

Village of Lytton BC shocked the world's meteorologists with record-high temperatures. A wildfire has now burned it to the ground

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[Lytton set records three days in a row for the highest temperatures ever recorded in Canada, topping out at 49.6C on June 29. That surpasses the highest temperature ever recorded in Las Vegas. Nowhere else in the world north of the 37th parallel has ever been hotter in recorded times. That's the border between Colorado and New Mexico or Utah and Arizona. The town and surrounding area has a population of some 2,000 and is located some 250 km north of Vancouver.]

After shattering Canadian heat records for three consecutive days, the village of Lytton in British Columbia has been destroyed by fire. About 1,000 people fled the area after the village's mayor issued an evacuation order on Wednesday evening. Some residents are still unaccounted for, B.C. Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth said on July 1.

The majority of the village has burned, including the city centre, ambulance station and health centre. Rail and highway infrastructure is also damaged. Images from the town's main street show a community levelled overnight.

"This has been a very difficult day, and the days ahead are going to continue to challenge us," Mr. Farnworth said. "There are several fires of note burning throughout our province. ... The one affecting Lytton and surrounding areas has been catastrophic for that community."

The fire happened a week into an unprecedented heat wave in Western Canada that has broken dozens of historic temperature records daily and is believed responsible for [hundreds of deaths](#) in B.C. since last Friday. On June 29, Lytton broke the record for the hottest temperature ever recorded in Canada for the third consecutive day, reaching a blistering 49.6 C. Some locals described the weather as intolerable.

As of late afternoon on July 1, there were 99 active wildfires in B.C., including nine that are highly visible or that pose a potential threat to public safety. A ban on campfires went into effect on Wednesday.

Lytton Mayor Jan Polderman issued the evacuation order at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, saying a fire within the village was threatening the safety of residents and structures. Residents fled with little or no notice. They scattered to neighbouring communities, including Lillooet, Ashcroft, Spences Bridge, Boston Bar and Kamloops.

"It was like a war zone last night," said John Haugen, acting Chief of Lytton First Nation. He said he first heard about the fire around 3:30 p.m. when someone mentioned flames moving quickly along the railway tracks southwest of town. In short order, he said, houses had been

engulfed, including his own. “It’s been catastrophic,” he said. “We lost our emergency health clinic, our hotel, our RCMP detachment, our grocery store – it’s all gone.”

Mr. Haugen said that other than a couple gas stations, little remains standing.

As the fire spread through town, landlines and cellphone towers lost service, preventing an all-important evacuation robocall from going out to residents, he said. “Some people were sent to one muster station and very soon that station had to evacuate to another station,” he said. “There was a great deal of confusion. When you’re dealing with elders ... it slows the process.”

While all elders from Lytton First Nation are accounted for, Mr. Haugen said that two people he’s aware of from the village of Lytton remain missing. “We had some people suffer smoke inhalation and there were no ambulances around or anything to help,” he said.

Danny Yan, owner of Lytton Hotel, said he had 10 minutes of warning before he had to flee his home with a few clothes and other possessions. “We could see houses behind the hotel on fire and we could hear ‘bang, bang, bang’ from propane tanks exploding,” he said. “It was scary. The whole town was smoke. I could barely see a metre in front of me.”

Mr. Yan and his wife first drove to an evacuation centre in Lillooet. He said much of the town was there, but everyone was too shocked and exhausted to speak. The couple then drove on to Vancouver. “I’ve never seen anything like that,” he said. “We’re very lucky to get out.”

Scott Hildebrand, the chief administrative officer for Thompson-Nicola Regional District, which includes Lytton, said officials are still trying to account for all the area’s residents. He could not say whether there have been any deaths or injuries.

About 250 to 300 people live in Lytton and another 1,500 to 2,000 live in the surrounding area, he said. He added that the district government is in “constant contact” with First Nations near the village as officials try to determine whether everyone is safe and has access to emergency support services. “It is all hands on deck right now,” he said. “Our focus right now is the welfare of our constituents.”

Premier John Horgan said he spoke with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on July 1 and that both levels of government will be there to help Lytton rebuild. The two leaders also spoke about Canada’s need to adapt and respond to climate change.

“What I’ve learned in my time as Premier is that we are in a changing environment, and climate change is affecting all of our lives in meaningful ways,” Mr. Horgan said. “It’s graphic when you see the record temperatures we’ve experienced in every corner of B.C, and we’re seeing that move now into Alberta and perhaps across the country. We need to amend how we behave.”

The Premier said he had heard anecdotal information from locals that the fire appeared to have been sparked by a passing train, but that the investigation into the cause of the fire is in its preliminary stage. “Right now everyone’s focused on making sure that everyone’s safe,” he said.

A spokesperson for CN said the company is looking into allegations that one of its trains could have ignited the blaze. “As for what caused the fire, the initial review of our operations is that protocols were followed,” Mathieu Gaudreault said in a statement. “CN will offer its full assistance to help authorities identify the causes of this tragic incident.”

Last year, the company was forced to pay nearly \$17-million as a result of the Cisco Road Fire, a 2015 wildfire that started next to CN tracks roughly 10 kilometres from Lytton. A subsequent tribunal determined that rail-cutting activities in the area had started the blaze, which eventually grew to 2,200 hectares and forced the evacuation of a nearby First Nations community. A Forest Appeals Commission panel ruled that CN owed \$9.4-million for damaged forest and \$6.9-million for fire control work.

The extreme weather that devastated Lytton continues to move eastward. Justin Shelley, a meteorologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada, warned that the heat has primed Alberta for wildfires. Thunderstorms are in the weekend forecast for parts of the province, which could spark fires, he said.

In 2016, a large wildfire partly destroyed the northeast Alberta community of Fort McMurray. Around 90,000 people were forced to evacuate the area. [Fort McMurray is located some 400 km north of Edmonton and sits at the center of Alberta's tar sands extraction zone.]

The temperature reached as high as 39.3 C in Medicine Hat on July 1, making it the city's hottest July 1 since the daily record was last set in 1990. The day prior, Alberta set 51 daily records and 13 all-time records, the highest being 41.2 C in Jasper, Mr. Shelley said.

The persistent heat has increased the number of people turning up at emergency departments. According to Alberta Health Services, EMS responded to 48 heat-related calls in Edmonton and 24 in Calgary on Tuesday. Information on deaths is not yet available.

Residents are flocking to public spaces in search of relief. The Grand Prairie Public Library has seen about a 30-per-cent increase in people coming in during the last few days, as residents seek refuge, said library director Deborah Cryderman. “It's one of the few places in town that you can go to and you can stay in as long as you want without buying anything,” Ms. Cryderman said. “We serve absolutely everyone in the community regardless of socioeconomic background.”

But accessing relief from the heat in public places can be tricky. In Calgary, Aaron Thibeault and his family got in line for a wading pool in the city's Bowness Park just before 9 a.m. on Thursday and waited an hour in rapidly increasing temperatures before getting in.

Mr. Thibeault, who has two children, said his family has been mostly living in the basement of his bungalow since the heat wave began, after moving mattresses and other supplies downstairs when he saw the forecast for extreme heat last week. He ordered a small portable air conditioning unit – which, luckily, arrived earlier this week. It has helped cool down his kitchen so he can cook, he said, but the rest of the house is still hot. “It's been a bit uncomfortable, but we manage,” he said. “We try to make it fun for them but everybody is a little bit annoyed and cranky with the heat.”

Meanwhile, the Alberta Electric System Operator is asking residents to conserve energy – especially between 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. – although the system has yet to fail during the heatwave, spokesperson Leif Sollid said. On July 1, the system set a new summertime usage record of 11,721 megawatts as residents cranked up their air conditioning. The all-time high is 11,729 megawatts, which came during an extreme cold snap this past February.

