



MEDIA RELEASE

BC Wildfires are threatening the health of Canadians in Four Provinces – August 21, 2018

Nearly 600 wildfires in BC are threatening the health of Canadians across the country. A province-wide state of emergency has been in effect in British Columbia since August 15 while the province struggles to contain the fires and protect the lives, health and homes of its residents. Approximately [6,000 people](#) living near active fires have received evacuation orders, while more than 11,000 people have been warned that evacuations could be ordered.

“Prolonged smoke events can produce fear, stress, uncertainty and isolation for those directly affected” says CAPE President, **Dr. Courtney Howard**, an emergency physician from the Northwest Territories (NWT) who has been researching the health impacts of wildfires since 2014 when the NWT experienced “a summer of smoke” from wildfires. “Evacuations, particularly if they are associated with the loss of property, can also lead to increased anxiety, depression and PTSD we found.”

Smoke from BC wildfires is blanketing a large portion of British Columbia and affecting the health of residents in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. [Metro Vancouver](#), with a population of nearly 2.5 million people, had [Air Quality Health Index \(AQHI\)](#) readings of 8 to 10 this week indicating that air pollution posed a “high risk” to “very high risk” to health, as did Edmonton and a number of other communities in [Alberta](#). Air quality advisories were also issued in [Saskatchewan](#) and [Manitoba](#) over the last week as result of BC wildfires.

“I have seen an increase in visits at my office from patients with respiratory diseases and chronic medical conditions since the wildfires began in BC” said CAPE Board member, **Dr. Larry Barzelai**, who is a physician in Vancouver. “I’m also hearing from many young, healthy people that poor air quality is limiting their ability to exercise.”

“[Many communities in Alberta](#), including Edmonton, had AQHI readings approaching or exceeding 10 this week” reported CAPE board member, **Dr. Joe Vipond**, who is an emergency physician in the City of Calgary. “These are dangerously high levels of air pollution. They can aggravate asthma, COPD, and heart conditions in the short - term, and produce long-term health impacts among those exposed at an early age.”

“If the AQHI is high or if people can see or smell smoke, they should protect their health by staying indoors and avoiding exercise outdoors” offered **Dr. Melissa Lem**, another CAPE board member from BC. “The air pollutants in smoke are harmful to everyone but particularly so for very young children, the elderly, and people with chronic heart and lung diseases.”

While wildfires tend to be “caused” by lightning strikes and human misadventures, they are becoming more frequent, more intense, and more dangerous in many situations because of the impacts of climate change. A

2018 article in [Scientific American](#) summarized it succinctly: “Global warming creates conditions that feed wildfires. It has led to earlier snowmelts in the West, increased temperatures in summer and spring and drier conditions, research shows. That has sparked more frequent wildfires that last longer. And that increase in wildfires has increased fine particle air pollution, according to the study.”

“It is time for our climate policies to come into alignment with our climate reality” noted **Kim Perrotta**, Executive Director for CAPE. “Climate change is not a partisan issue. We are talking about the health of Canadians, the future of our children, and the stability of the earth’s ecosystem.”

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