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Rising to the wildfire challenge

The dramatic images from beautiful Jasper just weeks ago were heart-wrenching reminders of the devastating impact wildfires can have on communities.

Such images have, unfortunately, become too common - from Fort MacMurray in 2016, to Lytton in 2021, to the many communities impacted by the record-breaking 2023 wildfire season.

Wildfires have always occurred in Canada. What is new is their frequency and their intensity. And the science is clear - the root cause of this is our changing climate.

Very recently, Government of Canada experts provided a forecast of what we expect to see for the remainder of the wildfire season. Based on these projections, Western Canada will experience continued significant wildfire risk in August, with above average activity expected in September.

An urgency to act

Canadians expect their governments to act to address what is now and will be an increasing set of challenges.

At the federal level, my colleagues and I have been working urgently on proactive measures to reduce the risks of wildfires as well as reactive measures that will enable us to fight fires and protect lives and livelihoods.

Proactive measures have included the development of a National Wildland Fire and Prevention Strategy, which includes broadening the implementation of programs like Firesmart.

They include the federal government providing \$256M in funding to provinces and territories to acquire equipment needed to fight wildland fires and investing \$28M to train additional wildland firefighters. And we have initiated a program with the International Association of Fire Fighters to train municipal fire fighters to better manage threats in wildland-municipal interfaces.

Addressing the root causes

Beyond measures to address immediate threats, we must also address the root causes of increasing fire activity.

In 2023, lightning-related fires represented 90% of the total area burned across Canada (even though they represented only 59% of all fires initiated). This fact underlines how weather events - combined with climate impacts such as increased temperatures, increasingly dry conditions and reduced snowpack - are elevating the threat, risks and costs associated with forest fire activity.

Canada presently has one of the most comprehensive climate plans in the world and is on track to reduce emissions by 40-45% below 2005 levels by 2030. And we are doing this in a manner that will allow us to seize the economic opportunities that can come through the transition to a low carbon future. In this regard, we are doing our part to mitigate climate change, but given the impacts we are seeing, we must act with enhanced urgency.

Climate change is a science issue. It truly should not be a partisan issue. For the sake of our environment, our communities and, indeed, the long-term competitiveness of Canada's economy, we must take bold action on climate change - which means proactive measures in the face of challenges such as wildfires.

Unfortunately, this is a conclusion not yet shared by all federal political leaders - the leader of the Conservative Party continues to ignore the reality of climate change and his plan to address it is seemingly to simply let the planet burn.

The recent fire in Jasper should be sobering for all. Canadians should be demanding a grown-up, thoughtful conversation as to how our governments can effectively respond to the increasing challenges we face.

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