Alberta wildfire displaces 25,000 people

Associated Press

FORT MCMURRAY, Alberta — A massive wildfire raging in the Canadian province of Alberta grew to 210,035 acres and officials said Thursday they would like to move south about 25,000 evacuees who had previously fled north, including 8,000 by

More than 80,000 people have emptied Fort McMurray in the heart of Canada's oil sands, authorities said.

The Alberta government declared a province-wide fire ban in an effort to reduce the risk of more blazes in a province that is very hot and dry.

"It is a very rare step," Environment Minister Shannon Phillips said. Phillips called it an offense to ignore the ban and said it can lead to fines.

The government said more than 1,100 firefighters, 145 helicopters, 138 pieces of heavy equipment and 22 air tankers were fighting a total of 49 wildfires, with seven considered out of control. Chad Morrison with AB Wildfire, manager of wildfire prevention, said the blaze grew rapidly, fueled by gusting winds, and he expected the fire to continue to grow Thursday because of dry conditions but it will be away from the community.

The fire has torched 1,600 homes and other buildings in Fort McMurray. There have been no injuries or death from the fires. The province of Alberta declared a state of emergency.

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley said rain is needed. She said she didn't know how much better the evacuation could have been when asked if ample warning was given



A wildfire moves towards the town of Anzac from Fort McMurray, Alberta., on Wednesday. Alberta declared a state of emergency Wednesday as crews frantically held back wind-whipped wildfires. Unseasonably hot temperatures combined with dry conditions have transformed the boreal forest in much of Alberta into a tinder box.

to residents, noting that in 48 hours more than 80,000 people were evacuated from a town that essentially has two roads out of it.

Fort McMurray surrounded by wilderness and is Canada's main oil sands town. Despite the size of the town and its importance to the Canadian economy, there are essentially only two ways out via car. The region has the third largest reserves of oil in the world behind Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

Aided by high winds, scorching heat and low humidity, the fire grew from 29 square miles Tuesday to 38.6 square miles on Wednesday, but by Thursday it was almost nine times that - at 328.2 square miles.

The fire remained wrapped around the western and southern edges of the city. No rain clouds were expected around Fort McMurray until late Saturday, with 40 percent chance of showers, according to online forecasts by Environment Canada. The chances drop to 30 percent on Sunday and Monday, with the skies then clearing up, the

service reported. About 25,000 evacuees moved north in the hours after Tuesday's evacuation, where oil sands work camps were being pressed into service to house people. But the bulk of the more than 80,000 evacuees fled south to Edmonton and elsewhere, and officials said they eventually would like to move everyone south where they have better support for the displaced. Officials are now trying to fly 8,000 evacuees out of the area starting Thursday afternoon and are

hoping the highway becomes safe enough to move people that way.

"Our focus right now is on getting those people south as quickly as possible," Notley said.

Government officials said energy companies in the area were prepared to use their planes in an airlift and a military aircraft was on standby.

Unseasonably hot temperatures combined with dry conditions have transformed the boreal forest in much of Alberta into a tinder box. Morrison said they are investigating the cause of the fire but he said it started in a remote forested area and said it could have been lightning.

A combination of factors conspired to make this wildfire especially ferocious, said Bill Patzert, a climatologist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Labo-

ratory in California. The El Nino global weather system brought Alberta a mild winter and low snowpack, he said. Patzert said the flames sparked at a time between the snowy season and before springtime rains that turn the landscape green, making the region especially vulnerable to wildfire.

The flames are moving so fast that they are nearly impossible to fight, he said.

'In a way, it's a perfect storm," Patzert said. "It's been warm, it's been dry and windy. It's the in-between period before you're in the

full bloom of spring."

The fire is driving one of the largest evacuations in North America in recent memory, said Bill Stewart, co-director of the University of California's Center for Fire Research and Outreach at the University of California, Berkeley.

With few exceptions in the United States, an entire town hasn't been threatened on this scale for over 100 vears, he said, noting rather that devastation has struck neighborhoods and smaller communities in California.

There is no stopping the advance of a fire such as the wind-driven flames in Alberta, which is spreading embers well beyond fire lines, Stewart said. He noted that the aggressive fire is also unusual for burning so early in the warm season and so far north.

"You could add five times the number of firefighters, but you can't get all the embers,"

he said. "There's no way to put out every ember flying over firefighters' heads.'

Fort McMurray resident Fahed Labek, whose relatives from war-torn Syria recently migrated to northern Alberta as refugees, said his family has escaped one fire for another. Labek fled the encroaching wildfire two days ago with family members, who arrived in Canada in late February.

Labek, who made it to Edmonton after a harrowing journey, is concerned the refugees are enduring additional trauma after leaving the Middle East. But he said he's taking solace in the helpfulness of Canadians now assisting the tens of thousands of forest fire evacuees.

The fire has dealt a blow to the region's crude production, with companies curtailing production or stopping it altogether. Notley, the province premier, said the infrastructure for oil and gas production remains largely unaffected. What's slowing down production is that their employees are not there, she

The airport only suffered minor damage because of the "herculean" efforts of firefighters, said Scott Long of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency. Firefighters have focused on protecting key infrastructure like the water treatment plant, the hospital and the airport.

Morrison said four air tankers from Quebec will arrive Thursday and 100 firefighters are arriving from Ontario.

Corrections

The East Oregonian works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

ELECT FOR CIRCUIT COURT JUDGE Paid for by Committee to Elect John L. Ballard Circuit Court Judge

EAST OREGONIAN

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NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY

NEWS

AccuWeather.com Forecast **SUNDAY MONDAY TUESDAY** Partly sunny Very warm with Mostly sunny and Partly sunny Nice with clouds sunshine not as warm and sun PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST 80° **52°** 82° 56° **72°** 46° 68° 40° 85° 55° 88° 60° 49° **74°** 44° **78°** 43° Seattle **ALMANAC** 75/54 Spokane Wenatchee 84/58 **PENDLETON** Tacoma

through 3 p.	m. yesterday	
TEMPERA	TURE	
	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	68°	50°

Normals

PRECIPITATION 24 hours ending 3 p.m. 0.15" 0.15" 0.17" Month to date Normal month to date Year to date Last year to date 3.13"

96° (1966) 29° (1904)

Normal year to date **HERMISTON** through 3 p.m. yesterday TEMPERATURE

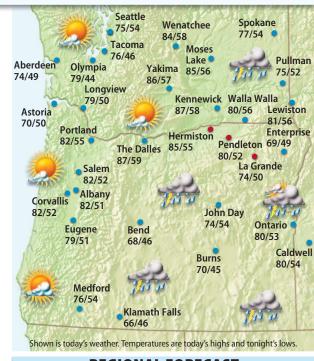
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Yesterday	54°						
Normals	44°						
Records	29° (1982)						
PRECIPITATION							
24 hours en	0.59"						

Year to date Last year to date Normal year to date 4.22' SUN AND MOON

JUN A	ND MO	ON	
Sunrise to	oday		5:35 a.m.
Sunset to	night		8:09 p.m.
Moonrise	today		5:54 a.m.
Moonset	today		8:14 p.m.
New	First	Full	Last
	(Fin	CA	6

May 13 May 21 May 29

Month to date Normal month to date 0.20' 1.79'



REGIONAL FORECAST

mountains.

Coastal Oregon: Partial sunshine today; pleasant. Clear tonight. Sunshine and patchy clouds tomorrow. Eastern and Central Oregon: Mostly cloudy

today with a thunderstorm in spots; partly sunny across the north Western Washington: Mostly sunny today. Clear tonight. Sunny tomorrow. Sunday: a

shower in places.

Clear to partly cloudy tonight. Plenty of sunshine tomorrow. Cascades: A shower or thunderstorm in spots today; warmer. Clouds and sun across

Eastern Washington: Partly sunny today.

the north. but showers of rain and snow in the interior

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London	72	54	рс	73	56	рс
Mexico City	82	51	рс	84	56	рс
Moscow	67	44	S	70	43	рс
Paris	75	53	рс	75	54	рс
Rome	71	51	рс	71	53	рс
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Sydney	77	57	S	76	63	S
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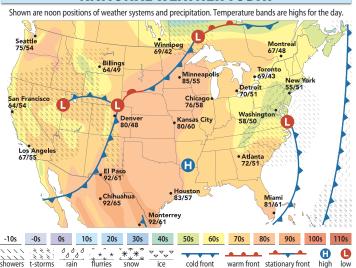
WINDS

(in mph) Today Saturday Boardman NNE 8-16 N 7-14 Pendleton

UV INDEX TODAY 4 5 6 5 6 5 4 5 1

8 a.m. 10 a.m. Noon 2 p.m. 4 p.m. 6 p.m. 3-5, Moderate 0-2, Low 8-10, Very High; 11+, Extreme The higher the AccuWeather.com UV Index™ num-

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National Summary: A mosaic of rain will affect areas from the Carolinas to southern New England today, Showers and storms will extend from California to the Rockies and along the Canada border in the northern Plains. Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 97° in Chandler, Ariz

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Weather (W): s-sunny, pc-partly cloudy, c-cloudy, sh-showers, t-thunderstorms, r-rain, sf-snow flurries, sn-snow, i-ice.