

## **Massive Alberta wildfire expected to burn for months**

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**Fort McMurray (Alberta):** The images are ones of devastation – scorched homes, virtually whole neighborhoods burned to the ground. It rained a little Sunday morning in Fort McMurray, but Canadian officials say they expect to fight the massive wildfire that has destroyed large parts of Alberta's oil sands town for months.

There's fear the growing wildfire could double in size and reach a major oil sands mine and even cross into the neighboring province of Saskatchewan.

The Alberta government said the massive blaze in the province will cover more than 200,000 hectares (495,000 acres) by Sunday and continue to grow because of high temperatures, dry conditions and high winds. Chad Morrison of Alberta Wildfire said it's not uncommon to fight such an inferno in forested areas for months.

Morrison said the fire was burning away from communities this weekend. He expected cooler temperatures along with the rain Sunday, but significant rainfall is needed to put out the flames.

The Rural Municipality of Wood Buffalo, which includes Fort McMurray, tweeted a picture of the rainfall and wrote: "It was only for a few minutes but the sight of rain has never been so good." Alberta Premier Rachel Notley retweeted the picture and wrote "Here's hoping for much more!"

Just over 30 kilometers (18 miles) south of Fort McMurray, the main highway into town is blocked off by barricades and police vehicles. More than a dozen media vehicles were parked near the barrier, along with a few volunteers who had trailers full of supplies.

One trailer had a sign on back that said "Fort Mac Bound." It carried supplies like clothing, Gatorade and protein bars for firefighters and EMTs, said Steve Jeges, of Olds, Alberta. He said he and others accepted donations for four days in Olds before heading here.

"If our services are needed, we're staying, he said.

Nearby, 22-year-old Sydney Robinson of Acme, Alberta stood near a trailer she had filled with clothing, water, food and about 20 kennels for animals. She came up on Thursday in hopes that she could help retrieve animals that were left behind in homes, but has not yet been able to get into Fort McMurray.

"I just want to help in any way I can," she said.

Trailer trucks bringing three bulldozers passed through the barricade as did other authorized vehicles with supplies.

Fort McMurray Fire Chief Darby Allen asked for the patience of residents who are eager to find out if their home has been destroyed.

"We are really working hard on that, it's a complicated process, what's damaged, what's left," Allen said in a posted video. "We really will get that to you as soon as we possibly can. We care about all of you."

Officials had hoped to complete the mass evacuation of work camps north of Fort McMurray on Saturday. Thousands of displaced residents got a drive-by view of some of the burned-out neighborhoods as convoys continued. No deaths or

injuries have been reported since the fire started last Sunday.

Notley said about 12,000 evacuees have been airlifted from oil sands mine air fields over the past two days, and about 7,000 have left in highway convoys escorted by police. She said the goal was to complete the evacuation from northern work camps by Sunday.

The fire could reach the edges of the Suncor oil sands facility, about 15 miles (25 kilometers) north of Fort McMurray. Non-essential staff have been evacuating and efforts to protect the site were under way.

Notley, however, said that the facility was highly resilient to forest fires. Oil sands mines are cleared and have no vegetation.

Morrison said the fire wasn't expected to reach the oil sands mines north of Suncor.

The fire and mass evacuation has forced a quarter or more of Canada's oil output offline and was expected to impact an economy already hurt by the fall in the price of oil. The Alberta oil sands have the third-largest reserves of oil in the world behind Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Its workers largely live in Fort McMurray where some neighborhoods have been destroyed.

More than 80,000 people have left Fort McMurray in the heart of Canada's oil sands, where the fire has torched 1,600 homes and other buildings. Gas has been turned off, the power grid is damaged and water is not drinkable. Officials said there is no timeline to return residents to the city, but the Alberta government has begun preliminary planning, though it stresses fighting the fire is still the first priority.

About 25,000 evacuees moved north in the hours after Tuesday's mandatory evacuation, where oil sands work camps that usually house employees were used to house evacuees. Officials are moving everyone south where it is safer.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had no immediate plans to visit the region. "We don't want to distract from the important work right now," Kate Purchase, a spokeswoman for Trudeau said.

The 200,000 hectares (494,211 acres) size estimate for the fire includes burned areas and those areas still in flames. The fire started last Sunday and has destroyed about 2,000 square kilometers (772 miles) of northern Alberta forest.

Saskatchewan Emergency Management Commissioner Duane McKay said there is heavy smoke in south west Saskatchewan, but no imminent threat of fire to any communities in the province that neighbors Alberta. McKay said the fire remains 15 to 20 kilometers from the Saskatchewan border and 60 to 70 kilometers from any communities in the province. He said whether it crosses the border over depends on weather but they don't see it happening Sunday.

Lac La Biche, Alberta, normally a sleepy town of 2,500 about 175 kilometers (109 miles) south of Fort McMurray, was helping thousands of evacuees, providing a place to sleep, food, donated clothes and even shelter for their pets.

Jihad Moghrabi, a spokesman for Lac La Biche County, said that 4,400 evacuees have come through The Bold Center, a sports facility in town. At the center, tables were piled with clothes, towels and other items. The center was offering three free meals a day and other services, including mental health services. A kennel housed people's pets on site.

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