



Canada's Recent Wildfires: Effects on the United States

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Abstract - Since late June 2026, large-scale wildfires across Canada have sent hazardous smoke plumes into the United States, exposing over 120 million Americans to dangerous air quality levels. This brief examines the scope of the crisis, its public health consequences, and the structural governance gaps it has exposed between the U.S. and Canada.

Keywords - Canadian wildfires, air quality, EPA, public health, wildfire smoke, bilateral framework, AQI

I. OVERVIEW

A. POINTED SUMMARY

- As of July 16, 2026, 876 active fires were burning across Canada, with the worst smoke readings clustering in the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes - Chicago recorded an AQI of 481, in the hazardous range.¹
- Between July 14 and July 20, 2026, more than 120 million Americans lived under air quality alerts, with PM2.5 concentrations in Baltimore and Washington D.C.

reaching nearly 13 times above the EPA's safe threshold.²

- No bilateral U.S.-Canada framework exists for sharing the health costs or coordinating emergency responses to transboundary wildfire smoke events.³

B. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thick smoke plumes from Canadian wildfires burning since late June 2026 have caused severe air quality degradation across the Great Lakes and East Coast, exposing millions of Americans to hazardous levels of pollution.⁴ The crisis has highlighted a structural gap in U.S.-Canada environmental governance as no bilateral framework currently exists to coordinate

¹ Clarity. 2026. "Understanding the Canadian Wildfires: Widespread Air Quality Impacts with Smoke Stretching across the U.S.." Clarity. July 17, 2026.
<https://www.clarity.io/blog/understanding-the-canadian-wildfires-widespread-air-quality-impacts-with-smoke-stretching-across-the-u-s>.

² Vega, Elena. 2026. "Canada's Wildfires Are a U.S. Public Health Emergency, and There Is No Framework for Who Pays the Health Costs." Medical Daily. July 23, 2026.
<https://www.medicaldaily.com/canadian-wildfire-smoke-us-health-costs-transboundary-air-quality-2026-476315>.

³ "Extreme Wildfires in Canada Lead to Severe Air Pollution in the United States." 2020. CopernicusECMWF. 2020.
<https://atmosphere.copernicus.eu/extreme-wildfires-canada-lead-severe-air-pollution-united-states>.

emergency responses or allocate the public health costs associated with emergencies.⁵

C. RELEVANCE

Emergency rooms in affected cities saw surges in respiratory complaints, and patients with COPD, heart failure, and chronic cardiovascular disease faced elevated risk.⁶ Beyond immediate public health concerns, the crisis highlights growing governance challenges. As wildfire seasons become longer and more severe, cross-boundary pollution emergencies are likely to occur more frequently, highlighting the need for a coordinated response through long term policy planning.

II. HISTORY

A. CURRENT STANCES

President Trump attributed the wildfire smoke crisis to Canada's "wilful negligence," pointing to poor and inadequate forest management practices as the cause.⁷ Along with this, President Trump has threatened to impose tariffs on Canada in response to the effect it has had on northern parts of the U.S., stating that the U.S. is "being unnecessarily invaded by filthy, polluted, and

unhealthy air."⁸ The premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, expressed disappointment with President Trump's comments, explaining that during the time in which the U.S. was working to contain the wildfires last year in southern California, Canadian rescue workers helped alongside in a coordinated effort. Ford stated on Saturday that even though "Americans love Canadians" and "Canadians love Americans," Trump's comments were "absolutely unacceptable."⁹

B. TRIED POLICY

Canadian officials are now urging that the country develop a national wildfire strategy through means of a federal agency. Doug Ford is calling for a "large national fire strategy" and a countrywide response to the wildfires.¹⁰ U.S. officials such as Senator Bernie Moreno have responded to the crisis by announcing plans to propose legislation that would place sanctions on Canada. Republican representatives John James, Jack Bergman, John Moolenaar, and Lisa McClain wrote a letter to Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, criticizing the Canadian government for not doing enough in addressing the crisis. In the letter, several U.S. lawmakers proposed expanding direct American involvement in anti Canadian wildfire initiatives,

⁵ Vega, Elena. 2026. "Canada's Wildfires Are a U.S. Public Health Emergency, and There Is No Framework for Who Pays the Health Costs." Medical Daily. July 23, 2026. <https://www.medicaldaily.com/canadian-wildfire-smoke-us-health-costs-transboundary-air-quality-2026-476315>.

⁶ Vega, Elena. 2026. "Canada's Wildfires Are a U.S. Public Health Emergency, and There Is No Framework for Who Pays the Health Costs." Medical Daily. July 23, 2026. <https://www.medicaldaily.com/canadian-wildfire-smoke-us-health-costs-transboundary-air-quality-2026-476315>.

⁷ Weaver, Andrew. 2026. "Donald Trump Blames Canada for Wildfire Smoke — but Global Warming Is Loading the Wildfire Dice." The Conversation, ahead of print, July 28. <https://doi.org/10.64628/aam.ja76jj7nt>.

⁸ Yousif, Nadine. 2026. "Trump Threatens New Canada Tariffs Over Wildfire Smoke in US Cities." BBC, July 17. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyq93j34lgo>.

⁹ Molly English, Sydney Bishop. 2026. "Canadian Premier Calls Trump's Threat to Add Wildfire Pollution Costs to Tariffs 'Unacceptable.'" ABC7 New York, July 19. <https://abc7ny.com/post/canada-wildfire-update-ontario-premier-doug-ford-calls-donald-trumps-threat-add-pollution-tariffs-unacceptable/19537934/>.

¹⁰ Bowden, Olivia. 2026. "Canada's Worst Wildfire Season Fuels Calls for National Agency to Tackle Threat." The Guardian, The Guardian, July 29. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jul/29/canada-wildfire-emergency-agency>.

including cross border fuel reduction efforts and additional firefighting support for the region.¹¹

III. POLICY PROBLEM

A. STAKEHOLDERS

The adverse effects of Canadian wildfires extends far beyond the communities the fires originate in, and has affected government and healthcare systems, businesses, and residents of both countries. On the federal perspective, policymakers have rushed to contain Canada's volatile wildfires while calling for improved federal coordination and funding. Now on a consecutive streak of intense wildfires since 2023, the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry states that Canada's response systems requires stronger federal leadership¹². Earlier this year, the Canadian government established an enhanced Government Operations Centre to improve emergency coordination during environmental disasters.¹³ This is meant to manage and contain wildfires in the cases of emergencies. President Trump also made a proposal requiring Canada to compensate the U.S. for some-related damages, however the proposal has received little support from both Democrats and Republicans.¹⁴ Canadian policymakers are also investing in firefighting technologies and capacities to improve

efficiencies and response speed.¹⁵ Other stakeholders like provincial governments and indigenous organizations are emphasizing preparedness strategies and seasonal planning regarding wildfires, along with training personnel and coordinating evacuations.

B. RISKS OF INDIFFERENCE

Wildfires are extremely dangerous. Caused by both human activity and natural occurrences, wildfires destroy property, pollute the air, cause major home displacements, ruin the ecosystem, and worsen climate change. According to the Air Pollutant Emissions Trends Data by the EPA, wildfires are responsible for 15% of the total US particle emissions per year.¹⁶ Further, prolonged exposure to these fine particles has shown to increase the risks of respiratory illnesses, strokes, heart attacks, and death across a diverse demographic¹⁷. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, wildfires cost nearly \$424 billion annually, with damages to infrastructure, private property, ecosystems, emergency evacuations, and post-fire rehabilitation¹⁸.

Without stronger prevention and cross-border coordination, future wildfire seasons are likely to impose on people's lives, the environment, and the economy. This issue, if not contained, may impact global processes, and will likely require global efforts to alleviate problems.

C. NONPARTISAN REASONING

¹¹ Bolton, Alexander. 2026. "GOP Senator to Introduce Bill to Sanction Canada Over Wildfire Smoke." The Hill, July 16. <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5972839-moreno-sanction-canada-wildfires/>.

¹² Kate Yandell, "Major Driver of Worsening Canadian Wildfires Is Climate Change, Not Forest Mismanagement."

¹³ Nick Murray, "Senate Committee Report Calls for Better Co-Ordination of Wildfire Response."

¹⁴ Olivia Bowden, "Canada's Worst Wildfire Season Fuels Calls for National Agency to Tackle Threat."

¹⁵ Nick Murray, "Senate Committee Report Calls for Better Co-Ordination of Wildfire Response."

¹⁶ US EPA, OAR, "Air Pollutant Emissions Trends Data | US EPA."

¹⁷ World Health Organization: WHO, "Wildfires."

¹⁸ U.S. Geological Survey, "Annual Cost of Wildfires in the U.S.."

Wildfire smoke poses a public health and environmental challenge that affects communities regardless of political affiliation. The policy options presented in this brief emphasize the need for cooperation, public health preparedness, and long-term wildfire mitigation rather than partisan political affiliations and objectives.

IV. POLICY OPTIONS

A. Negotiate a Wildfire Smoke Annex to the 1991 U.S.-Canada Air Quality Agreement

The gap identified in this brief is the narrow scope of a bilateral agreement. The 1991 Air Quality Agreement was built so that new pollution problems could be added to it, and both governments did exactly that when they signed an ozone annex in 2000. What the agreement was never designed for is an acute, continent-scale smoke emergency. Thus, a smoke annex would not need a new treaty, only a negotiation through the joint committee that already meets. It should stay narrow: shared smoke forecasting and monitoring data, an automatic notification protocol once air quality crosses hazardous thresholds, and a jointly commissioned study to settle how transboundary health costs are actually measured.

B. Build a smoke-readiness floor at home, starting with schools

The only thing entirely within American control is what happens after the smoke arrives. Bills already sitting in both chambers of Congress would fund exactly this: EPA grants to state and local air agencies to detect, forecast, communicate about, and mitigate wildfire smoke, plus university research centers studying what smoke exposure does to public health. Weighted towards the Great Lakes, Upper Midwest, and Northeast, that money buys clean-air shelters, filtration in

schools and clinics, and clear guidance for the COPD and cardiac patients described above.

This approach also directly benefits young people, who are among the populations most likely to experience repeated smoke exposure throughout their lifetimes. When AQI hit 481 in Chicago, the first institutions to shut down were schools, summer programs, camps, and youth sports— and students with asthma absorbed the worst of it in buildings where ventilation systems were not so good. Young people are the demographic most exposed to smoke over a lifetime, so a readiness floor is the option that reaches them fastest.

C. Turn reciprocal firefighting from reactive to pre-committed

Members of Congress have already floated direct U.S. involvement in cross-border firefighting. That instinct can be satisfied cooperatively, because the mechanism exists: a 1992 arrangement already authorizes the two countries to trade crews, equipment, and aircraft across the border, and the U.S. sent airtankers, crews, and management teams into four Canadian provinces in 2025 as well. Fixing that means committing aviation and crew capacity before the season based on fire-danger forecasts, standardizing credentials so firefighters are not stuck at the border, and funding a shared reserve.

V. CONCLUSION

EPA Administrator Zeldin stated that the agency has been “working around the clock” in direct communication with the Canadian government, federal, state, local, and Tribal partners – characterizing the provision of clean air for all Americans as a “top priority of the TRUMP EPA.”¹⁹ However, no bilateral U.S.-Canada

¹⁹ “EPA Statement on Cross-Border Wildfire Smoke and Air Quality Impact on U.S. | US EPA.” 2026. US EPA. July 17, 2026.

framework exists for sharing the health costs or coordinating emergency responses to transboundary wildfire smoke events – a structural governance gap that the July 2026 event has highlighted as emergency rooms in affected cities saw surges in respiratory complaints and patients with COPD, heart failure, and chronic cardiovascular disease faced elevated risk.²⁰ As wildfire seasons grow longer and more severe, the absence of a binational accountability structure means the burden of cross-border air pollution will continue to fall disproportionately on American communities with no mechanism for cost-sharing or coordinated prevention.²¹

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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