

A SUMMER IN FLAMES

It's the most dangerous fire season in a half-century. Forest fires are hard to prevent and getting harder to fight, as more people move into the woods

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By Steven Frank

Lyle Fullerton had never seen anything like the Crownsnest Pass fire. Early on Aug. 2 what had been a seasonal wildfire abruptly changed direction and transmogrified into a fast-moving monster. A 6-km wall of flame reaching 50 m into the sky, the fiery beast was suddenly whipping over the slopes, throwing off the energy equivalent of a Hiroshima-size atomic explosion every 30 minutes. "I was telling people to stay and look at it with their children," recalls Fullerton, a 25-year fire and forestry veteran who has worked in all four Western provinces. "They weren't going to see anything like this again in their lifetimes."

As spectacular as it was, the fire was on a deadly rendezvous with Hillcrest, Alta., a mining village of 900 people on the southern Alberta-British Columbia border. One resident at home that Saturday was Elaine Hruby, whose husband was working that weekend up north in Fort McMurray. At 10 a.m. authorities told her to leave. Immediately. "I didn't know what to take," says Hruby, recalling her anxious departure. "You start doing crazy things." After putting her cat and dog in the car, she grabbed the lamp her husband once used as a miner, her jewelry (but not his) and a little plastic Buddha.

Hruby then drove about 20 km west along the valley, sat down on a rock ledge overlooking 1,359-m-high Crownsnest Pass and watched the flames veer down on Hillcrest. Despite her horror, she couldn't stop looking. "I felt masochistic, sitting on the outcropping," Hruby recalls. "But those flames were like a magnet."

The Crownsnest Pass fire was not the only one threatening Western Canada. Dangerous wildfires near Kamloops in southern British Columbia forced the evacuation of 8,500 people and left some 70 homes and 100 other buildings destroyed. The hardest hit was Louis Creek, a mill town about 50 km north of Kamloops. While fire fighters miraculously saved many homes, the so-called McLure-Barriere fire left the Tolko Industries sawmill complex at Louis Creek a giant sculpture of unrecognizable metal. In the surrounding area, little was left standing save chimneys, the remnants of a washer and dryer and a convenience-store sign advertising lottery tickets. British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell—who declared a state of emergency for the whole province on Aug. 2—compared the devastation at Louis Creek with a nuclear explosion. "There is nothing left," Campbell told Time. "You see what you think are shadows where the buildings were."

A prolonged heat wave in the West, combined with the driest year in the past 50 in Western Canada, is exacerbating years of drought and making this one of the most frightening summers for fire on record, particularly in southern B.C. "The whole province is tinder dry," says fire-information officer Gary Horley. B.C. has lost about 90,000 hectares of forest, in contrast to 8,581 all of last year and 76,574 in

1998, until now the worst year in the past decade.

Nor is Canada alone in this summer of combustion. In the Western U.S., fires closed much of Glacier National Park in Montana and threatened communities in California and Arizona. In Europe, Portugal declared a national emergency, but could get little help from its neighbors because Spain and France have their own conflagrations to contain.

Everywhere, managing the forests has become more complex as the population moves into the woods. Scientists and timber interests, particularly in the U.S., are fiercely debating which management policies—including prescribed burn, thinning and neglect—are the best long-term choices for the environment (see following story).

The severity of the situation this year in Canada has been magnified by the number of fires threatening inhabited areas. One blaze, the Strawberry Hill fire, touched the outskirts of the Kamloops suburb of Rayleigh before it was turned back, mostly because of alert fire fighting. Still, the once grassy hillsides, scattered with ponderosa pine and sagebrush, were charred black, with some areas reduced to deep piles of gray ash, like a fireplace that hasn't been cleaned in months. Around Heffley Creek, a junction town that was sandwiched between the Strawberry Hill and McLure-Barriere blazes, fires left the road looking as if an invading army had come through. Anita Beckett, who co-owns an antiques store on the edge of the worst hit zones, ignored evacuation orders and watched for fires with binoculars. When the order for Heffley Creek was lifted on Aug. 4, she drove into Kamloops to find Highway 5 littered with suitcases, dresser drawers and bags of clothing jettisoned by people fleeing the fire. "People left in such a panic," Beckett says.

There was similar mayhem when residents fled the McLure-Barriere area. The normally sedate Highway 24 was "as busy as a Los Angeles freeway," says Marguerite Dodds-Lepinski, a former Los Angeles resident who lives near Barriere, about 65 km north of Kamloops. Electricity outages that knocked out power at gas stations added to the calamity. "People were trying to outrun the fire in their cars," she says, "but many ended up stranded on the side of the road without fuel." Fire fighters saved most of the threatened towns as of last week. It took 850 fire fighters, 1,700 civilian volunteers, a lot of luck and several days to prevent the Crownsnest Pass fire from devouring Hillcrest. The blaze came as close as 500 m from the edge of town. More than 1,100 forestry and city fire fighters, including 36 fire trucks from across B.C., saved most of the villages north of Kamloops. About 100 exhausted fire fighters working 18-hour days were stationed at the Barriere fairgrounds,

eating at a makeshift kitchen and sleeping on foams in an elementary school. "What day is it?" a dazed Forrest Owens of the Central Saanich fire department from southern Vancouver Island asked a Time reporter. "Days are running into days."

There could be more endless days ahead this summer and, indeed, in the longer term. Despite improved fire-fighter cooperation and new technology—such as increased use of satellite imaging to track fires—a number of factors are working against forest managers. Not least is the increasing number of people moving into wilderness areas for either recreation or habitation. That's a problem since 60% of fires in Canada are started by careless humans. Both the McLure-Barriere and Strawberry Hill fires are believed to have been caused by discarded cigarette butts. The presence of homes and businesses in forests make fire fighting trickier. "Rather than just fighting the fire, now we have to worry about human life and communities in an area where we never had to worry about it before," says Jules Leboeuf, an Alberta wildfire-prevention officer.

In wilderness areas, fires are allowed, within certain limits, to do what they are supposed to do: burn trees and underbrush, which has a natural rejuvenating effect. But with human activity expanding so vigorously, about 90% of the 10,000 fires in Canada every year are stopped at about a hectare or less. Suppressing so many fires, environmentalists say, has led to higher than normal levels of accumulated underbrush and thick tree growth that can fuel catastrophic wildfires. "If you deliberately suppress fire, you're creating ticking time bombs," says Reese Halter, a biologist based in Banff.

Still, western forestry officials say, there is only so much that can be done to manage forests in terms of "controlled burns" (mostly used in national parks) and other thinning programs. Human stupidity aside, the number of forest fires is ultimately going to be a function of weather and luck, asserts Leboeuf. "Bad things are going to happen," he says. "It's just a matter of where."

And how severe. The Crownsnest Pass fire, for instance, was detected at 2:27 p.m. on July 23 and was greeted by a helicopter crew of fire fighters seven minutes later. The first air tanker was attacking the fire eight minutes after that. The fire still got away: by 7 p.m. that day, it was 1,400 hectares large—and hungry. "That's why they're called wildfires," says Gene Walters, who helped co-ordinate the fight. "We're not in charge of them. Mother Nature is. We can only steer them some." And watch, transfixed, with awe and horror. —With reporting by Melanie Collison/Crownsnest Pass, Petti Fong/Vancouver, Deborah Jones/Barriere, Amy Lazar/New York and Leigh Anne Williams/Toronto

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