

Wildfire Insight Series

Wildfires, Climate Change and Activism

This article, by Paul Berger, was originally published in the Chronicle Journal in September, 2024. Paul Berger is one of the founders of CUSP - Citizens United for a Sustainable Planet and an associate professor at Lakehead University.



Earlier this summer, my partner Helle and I drove our electric vehicle to southern Ontario for the first time. We had to learn to use the apps to charge the car, plan where we would charge it, and spend about an hour charging three times on the way down. It was a bit of a sacrifice compared to a gas or diesel vehicle.

On the way, we heard that Jasper had been evacuated due to wildfires. I said to Helle that I doubted the fires would reach the town. I was wrong.

Climate change connects these events.

When forests are hotter and drier, they burn more easily – whether that be from a careless campfire, a lightning strike, or a spark from an all-terrain vehicle. As the climate warms from the burning of fossil fuels in cars, in furnaces, and in industrial processes, forests become hotter and drier. Hot conditions contributed to pyrocumulonimbus clouds forming above the Fort McMurray fire in 2016, causing lightning without rain that triggered fires ahead of the main fire. Sometimes, they spawn a ‘fire tornado.’ ‘These aren’t your grandparents’ wildfires.

On average, destruction from wildfires in Canada and globally will continue to get worse until we stop burning fossil fuels. This is a political problem, not a technological one. Solar and wind energy have gone from being ‘alternative’ to being the cheapest ways to generate electricity on the planet, but our governments, inundated with corporate lobbyists and messaging, are still failing us.

This would probably surprise most Canadians. Polling suggests that people see Canada as a climate leader, while the international non-partisan Climate Action Tracker rates Canada’s climate change actions and policies as ‘highly insufficient.’ Our governments’ lack of action on climate change compromises our values of integrity, responsibility and care for each other, future generations and all living things.

Thunder Bay City Council, for example, keeps funding big new builds to be heated by burning fossil gas. The provincial government is building new gas-fired generating stations. The federal government just built a major new fossil fuel pipeline, the Trans Mountain

Expansion. When people set fires deliberately to cause damage, we call them arsonists. What should we call politicians whose policies predictably result in more wildfires?

If wildfires, terrifying and disruptive as they are, were the only concern on a warming planet, we would be very lucky. Unfortunately, heatwaves – which tend to precede wildfires like the ones that burned Fort MacMurray and Lytton – are more deadly for humans, and even they are not the worst we can expect.

We're currently on a trajectory to cross planetary boundaries, disrupting major Earth systems and making the changes Canadians have seen so far seem like nothing. Think of a coffee cup being pushed slowly towards the edge of a table; it remains fairly stable until it suddenly falls, coming to rest in another stable state that was nothing like the first one. That's where we're heading.

Canada hasn't, of course, suffered the most. In the iron law of climate change, the countries and people who have done the least to cause climate change – who have burned the least fossil fuel – are mostly hardest hit. That's drought and starvation in East Africa, flooding in Pakistan, hurricanes in Honduras. It is Indigenous people being disproportionately evacuated in Canada.

We can tackle climate change and move toward a world where these un-natural disasters stop getting worse and then recede. We can take climate action that makes daily life better. Climate solutions that already exist can solve multiple problems: heat pumps lower energy costs and move us away from burning fossil gas; free and fantastic public and active transit make mobility work for everyone and reduce fossil fuel burning; we can electrify everything and drop the religion of eternal economic growth, making time for things that give us meaning. We can live cleaner, safer and more beautifully.

Waves of climate activism have pushed tackling climate change up the political agenda but the changes we need are not happening quickly enough. This is where you come in. Send me an email (paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca) and I'll put you on the CUSP – Citizens United for a Sustainable Planet e-mail list. You'll hear about local climate actions you can join, including emailing City Councilors just before they vote on specific climate-related policy. We're not too late to save much of what we love. There are millions of people working for a climate-safe future with thriving biodiversity and less inequality, making small changes and pushing for the big, systemic changes we need.

On the way back from Southern Ontario Helle and I had figured out the apps and where the charging stations were. No fuss, no stress. Waiting a bit to charge the car didn't seem like much of a sacrifice at all. While we were gone, one-third of Jasper had burned.