



Welcome to Fire Weather

Last year I attended a talk given by author John Vaillant whose award winning book “Fire Weather” documents the intense climate driven wildfires that decimated the Alberta town of Fort McMurray.

During his lecture Vaillant made the ominous prediction that what happened there could easily happen again, in almost any given city on the planet.

Vancouver narrowly dodged the fire bullet just last year when buildings in 2 city neighbourhoods caught fire. According to Vaillant, the flames were so intense and spread so quickly that had the wind been just 10 knots higher a significant portion of the city would have burned.



The Los Angeles Fires burned 18,000 homes

Then there were the January 2025 Los Angeles fires, which decimated more than 18,000 homes and burned through more than 23,000 hectares, leaving an estimated \$250 billion in damages.

So, the question is - could the same thing happen in Winnipeg?

Based on the recent Transcona grass fire which threatened both homes and businesses, it could indeed happen here. 30 fire crews battled in the heat and high winds for hours before finally containing it. Had a nearby chemical plant gone up in smoke who knows what might have happened.

And Transcona isn't alone. As of May 14th, a number of Manitoba towns like Libau were precariously perched on the edge of wildfires, evacuation orders had already been issued for the Broken Head Ojibway community, and two people trapped by the wildfires at Lac du Bonnet had lost their lives.

In addition to that, Nopiming provincial park was closed due to out of control wildfires as was the Whiteshell.



A water bomber fights the Kenora 20 fire at Long Pine Lake, Ingolf

At Ingolf's Long Pine Lake, which borders the Whiteshell, water bombers, helicopter "air tankers" and fire fighters were still struggling after 3 days to contain a wildfire that exploded jumped the lake then raced across some 23,000 hectares, 43 kilometers to the north, prompting evacuation warnings across the region. As of May 21st the fire had spread to encompass an additional 7,000 hectares.

It was with the announcement of the Ingolf fire on May 12th that the ominous but still somehow abstract idea of "climate-driven wildfires" suddenly hit home for me. Long Pine is where my grandfather, a railway machinist, started building his log cabin in 1919, and where my parents built ours in the early fifties.

At this point, we know that both cottages were still standing as of May 21, but with temperatures on the rise again, the threat remains.

The circumstances that caused the Ingolf fire to explode with such intensity were not unlike those in Fort McMurray – temperatures in the mid 30 C. range, extremely dry conditions and a relative humidity below 18%.

This, when the May average is usually 19 C with a relative humidity of 48%.

This month's unusually hot, dry conditions are what create the perfect storm for bigger more intense wildfires that rapidly increase in size. Climate warmed blazes that are a

nightmare for firefighters, who are hard pressed to get boots on the ground, because the combined heat makes the conditions almost impossible to withstand.

And if the carbon emissions driving climate change and global warming remain largely unchecked, those conditions are predicted to become the norm in Manitoba. Which means that our fire season will start earlier, the wildfires will be bigger and more intense, and the loss of life and property will likely escalate.

To make matters worse, as vast tracts of forest burn, global CO2 levels will rise even higher.

So what can we do to mitigate this?

Well the first thing our government should definitely not do is sell off so-called “surplus” water bomber planes as did the previous provincial conservative government.

Then we need to ensure that the province adopts a multitiered approach to firefighting, which begins with a clear and achievable plan to reduce the emissions that are driving bigger more intense forest fires.

Next up, the province and city need to look at ways to increase our resiliency by discouraging residential expansion near fire prone forests and grasslands as well as setting higher standards for building codes that feature fire resistant designs and materials.

Even more obvious, the province needs to beef up its firefighting and fire prevention capacity on all levels, something which may have finally begun with the recent repurchase of 3 new water bombers.

Other good ideas? - assign someone to keep the province’s fire tracking and alert websites up to date and create a climate resiliency portal where Manitobans can learn about and plan for the climate risks in their areas.

Finally, developing recovery plans *before* fires hit and implementing those plans quickly is key.

In the meantime, all of us need to remember that the fires we’re seeing now could happen anywhere, given the right conditions. So let’s ensure that our governments are protecting us by being as well prepared as possible.

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