

Historic 2023 Wildfire Season

Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize this year's historic wildfire season, the challenges faced by so many NWT residents and others across Canada, and the heroic efforts of firefighters and emergency management personnel to protect our communities.

Before the 2023 wildfire season began, weather forecasts predicted an early start to the season and a high risk for many areas in the NWT. We saw record temperatures, very little rain, and severe drought throughout the summer and fall. All of this resulted in extreme fire conditions for most of the season.

Based on the forecasts, the Department of Environment and Climate Change brought on fire crews, air tankers, and helicopters earlier in the season than normal, and added additional resources. Unfortunately, all of our wildfire personnel and aircraft were put to work right away.

We saw our first wildfire of the season on May 4th, almost a month earlier than normal, which was followed by a record number of fires, area burned, and community evacuations because of fire.

The first major fire followed on May 14th, threatening the K'atl'odeeche First Nation and Hay River. By the end of June, four NWT communities had been evacuated given the threat of wildfires, including K'atl'odeeche First Nation, Hay River, Sambaa K'e, and Wekweeti.

In July, residents of Behchoko and people living along parts of Highway No. 3 also had to leave their homes, and by mid-August, the residents of Kakisa, Enterprise, Fort Smith, Yellowknife, N'Dilo, Dettah, the Ingraham Trail, and Jean Marie River had been

evacuated. Additionally, Hay River and the Katlodeeche First Nation had to evacuate for a second time this summer.

As of this week, 299 fires have burned over four million hectares across the NWT this season. These fires resulted in 12 community evacuations, displacing more than two-thirds of NWT residents from their homes.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard from some people that wildfires are not managed like they used to be 40 or 50 years ago and that with more initial attack, we would have avoided the worst of this. I want to be clear: we monitored for new fires throughout the season, and responded to every wildfire that was threatening an NWT community.

These fires grew not because of a lack of action or resources, but due to a perfect storm set in motion by nature. With record temperatures and severe droughts in the Dehcho, South Slave, North Slave, and Sahtu regions, we had fires that burned deeper, hotter, and faster.

With the buildup of forest fuels twice what is considered extreme, the forests were primed for explosive fire growth. This, combined with relentless wind events, intense smoke, and proximity to communities, made conditions very difficult for our crews. On the most difficult days, there was no amount of firefighters or aircraft we could have put in front of these fires to stop them.

Mr. Speaker, behind this year's response are people, people who are our friends and neighbours, making critical decisions and working hard to keep the places we care about safe.

Over the course of the season, more than a thousand wildfire experts and crew members were brought in from across the NWT, Canada, and around the world. Hundreds more structural firefighters helped to protect our communities. Hundreds of armed forces members, workers from communities and private companies joined

the effort, and dozens of additional aircraft and heavy equipment also assisted. Crews did an incredible job FireSmarting and building fire breaks that will now serve as long-term protection for many of our communities. Thousands of homes, cabins, camps, and businesses were saved thanks to the help of so many. Everyone who rose to this occasion deserves the deepest gratitude of this House.

Mr. Speaker, as the fire response slows down, we will turn our attention to learning everything we can from this year's wildfire season. Over the fall and winter, we will conduct after-action reviews of this year's fires that impacted communities and apply these lessons to our operations as we do every year. Some lessons we can immediately take away include: continuing to invest in wildfire and climate resilience to get ahead of challenging seasons, ensuring we all play a role in FireSmarting, and strengthening coordination between local firefighting forces and wildfire management teams.

Mr. Speaker, I want to close by acknowledging the immense human toll of this season. This has been the most damaging wildfire season the NWT has ever experienced. The community of Enterprise has been devastated. More than two-thirds of all NWT residents were separated from their communities for weeks. Some people lost their homes and cabins, and others had their businesses or livelihoods impacted by wildfires.

We also lost a firefighter when Fort Liard's Adam Yeadon tragically passed away while protecting his community earlier this summer. My thoughts remain with his family, his friends, and his colleagues.

To everyone who was impacted by this year's wildfire season, our government gives not only our heartfelt thoughts, but our commitment to help you as we work to rebuild.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.