

# *Canada Is Ravaged by Fire. No One Has Paid More Dearly Than Indigenous People.*

The country's record-breaking fire season has led tens of thousands of Indigenous people to flee their homes and ravaged forests they rely on for sustenance.

**By Brent McDonald, Matt Joyce and Ben Laffin**

Brent McDonald reported from Washington, and Matt Joyce from northern Quebec. Ben Laffin edited the video.

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In early July, fierce wildfires fueled by dry conditions in northern Quebec laid waste to large swaths of spruce forest, destroying cabins and tourist camps. It also cut off transportation to isolated Indigenous communities over the region's lone paved road, a 370-mile stretch of highway with little or no cell reception.

Before evacuation orders were issued, residents who tried to leave along the Billy Diamond Highway, as the road is known, encountered flames and smoke that cast a dark-of-night pall in the afternoon.

"I honestly wasn't sure we'd make it out," said Joshua Iserhoff, 45, a member of the Cree nation of Nemaska who was forced to turn back with his wife and two children and who, like other residents, eventually found another way out.

"The wind was so ferocious it almost picked up the vehicle," he said, calling the drive a "traumatic experience."

Since May, hundreds of wildfires across Canada have burned more than 47,000 square miles of forest, an area the size of New York State, and have displaced more than 25,000 Indigenous residents from British Columbia to Nova Scotia, according to government officials.



A wildfire burning in northern Quebec in June. Many Indigenous communities live in remote stretches of the province. Renaud Philippe for The New York Times

The blazes have taken a particularly devastating toll on Indigenous communities because they live on the frontline of many fires and depend on forests for food and their homes are in remote areas that are not a firefighting priority since they are sparsely populated and have few buildings.

The country's Department of Indigenous Services has paid \$55 million so far to communities affected by wildfires.

Canada's wildfires, whose frequency and intensity are linked to climate change, have set records for the amount of land that they have burned and have sent vast plumes of smoke across the country and into the United States.

As of Friday, more than 1,000 fires were burning across Canada with more than 600 of those out of control, according to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Center.

Evacuations from Indigenous people ordered by community leaders in tandem with government officials have lasted weeks, with families sometimes separated across hundreds of miles, sleeping in hotels and gyms.

Many have had to flee repeatedly already, with a little more than a month left in Canada's fire season.



An emergency shelter that was opened in Roberval, Quebec, in June for people forced to flee a wildfire farther north in the province. Renaud Philippe for The New York Times

In July, eight of the nine Cree communities in Quebec, with a collective population of about 21,000, were under total or partial evacuation orders.

Some were airlifted by commercial airliners or Chinook helicopters operated by the Canadian Royal Air Force. In some Cree communities, older people, young children and those with health issues were taken out by bus along hundreds of miles of gravel roads.

On an 11-hour bus ride from Nemaska to Quebec City, William Wapachee, 79, who said he had lung cancer, started coughing and had trouble breathing. Before reaching the city, he was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital where he received oxygen.

“I inhaled too much of that smoke,” Mr. Wapachee said.

“Before, if we had fire, it was only in one place,” he added. “Now it seems to be a fire here, a fire there, fire everywhere.”

Quebec has been hit by outbreaks of wildfires that are more common in western Canada, putting many Indigenous communities in the province at risk.

“I’ve never seen that level of evacuation in Cree Nation, simultaneous communities all at once,” said Mandy Gull-Masty, who in 2021 became the first woman elected grand

chief of the Cree Nation in Quebec. “Never has that happened before.”



Kurtis Black, the fire chief for the Cree nation of Nemaska in northern Quebec, surveyed an access road for fire activity in late July. Lloyd J. Wright

In June, Ms. Gull-Masty was among roughly 1,000 residents of Waswanipi, an Indigenous community in northern Quebec, who were forced to leave after a large wildfire threatened the town.

“We are basically refugees of climate in this territory,” she said. “We are constantly escaping either risk of fire or impact of smoke in the community.”

While no one has been killed by the fires that have threatened Indigenous communities, they have inflicted immeasurable damage to the forest ecology and cultural heritage, disrupting a way of life that’s reliant on hunting and fishing for food.

Many Indigenous communities occupy the country’s vast northern latitudes where the government’s policy is to let wildfires burn, except where they threaten towns or key infrastructure.

A single fire near the Quebec town of Radisson that started during an intense lightning storm on June 1 is still burning and is now two and a half times the size of the largest wildfire ever recorded in California, according to the interagency forest fire agency.

Such gigantic blazes have contributed to bands of heavy smoke that have blanketed

large parts of the United States and led to warnings in early June about hazardous levels of smoke pollution across the Eastern Seaboard.



Smoke from wildfires this month darkened the skies near the Cree nation of Nemaska in northern Quebec. Lloyd J. Wright

Kurtis Black, the fire chief in Nemaska, was recently surveying Indigenous firefighters applying water to smoldering hot spots that have repeatedly flared up along a gravel road that leads to the Billy Diamond Highway.

“I don’t think these fires will stop until everything is burned,” Mr. Black said. “These fires are here to stay until fall gets here — or the snow.”

Ms. Gull-Masty, in a video interview, criticized the Quebec government’s policy to largely refrain from fighting wildfires in the province’s northern section. This year’s fires have caused major damage to Cree traplines, which are crucial for hunting and trapping in the fall and winter, she said.

“Our territory doesn’t have a super high population, and we don’t have a lot of infrastructure that needs to be protected,” Ms. Gull-Masty said. “But for us, our territory is our infrastructure.”

Quebec’s Wildfire Agency, in an email, defended its policy as necessary because of limited resources across such a vast boreal landscape.

On July 20, a period of rain had contained the fires and dissipated the smoke near Nemaska, allowing about 300 evacuees to return from hotels outside Quebec City. But three days later the fires roared back and the skies again turned orange.



Seasonal residents of a Cree settlement in northern Quebec prepared to evacuate this month after nearby fires sent heavy smoke into the community. Lloyd J. Wright

Mr. Black, Nemaska’s fire chief, called for the full evacuation of a summer settlement used by the Cree that was near the fires. Freshly caught sturgeons were left drying on fish racks.

Diane Amy Tanoush recorded a video as she and other Indigenous people who had been living at the settlement loaded bags and coolers and put on N95 masks for the long boat ride to a landing across a lake.

“It’s starting to get dark,” she said.

“This is our fifth time evacuating.”

**Brent McDonald** is a senior video journalist, based in Washington. He produces short documentaries, video news stories and visual investigations. More about Brent McDonald

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