The Lakeside Leader

PAP Reg #08791

95 Cents

Vol. 40 No. 19 Wednesday, May 18, 2011 Slave Lake, Alberta www.lakesideleader.com

Chris Clegg
For Lakeside Leader

Residents evacuated the community of Slave Lake on May 15th, due to a Wildfire that consumed the region.

Slave Lake burns

As much as half the town of Slave Lake - including hundreds of buildings – may have burned May 15 as wildfires spread through the town causing catastrophic damage to the town of just over 7,000 people.

Estimates from various sources estimate anywhere from 30-50 per cent of the town's building are destroyed, including the town hall and the mall it was situated in, the library, several businesses, high school and dozens of houses.
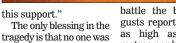
It is so bad Slave Lake Mayor Karina Pillay-Kinnee told CBC-News May 16 that it's easier to tell you what's left rather than what's gone.

The Alberta government is already promising to do whatever it takes to help the town.

"Our hearts go out to the community of Slave Lake which has been devastated by these wildfires and our first priority continues to be the safety of residents," says Municipal Affairs Minister Hector Goudreau. "We have been working directly with the municipality and nearby communities to ensure residents are evacuated to safe locations away from any danger.

"I want to assure the residents of Slave Lake that we will be there to work with the community as they recover and rebuild."

"It has been heart-wrenching to see how quickly this wildfire moved and the effect it's had on our community," says Pillay-Kinnee. "Our local emergency staff are working hard in very difficult circumstances, together with the Government of Alberta and many other agencies, and we are grateful for this support."

The only blessing in the tragedy is that no one was injured or perished.

Officials began watching the fires in earnest May 14. Pushed by high winds and dry conditions, the fires pushed toward the town from the southeast. At 6:15 p.m. May 15, the fire breached Slave Lake's boundary along the southern portion and entered the town.

At 6:25 p.m., an order was issued to evacuate to non-combustible areas. Residents were told to go to the airtanker base, beaches and parking lots.

At 7:05 p.m., a water ban was issued with water only to be used for fighting fires.

The fire could not be fought through the air with water bombers and other firefighting aircraft as high winds and smoke made it unsafe to battle the blaze. Wind gusts reported to reach as high as 100 kilometres per hour.

Meanwhile, plans were being made to evacuate residents. The Government of Alberta worked closely with local municipal officials and agencies to ensure the safety of residents. Slave Lake issued a mandatory evacuation for all residents May 15. Evacuated residents have been directed to the Westlock Community Hall, Athabasca Multiplex and M.E. LaZerte High School in Edmonton.

The Government of Alberta's emergency response actions included:
* buses were sent to assist evacuees who do not have access to transportation;
* 29 patients were evacuated from Slave Lake General Hospital to hospitals in Westlock, Boyle and Athabasca. All long term care patients have also been evacuated to area facilities;
* reception centres and disaster social assistance have been established in neighbouring communities;
* approximately 70 firefighters from the greater Edmonton area are on route to assist.

By early May 16, Slave Lake remained cut off from the south. The highway was blocked off 70 kilometres south of the town with highway crews estimating they will probably be closed for a couple of days.

The fires were burning over 10 square kilometres Monday morning and high winds were hindering efforts to douse the flames.

Winds were expected to remain gusty in the Slave Lake area for the next 24-48 hours. Strong, dry winds combined with a lack of precipitation are creating extreme fire conditions over most of the northern half of Alberta. About 68 new wildfires started in the province between Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

Gift Lake, Whitefish evacuated

Residents in Gift Lake, Atikameg and Whitefish were asked to evacuate the area May 15 and go to High Prairie after a fire in that region burned out of control.

The Town of High Prairie quickly declared a local state of emergency and used the Gordon Buchanan Recreation Centre as an emergency shelter. About 400 people checked in Sunday but less than 50 stayed the night, instead opting to leave for friend's houses or hotels.

Faust fire

A small fire was burning in Faust May 15 east of RR 114 between Township Road 732B and Highway 2. Winds were pushing this wildfire away from the hamlet and it posed no threat to the hamlet unless conditions changed.

East Prairie

A 5-hectare fire on the East Prairie Metis Settlement was burning out of control May 15. It started in the southwest corner of the settlement and is moving northwest in the direction of High Prairie.

However, Sustainable Resources and Development reported that enough resources were in the area to contain the blaze.