

Fort Smith first responders relocate operations bases

Sarah Pruys · August 14, 2023



A map shows the burn area and satellite hot-spots associated with a fire outside Fort Smith the afternoon of August 14, 2023.

Fort Smith's first responders are temporarily relocating their operations bases to Fort Chipewyan and Salt Mountain as a wildfire is expected to reach the town Monday night.

“There have been significant impacts to the area’s power supply, and the ability to continue to treat potable water, maintain communication lines, and healthcare services is no longer sustainable,” a [Monday afternoon update](#) from Parks Canada, Alberta Wildfire, Fort Smith and the NWT government states. “This makes it very difficult for first responders to do their jobs safely.”

This includes first responders from Parks Canada, Alberta Wildfire, the Government of the Northwest Territories, and the municipality of Fort Smith.

Fire 7 – also called SS069 or MNZ003 – has “the potential to continue to exhibit extreme fire behaviour over the next 48 hours,” the update stated, putting both Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald at risk. It added the wildfire is expected to reach the community by 8 pm Monday.

The update stated all agencies “will keep a small complement of critical resources” in Fort Chipewyan and Salt Mountain to help support ignition operations, structural protection, and containment. All non-essential personnel are being evacuated.

“One of the last remaining tactics for protecting the community are landscape-level ignition operations where fire specialists bring the fire to large holding features including Highway 5, dozer guards, and the airport lands,” the update continued.

“In order to do this safely, we need to ensure that no one remains in the vicinity of the communities.”

Meanwhile, the NWT Health and Social Services authority said Monday afternoon the Fort Smith Health Centre would be closed until further notice as community [evacuation by air](#) continues.

The authority said mobile paramedic service is being planned to address basic health needs in Fort Smith and for first responders until service is restored at the health centre.

<https://cabinradio.ca/141202/news/environment/wildfires/fort-smith-first-responders-to-be-relocated/>

I taught in the high school in Fort Smith from October 2022 through to the end of the school year in June. It would require another website to describe Fort Smith. The fire season began in May, and try as I did to not be morbid, I have had a bad feeling ever since.

They're admitting defeat. Only some kind of miracle in the next 48 hrs will save Fort Smith. No one it seems has ever been able or willing till maybe now to judge or fully admit the magnitude and potential of this fire. (Managing public perceptions, and thereby, behaviour, is a thankless, hopeless task in emergencies.) They finally do when they need to justify abandoning the town. But they likely have done all they really can, and were there till now primarily because of all those who refused to leave promptly.

Just to start appreciating the magnitude of this for many, many good people:

Imagine wondering if you will have a home to return to. A school to teach at. A career to continue after you have sacrificed a lot to build one in a difficult place like Fort Smith. If Fort Smith burns, there is even legitimate reason to doubt it will ever be rebuilt close to the same scale, whatever the official assurances. For example, it has the headquarters for Wood Buffalo National Park, but why wouldn't management prefer to be in Yellowknife (schools, services, amenities) able to operate remotely with Fort Smith only 45 minutes away by air, keeping only a skeleton crew on the ground there? Right now Wood Buffalo NP is already the most moribund park in Canada. All governments look for opportunities to rationalize, consolidate services they feel local politics prevent them from implementing.

Children, elders, people too tired to start again ...

TJB