

Minister of Health of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

October 10, 2023

Dear Minister Holland,

We wish to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Canada's Minister of Health and to write to you about a matter of highest concern.

As health care professionals from leading Canadian health organizations, many of us have spent the summer treating patients suffering from the impacts of wildfires, smoke and heat waves. **The climate crisis is a health emergency – and extreme weather due to climate change is already costing lives.**

July 2023 was the hottest month since record-keeping began¹ – and the effects of this global heating have been deeply felt in Canada. Wildfires have burned more than 15 million hectares across the country so far this year, shattering all previous records.² Tens of thousands have had to evacuate their homes, many under perilous circumstances.³ A significant portion of wildfire evacuees have been Indigenous peoples.⁴ Millions have faced health impacts from exposure to

¹ NASA Earth Observatory. *July 2023 was the Hottest Month on Record*. NASA Goddard Space Flight Centre. <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/151699/july-2023-was-the-hottest-month-on-record>

² Allen, R.W., Cleland, S. (2023, September 1). Protect Yourself from the Health Threat Posed by Wildfire Smoke. *The Tyee*. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2023/09/01/Wildfire-Smoke-Making-Sick/>

³ Carty, M. (2023, September 4). World on Fire: 2023 is Canada's worst wildfire season on record – and it's not over yet. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/world-on-fire-canada-s-worst-wildfire-season-on-record-1.6946472#:~:text=2023%20fire%20facts&text=Nearly%20200%2C000%20Canadians%20have%20been,surpassin%20the%20size%20of%20P.E.I.>

⁴ Lewis, H. (2023, August 25). 42% of wildfire evacuations occur in Indigenous communities, researcher. *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9918749/indigenous-vulnerable-wildfires-evacuations/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt%27s%20a%20really%20disproportionate%20impact,a%20M%3%A9tis%20fire%20research%20scientist.>

dangerously high levels of wildfire smoke in the air.⁵ Heat waves and record-breaking temperatures have affected people in every single Canadian province and territory.^{6 7 8}

People in Canada are dying from these climate-related events. From this summer, we remember a child with asthma in British Columbia, two children and a father who perished in the Nova Scotia floods, and four firefighters who put their lives on the line. We think of the hundreds of lives lost due to heatwaves in the past five years.⁹ We recognize countless more people who will face shortened life spans and adverse health impacts due to exposures to toxic wildfire smoke and extreme heat, and the devastating mental health impacts of evacuations and lost homes and communities due to fires.¹⁰

⁵ Public Health Agency of Canada (2023, July 7). *Public health risk profile: Wildfires in Canada, 2023*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/emergency-preparedness-response/rapid-risk-assessments-public-health-professionals/risk-profile-wildfires-2023.html>

⁶ O'Neill, N. (2023, July 11). Canada's far north under heat warnings amid alarming rise in record-breaking temperatures. *CTV News*. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/climate-and-environment/canada-s-far-north-under-heat-warnings-amid-alarming-rise-in-record-breaking-temperatures-1.6475370>.

⁷ European Union; Copernicus (2023, May 16). *A record heatwave hit Canada in May 2023*. Copernicus. <https://www.copernicus.eu/en/media/image-day-gallery/record-heatwave-hit-canada-may-2023>.

⁸ Omstead, J. Ahmed, N. (2023, July 6). Warnings remain from coast to coast as parts of Canada swelter under heat wave. *CTV News*. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/climate-and-environment/warnings-remain-from-coast-to-coast-as-parts-of-canada-swelter-under-heat-wave-1.6469101>

Gilligan, M. (2023, August 15). 5 new record highs set in southern Alberta amid sizzling hot weather. *CTV News Calgary*. <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/5-new-record-highs-set-in-southern-alberta-amid-sizzling-hot-weather-1.6520261>

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Yarr, K. (2023, July 24). July on track to be hottest month in P.E.I. history. *CBC*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-hot-july-record-1.6916133>

⁹ At least 600 in BC heat dome, about 100 in Montreal in 2018

Public Safety and Solicitor General. (2023, Jun 7). Minister's Statement on 619 lives lost during 2023 heat dome. *Government of British Columbia*. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022PSSG0035-000911#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20are%20saddened%20by%20the,heat%20dome%20in%20summer%202021.>

CTV News. (2018, December 20). Heat wave that killed 93 in Quebec is second biggest weather story of 2018. *CTV News*. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/heat-wave-that-killed-93-in-quebec-is-second-biggest-weather-story-of-2018-1.4226174>

¹⁰ Health Canada (2022, November 7). Risks to health from climate change. *Government of Canada*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/climate-change-health/risks-to-health.html>

Canadian Institute for Climate Choices (June, 2021). "The Health Costs of Climate Change: How Canada Can Adapt, Prepare, and Save Lives." https://climatechoices.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ClimateChoices_Health-report_Final_June2021.pdf

Health Canada. (2022, February). *Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate*. Changing Climate. <https://changingclimate.ca/health-in-a-changing-climate/>

As global temperatures continue to rise, people in Canada will experience escalating harm and risks from extreme weather and other effects of the heating climate. Those at highest risk are children and infants, elderly, disabled, Indigenous and racialized people, perpetuating ongoing environmental injustice.¹¹

As Canada's Minister of Health, you have a key role to play to protect people in Canada against the greatest threat to our health, safety and lives. As health care professionals working on the frontlines, we call on you to:

Recognize Canada's escalating health emergency caused by the climate crisis. The World Health Organization¹², and now the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada (CPHO)¹³, have both declared climate change a health emergency. We call on you to do the same, and take a leadership role within your government to champion Canada meeting our global commitments to mitigate and adapt to global warming from the perspective of health. Set the example by funding a national secretariat, in partnership with provinces and territories, to decarbonize the healthcare system in Canada. Equip your ministry with the tools and mandate needed to bring a health-centred approach to tackle the climate crisis. Embed environmental justice considerations within this work and ensure that those facing disproportionate impacts have voice and agency.

Acknowledge fossil fuels as the root cause of the climate health emergency and take action to end this harm. The burning of fossil fuels – including oil, gas and coal – is by far the lead driver of climate change and of air pollution. Air pollution alone leads to between 15,300¹⁴ and

¹¹ World Health Organization. *Social Determinants of Health*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1; Li, A.M.L. (2017). "Ecological determinants of health: food and environment on human health." *Environ Sci Pollut Res Int.*, 24(1) 9002-9015, [The Lancet Planetary Health, 6\(2\), E156-E163, \[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\\(21\\)00354-5/fulltext\]\(https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00354-5/fulltext\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7089083/#:~:text=As%20such%2C%20those%20ecological%20factors.through%20biological%20control%2C%20which%20are; Redvers, N., et al. (2022, February).)

¹² World Health Organization (2023, May 24). "WHO issues urgent call for global climate action to create resilient and sustainable health systems." <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-05-2023-wha76-strategic-roundtable-on-health-and-climate#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20climate%20crisis%20is%20a,challenge%20of%20the%2021st%20century.>

¹³ Public Health Agency of Canada (2023, April 17). What We Heard: Perspectives on Climate Change and Public Health in Canada. *Government of Canada*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/corporate/publications/chief-public-health-officer-reports-state-public-health-canada/state-public-health-canada-2022/what-we-heard-perspectives-climate-change.html>

¹⁴ Health Canada (2021). Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Canada: Estimates of morbidity and premature mortality outcomes – 2021 Report. *Government of Canada*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/health-impacts-air-pollution-2021.html>

34,000¹⁵ premature deaths and \$120 billion in health costs¹⁶ in Canada each year. We therefore call on you to develop a comprehensive, health-focused approach to reduce the health harms of fossil fuel pollution. Such an approach could draw from Canada's success in tobacco control. It should similarly entail education and awareness campaigns about the health harms of fossil fuels and the health co-benefits of current and proposed government decarbonization initiatives, including robust carbon pricing, a strong cap on oil and gas emissions, regulations on methane pollution and a mandate on clean electricity.

Ensure systems are in place to protect people from extreme weather and other effects of the heating climate. Work with Indigenous, provincial and municipal governments to ensure they are prepared and equipped to protect their communities. Support implementation of the National Adaptation Strategy on a scale and timeline appropriate to the urgency of escalating climate impacts, including consideration of health infrastructure and staffing needs.

You were appointed to the role of health minister in the midst of wildfires and heatwaves. We hope you will consider the heating climate to be a top health priority during your mandate, and that you will act with the urgency required. We stand ready to collaborate with you to safeguard the safety and wellbeing of all people in the face of this health emergency.

Sincerely,

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¹⁵ Vohra, et al. (2021). Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem. *Environmental Research*, 195, p.5. [Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated ...ScienceDirecthttps://www.sciencedirect.com > science > article > pii](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167636921001111)

¹⁶ Health Canada (2021). Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Canada: Estimates of morbidity and premature mortality outcomes – 2021 Report. *Government of Canada*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/health-impacts-air-pollution-2021.html>

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