while the canopy is more spread out, benefitting wildlife but also making the spread of fire in the canopy less. They also point out that reforestation carried out by the monopolies planting one species only after clearcutting does not restore the balance to the ecosystem which the forests require. It is purely self-serving to suit their demand for raw logs to export.

The Tsilhqot'in territory in the province's Interior saw some of the worst fires in the province's history in 2017. Chief Joe Alphonse of the Tsilhqot'in National Government has called the failure of federal and provincial governments to recognize Indigenous knowledge a greater threat to the First Nation than the fires themselves.

Alphonse explained that Tsilhqot'in First Nation members' local knowledge of and commitment to their land gave them an advantage when they stayed behind to protect it in 2017. "We managed to save everything, we stopped the fire right at our doorstep and we did so without anyone losing their lives or even getting injured."

Alphonse said that after the 2017 fires that affected Tsilhqot'in lands, the First Nation became the first community to sign a formal wildfire response agreement with the federal and BC governments, following which 400 people in the community were trained in firefighting. Failure to pay attention to the changing nature of 21st century fires is not an option, because of the enormous consequences for human life as well as the ecosystem as a whole, he pointed out.

The need for "Fire Safe" measures to protect the towns, cities and First Nation and Métis communities has been evident especially since the Slave Lake fire of 2011 and the Fort McMurray fire of 2016 where thousands lost their homes and everything they had. It also showed that refusal by governments to take seriously the measures needed to protect communities, especially those with one or even no road out.[3]

Measures to respond to 21st century wildfires are part of the work to overcome the destructive effects of climate change and the reckless practices of the monopolies and oligopolies and the

governments which serve them who now exercise decision-making power. Indigenous Peoples and local communities are not only losing their homes, but also their traditional territories which all have a decisive role in fire stewardship.

Many industrial practices that negatively impact wildfire severity and spread must also be eliminated. Besides planting for monoculture, this includes spraying with herbicides to kill species which are of lesser commercial value but less prone to burn, and planting stands that are all the same age.[4]

All those involved in prevention, firefighting, research and education are an extremely precious resource. They are dedicated to the work they do, and they know what must be done now to mitigate the impact of 21st century fires. Those who have shown by their work that they can be trusted to protect our communities and to care for Mother Earth must have decision-making power. They know that the claims they make on society are just. This includes what they need for their own health and safety and well-being, including an end to precarity and adequate wages and working conditions.

Notes

1. Trina Moyles is the author of *Lookout: Love, Solitude, and Searching for Wildfire in the Boreal Forest*. (Heather Van Haren)
2. See [Canada needs Indigenous-led fire stewardship, new research finds](#) ,UBC News and [Centering Indigenous Voices: The Role of Fire in the Boreal Forest of North America](#).
3. See also [The Fires Awakened Us – Tsilhqot'in Report -- 2017 Wildfires](#).
4. See [No Going Back – A Paradigm Shift in Forest Management](#), Peter Ewart, Workers' Forum, March 19, 2021.



Alberta Firefighters Speak Out



The work of the trained and in many cases highly skilled firefighters fighting to contain the destructive wildfires in Alberta is saving lives and preventing entire communities from being ravaged. Firefighters are speaking out about how the irresponsible acts of the UCP government,

which carried out savage cuts to fire prevention and firefighting, has made containing the fires immensely more difficult.

Twenty-six fire towers, more than 20 per cent of fire towers in the province, were closed despite their essential role in early detection, the Rapattack Rappel team was eliminated, aerial patrols were scaled back, and permanent staff laid off. The length of the season was cut, meaning a later start and earlier finish. As a result, firefighters, radio dispatchers, lookout observers, support logistics and others were still in training when the wildfires broke out. [1] The lack of experienced firefighting crews is compounded by the ravaging of health care and other services by the anti-social offensive, leaving a severe retention problem and reduced numbers of firefighters. The result is a catastrophic situation where there is no one to contain a small fire before it becomes a raging inferno.

One example of the cost for Mother Earth and the people of Alberta of what the UCP and others call "savings" is the dissolution of the Rapattack Rappel team. Former members of Alberta's Rapattack Rappel team, a specialized wildfire-fighting crew, are speaking out and saying that government budget cuts have left the province battling its current blazes short-handed. "We could have been difference-makers," said Jordan Erlandson, a former member of the team.

The Rapattack Rappel team consisted of 63 firefighters stationed around the province, including at Edson, Fox Creek and Lac La Biche, communities which were threatened by what were known as the sleeping giant wildfires. "They told us the program had been eliminated," said former member Adam Clyne, who further stated that the province's excuse for the cuts was the budget. Not only the fire-fighters, but the communities they served spoke out about the elimination of the Rapattack Rappel team. They included the Mayor of Fox Creek, a community which has been evacuated.

The unit was trained to rappel from helicopters and were able to quickly arrive on the scene to extinguish wildfires while they still only covered a few hectares. Rappelling is one of the fastest and safest ways to get into thick bush, muskeg and dense forest. It allows firefighters to get right to work instead of slogging overland with heavy equipment. When one storm sparked several fires, they could extinguish them before they merged. "We would have caught some of them when they were small," said Erlandson.

They also cleared landing spaces for other helicopters to bring in crews and gear. They explained how precious time is lost now that crews have to walk in with heavy equipment because no landing space has been cleared. Clyne explained the importance of the rappel teams because, "That way, we don't have firefighters that are bagged by the time they reach the fire line."

The "savings" were \$1.4 million from a total wildfire budget of \$117 million in 2019. At the time, Devin Dreesen, then Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, claimed that the team spent only two per cent of the time rappelling from helicopters, which he stated was based on data from 1,400 fires in Alberta from 2014 to 2018.

However, documents obtained under Freedom of Information legislation from internal government communications and supplied to the Canadian Press tell a different story. According to the documents, rappel crews were called out about 100 times annually between 2014 and 2018, and rappelled into a fire on average 23 times a year. "This is an assessment of wildfires that rappel crews were deployed to that there were no other feasible means of getting to," said one email from a government forester.

Erlandson pointed out rappel crews sometimes jump many times into the same fire as part of a large campaign. He estimates teams jumped up to 20 times per fire and probably closer to 100 times on the fire that leveled parts of Fort McMurray in 2016.

Alberta had initially planned to replace the Rapattack crews by dangling firefighters beneath flying

helicopters and depositing them at the fire site. Transport Canada blocked that plan, saying it was too dangerous.

"The elimination of the teams also eliminated important tools such as bigger pumps, bigger helicopters, bigger buckets on the helicopter, bigger crews, more hoses, more saws and more experience," said Erlander.

The Rapattackers could have helped, said Ryan Kalmanovitch, a contract firefighter currently battling blazes near Edson. He also said that even on relatively quiet days, Rapattackers could be helping set fire perimeters and dousing hot spots. "They would be able to action those while they're small and that would allow us not to divert resources," he said. "They would absolutely be useful, maybe more so than other crews." Kalmanovitch stated, "They're definitely missed."

The firefighting budget was also cut considerably in 2016, which was explained away by saying that if the monies were needed in the future, emergency funds would be available and short-term contracts would be utilized.

Such vital public services and the workers who provide them are of immense value to our communities, and the specialized firefighters speaking out at this time show this to be the case. The firefighters who are speaking out make clear where decision-making should lie. The firefighters and the communities they serve know what is needed, which is to put the needs of the communities and of the firefighters – who must be provided with the wages and everything they need to do their job and protect their health and safety.

Note

1. "We are a skeleton crew out here': UCP cuts led to disastrous Alberta wildfire situation," *The Narwal*, Trina Moyles, May 10, 2023.

(With files from CBC, Global News and The Narwhal)



Government Irresponsibility in Response to Climate Crisis and Private Interests

The extent of the wildfires burning in Canada, many out of control, and the extent of the damage they have caused has become a major concern for Canadians and peoples of the countries affected by the quality of the air which is deteriorating apace. The toxic smoke from the fires has spread across Canada, far south into the United States and has reached Europe.



A series of reports produced between 2019 and 2022 by Health Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada and Natural Resources

Canada confirm that Canada is the country most affected by global warming in the northern hemisphere, partly because of the marked reduction in polar pack ice.[1] This has a direct impact on the temperature of the Arctic Ocean and its surrounding atmosphere. The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet, and fires have begun to threaten it as well. In the summer of 2020,

forest fires in the Arctic broke all records with regard to CO₂ emissions, scientists at the Copernicus Atmospheric Monitoring Service (CAMS) reported. Reports confirm that warmer, drier conditions will extend the fire season in boreal forest regions.



The annual area burned and the number of major forest fires has increased in Canada over a period of 50 years, and this trend is obvious when looking at the most recent statistics compiled by the Government of Canada for the period from 1960 to 2010 [see the graphs below].

Based on data in the National Forestry Database, over 8,000 fires occur each year, and burn an average of over 2.1 million hectares [21,000 square kilometres].

Already in 2023, forest fires have burned a record 77,000 square kilometres of woodlands across Canada in a single summer. As of June 27, 492 fires were raging across the country, 259 of which were considered out of control by the authorities responsible for fighting them.

The Need for Timely Satellite Detection



Experts concur that timely satellite detection is crucial to fighting wildfires effectively. Already by 2010 it had become evident that the increase in future wildfire activity would be mostly caused by lightning. Lightning causes about 50 per cent of all fires but accounts for about 85 per cent of the annual area burned.[2] The 1960-2010 graphs and the more updated information on wildfires confirms this and this means that the Canadian and provincial governments would be expected to step up to the plate.

Canada has one of the largest boreal forests in the world and it has a Crown agency called the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), but it has no satellite of its own that can detect lightning even though the technology exists, as demonstrated in December 2022 by the European Space Agency with its European Organization for the Exploration of Meteorological Satellites (EUMETSTAT) weather satellites.

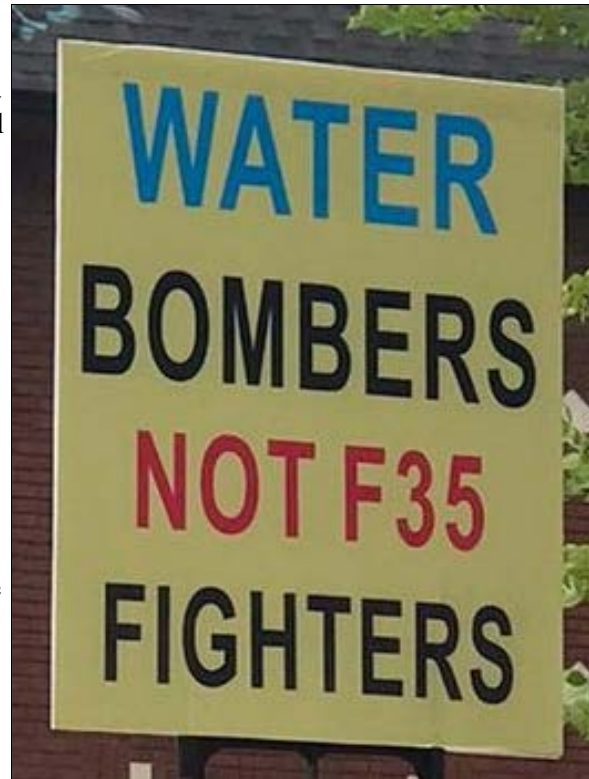
"These are sequences of images captured over periods of one minute by the lightning imager onboard the MTG-I1 satellite, which operates in geostationary orbit at an altitude of 36,000 kilometres," explains EUMETSTAT.

"Launched on December 13, 2022 by an Ariane 5 rocket, this third-generation meteorological satellite carries a lightning detection imager equipped with four cameras covering Europe, Africa,

the Middle East and part of South America," it writes.[3]

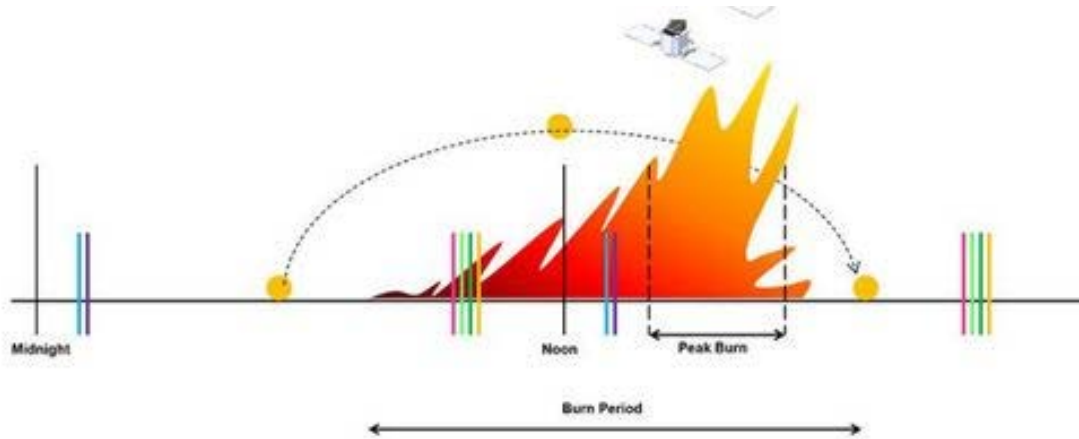
These cameras are capable of continuously observing lightning activity from space but Canada, the second largest country in the world in terms of land surface, mostly located at subarctic and arctic latitudes, has limited capability when it comes to satellite monitoring progress of forest fires in real time. The CSA itself admits that "88 per cent of Canada's 4 million km² of forested lands is characterized as boreal forest, and is home to some of the largest and most intense wildfires in the world. Every year, Canada sees about 7,500 wildfires burn over 2.5 million hectares of forest, a territory about half the size of Nova Scotia. The amount of forest burned by wildfire is projected to double by 2050 due to our changing climate, which is causing longer wildfire seasons, more extreme weather conditions and increased droughts." [4]

Instead of reiterating what scientists in the field of forest management and climate change have been demanding for years, i.e., the need to have a national plan to forecast and prevent these natural phenomena and most importantly put in place measures to counter them in the most effective way, the CSA, in step with irresponsible governments engaging in warmongering instead of looking after their social responsibilities, does not take action. This is despite the fact that Canada needs satellite monitoring progress of forest fires in real time. Without it, human and material resources cannot be deployed in the most effective way. The CSA has made it very clear that: "On average, about three per cent of wildfires are very large and uncontrolled. Ultimately, these three per cent of wildfires cause about 97 per cent of the burned area. By increasing our capabilities to better anticipate which wildfires have the potential to burn out of control, they can be prioritized for suppression, leading to a drastic reduction in the economic losses related to wildfire." [5]



But when it comes to forest fire detection, Canada depends on satellite data from the United States and Europe, including the European Space Agency's Sentinel satellites. These satellites make it possible to determine a wide range of emissions, from greenhouse gases to particulates and carbon monoxide. This information is crucial in determining how and where to deploy firefighting crews and equipment on a daily basis.

However, some of the most useful data collected by satellites is the radiative power of the fire, a measure of the amount of energy it emits. This satellite information has to be collected in the late afternoon, the most critical period in the development of fires, whereas the American and European satellites that fly over these Canadian regions do so at times when the fires are not burning at their peak.



In the above illustration, coloured bars show the overpass times of various existing satellites that are used for wildfire management purposes in Canada: American Terra (dark green), Aqua (blue), Suomi NPP (purple) and Landsat 8 (pink) satellites, and European Sentinel-3 (light green), Sentinel-2 (orange) satellites.

This time lag has dire consequences for teams on the ground fighting forest fires who need that information by the end of each day in order to plan for the next. "During the 2016 fire that ravaged much of Fort McMurray, Alberta, satellite data was downloaded in Ottawa and then sent to Edmonton. By the time it arrived, it was too old to be useful," an article in *l'Actualité* points out. [6]

The urgency is such that on May 17, the CSA announced that a satellite, nicknamed WildFireSat, would be built to enhance "Canada's ability to manage wildfires." It is required "for protecting lives and health, as well as our resources, infrastructures and environment," the CSA said. "WildFireSat will monitor all active wildfires in Canada on a daily basis," it said. But far from getting on with the job, we learn that the CSA has been calling for tenders and all that has transpired thus far is that the costs are soaring.

The CSA issued a call for tenders in 2019 to build the WildFireSat at a cost of \$31 million. In the words of the online publication *SpaceQ*, "The WildFireSat mission will now cost at least \$170 million and won't launch until 2029 with the design and implementation anticipated to commence in spring 2024."

The contract to build it was awarded to a company called exactEarth, based in Cambridge, Ontario. It was expected to become operational in 2026.[7] ExactEarth was then bought by Spire Global, a company that specializes in building nanosatellites. It is a U.S. firm based in San Francisco, founded in 2012 and now listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The deployment of Spire Global's first two satellites took place in November 2012 in what was to become "the first U.S. Commercial Satellite Deployment from the International Space Station."

For years, scientists in the field of forest management and climate change have been underscoring the need to have a national plan to forecast, prevent and, most importantly, put in place measures to counter the wildfires in the most effective way. How to do so, and how to bring the climate crisis under control, are known. The problem lies with governments whose only fidelity is to narrow private interests and the U.S. war economy. The story of the contract to build the WildFireSat shows how dangerous their warped notion of national security is.

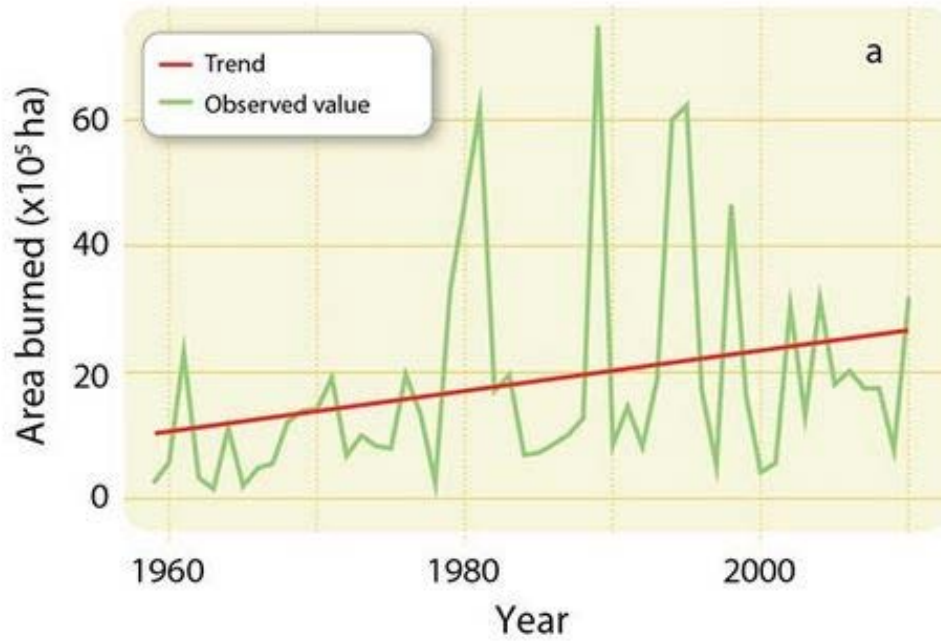


Figure 1a — Trends in area burned on an annual basis (in hundreds of thousands of hectares (ha)) across Canada between 1959 and 2010.

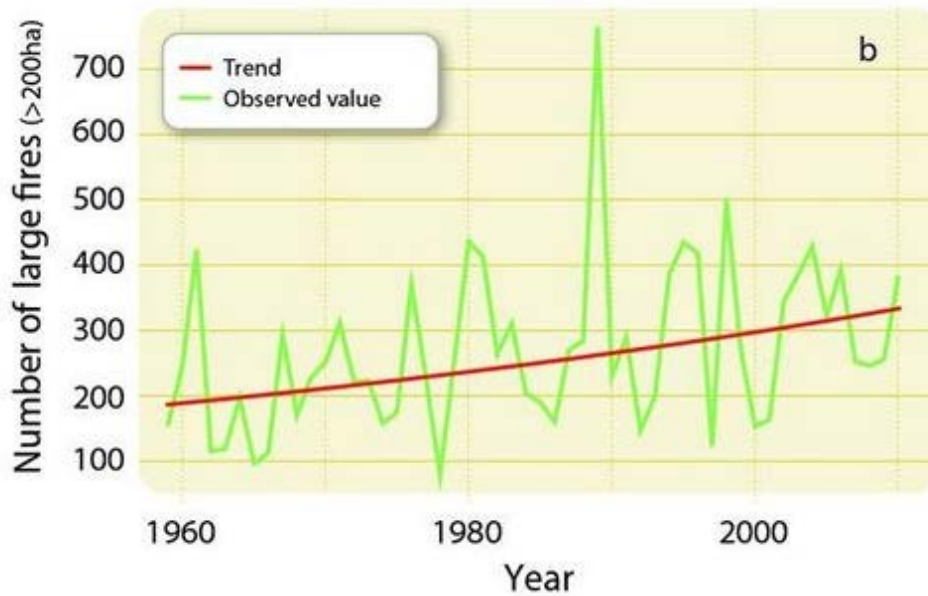
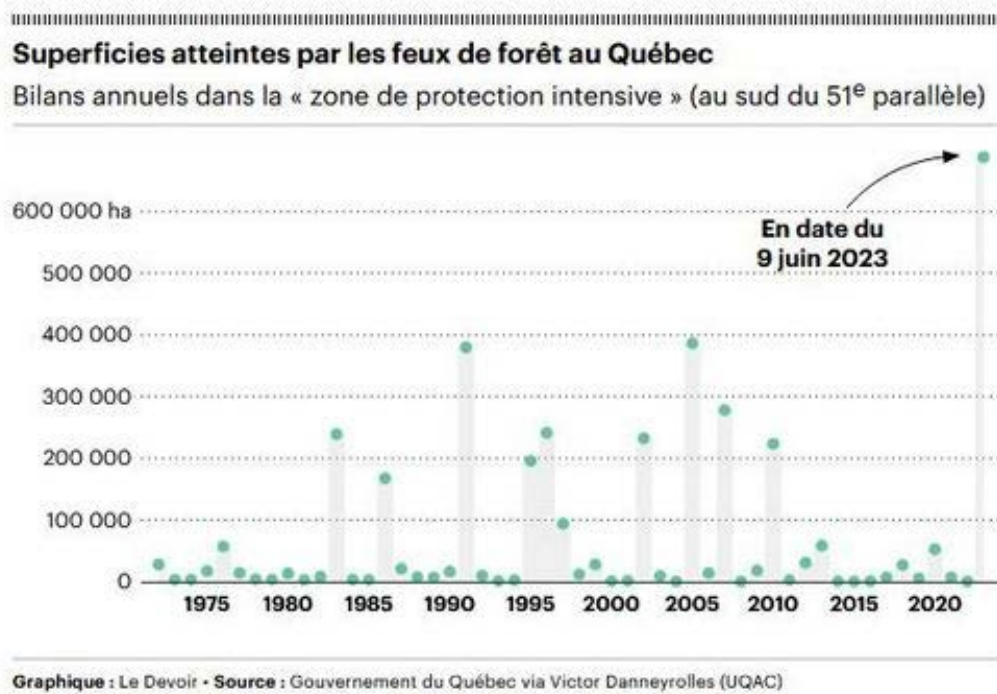


Figure 1b — Trends in the number of large fires (>200 ha) across Canada between 1959 and 2010.

The situation is no different for Quebec (see attached graph).



Notes

1. "Canada's Changing Climate Report," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2019, p. 446 .

2. Canadian National Forest Fire Database (CNFFD), Government of Canada, 1980-2021.

[Note that these statistics may differ due to incomplete data. More statistics are available in the National Wildland Fire Situation Report.]

3. "Le premier satellite européen détecteur de foudre à l'oeuvre," *La Presse*, July 3, 2023

4. "WildFireSat: Enhancing Canada's ability to manage wildfires," CSA.

5. *Ibid.*

6. "Les satellites peuvent jouer un rôle pour mieux combattre les incendies de forêt," *l'Actualité*, May 21, 2023.

7. "Spire's ExactEarth to Support WildFireSat Mission," *SpaceQ*, May 11, 2023.

(SOPFEU, Government of Canada, Hydro-Québec, *Le Devoir*, *Journal de Montréal*, *Journal de Québec*, *La Presse*, *l'Actualité*, Wikipedia. Photos: Canada 350, C. Gusen, AlienorR2)



Wild Fires Still Raging in Quebec

During the first six months of 2023, close to 14,900 square kilometres have been affected by forest fires across Quebec. In the month of June alone, more than 14,500 square kilometres of forest burned in Quebec, an area over 30 times the size of the island of Montreal and three times the area of Prince Edward Island. Over the last 10 years, the average area of burned forest during the same corresponding period of June was 77 square kilometres.



In June of this year, the most intense month of wild fire activity in Quebec, over 14,000 people fought these fires, including at various times teams comprised of 547 forest firefighters from France, Portugal, Spain, the United States, South Korea, Yukon and New Brunswick, who were assisted by some 20 water bombers and nearly 80 helicopters.



Korean firefighters arrive in Quebec, July 2, 2023, to assist in fighting the wildfires.

During the month of June thousands of people were evacuated for periods ranging from a few days to a few weeks from towns in the Côte-Nord, Abitibi and northern Quebec regions, including Sept-Îles, Malietenam, Chibougamau, Chapais, as well as Normétal, Lac Simon, Lebel-sur-Quévillon and Senneterre, etc. Three sectors around Val-d'Or were evacuated at the end of June, as were some 360 people from the Atikamekw community of Obedjiwan, in the Mauricie region. More than a thousand residents from the Cree communities of Mistissini, Oujé-Bougoumou and Waswanipi, in Northern Quebec were also forced to leave as a precautionary measure. Other communities in Haute-Mauricie, Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Northern Quebec remained on high alert. As of July 6, 155,846 people had been evacuated from their homes due to threatening forest fires, a toll unseen in the last 40 years, as reported by the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources, with 40 per cent of those evacuated hailing from Indigenous communities.



As the summer season advanced into July and August, many areas remained under alert, such as the Abitibi area. New forest fires began appearing at more northern latitudes, such as in the James Bay area, around the 52nd parallel. Some 200 Hydro-Québec employees working at the LG-3 and LG-4 hydroelectric power stations in Northern Quebec were evacuated by plane on June 20-21 as a precautionary measure, given that the Transtaïga Road linking the 660 kilometres of power stations in the La Grande River complex to the main James Bay Road was affected by forest fires. Conditions continued to deteriorate, with planes no longer able to land there. As of July 6, the evacuation of personnel remained in effect for a certain time, until they were able to return to their posts. A second evacuation of a hundred workers from the LG-3 hydro dam site was ordered on August 16 because of new forest fires in the James Bay area.



During July and August, many Cree communities along the James Bay were forced to evacuate their villages. As recently as last week, 200 people from the Cree community of Wemindji, along the James Bay coast, were evacuated by plane. As well, many sections of the main road that links Abitibi to the James Bay area were temporarily closed because of smoke and strong winds. This road is a vital land link between the northern Cree communities and the rest of Quebec. This situation has prevailed since July 17 when the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources announced that road access to the forest area comprising all of the western territory of the Eeyou Istchee First Nation was restricted to essential services.



First cohort of Cree auxiliary forest fire fighters who completed basic training.

The agency responsible for combating forest fires in Quebec, the Société de protection des forêts contre le feu (SOPFEU), reports that 523 forest fires have been recorded since the start of the 2023 season, twice as many as the average 271 during the corresponding period over the last ten years. On June 26, SOPFEU reported that 12,500 square kilometres had been affected by fires in the "intensive zone" – located south of the 51st parallel – since the start of the season. The previous record, dating back to 1923, the year reliable data became available for commercially exploited forests, was 12,300 square kilometres.

For Your Information — SOPFEU



Quebec's Société de protection des forêts contre le feu (SOPFEU) is a not-for-profit organization with around 450 employees at any given time. Its mission is "to provide the very best forest fire protection so as to ensure the sustainability of forest areas at the lowest possible cost."

According to its website, SOPFEU has a network that "serves to connect the Quebec government, the forest industry and major private woodlot owners. Managers of parks and outdoor activity establishments, municipal fire chiefs, forestry supervisors and the media are all valuable collaborators maximizing the SOPFEU's range of action."

SOPFEU says that its staff concentrates their efforts on priority fires to protect communities and certain strategic infrastructures. Resort areas (camps and cottages) are not being prioritized. For example, on June 28, 2023, at the peak of the forest fire activity, "14 fires were classified as priority

1, while 12 fires were classified as priority 2.

"On out-of-control fires, priority is given to fighting fire edges in areas that could threaten communities. Where this has not yet been achieved, mechanized stop lines are being built to protect towns, municipalities and villages."

Under the heading "Anticipation for Better Control," SOPFEU states that "Meteorological observations and forecasts are at the heart of the SOPFEU's work. The organization's know-how is based on its advanced capacity to analyze data provided by 193 weather stations. This way, the SOPFEU can monitor the situation in the forest province-wide and evaluate at-risk areas every hour of every day. In addition, airplanes fly over the forest looking for suspicious smoke according to circuits based on weather conditions, the fire danger rating or lightning," says the SOPFEU website.

Of the 523 forest fires that have been identified in the Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) by SOPFEU since the beginning of 2023, 236 were wild fires caused by lightning. Even though only 45 per cent of forest fires are caused by lightning, this represents more than 99 per cent of all the woodland areas burned. In the northern zone alone of the 137 forest fires identified since the beginning of 2023, 126 were wild fires caused by lightning.^[1] The northern latitude corresponding to the 51st parallel is the line that separates the two major areas of Quebec: the Intensive Protection Zone that corresponds to the most densely populated territory of Quebec from the Northern Zone inhabited mostly by the Cree and Inuit Indigenous Peoples.

What all this reveals is the need to migrate towards real-time detection and recognition of forest fires by satellite so that the teams and equipment deployed daily to fight forest fires can do so properly. "Having a good view of a fire is the most important thing for fighting it effectively. There aren't enough pilots to have a plane watching every fire every day, let alone twice a day," says Joshua Johnston, a Natural Resources Canada scientist working on the WildFireSat Mission, which in 2029 will become Canada's first satellite specifically designed to monitor forest fires.



Aerial view of charred lands in northern Quebec

Note

1. "Statistics Intensive Zone – Table per month and cause, 2023", SOPFEU.

(With information from SOPFEU, Natural Resources Canada, Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources, Grand Council of the Crees, La Presse, le Devoir. Photos: SOPFEU, Grand Council of the Cree)