

UPDATED: Faith sustains northern residents as they flee raging wildfires



Rev. Harry Kiggundu

Residents of High Level are returning home after a harrowing wildfire threatened their community for the past two weeks.

Meanwhile, other northern Alberta communities remain evacuated or on alert.

Beginning June 3 at 10 a.m., High Level residents can return to High Level, the surrounding areas of Mackenzie County and local Dene First Nations. Returning residents will be under an evacuation alert and should be prepared to leave on short notice if conditions change.

It's a welcome relief after a two-week ordeal when a skyscraper of black smoke shrouded the highway as Elizabeth Lim and six friends tried desperately to escape the expanding flames of the wildfire that forced them from their homes in High Level.

"We got an evacuation warning beforehand, so we were prepared," Lim said in a cellphone call. "But there was a lot of panic. It was my first time experiencing something like this."

They first fled the raging Chuckegg Creek on May 20, and as it expanded relentlessly, it kept them on the run for more than a week.

Lim and her fellow parishioners from Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in High Level, initially left for Slave Lake. When that community was also put on an evacuation alert on May 30, they fled once again.

"All around us it is very smoky; it's hard to see on the highway," Lim said as they made their way out of Slave Lake, a town that was partially destroyed by wildfire in 2011.

In their continued effort to outrun the wildfire, Lim and company eventually

made their way to Grande Prairie.

The Chuckegg Creek is the largest of 29 wildfires burning in northern Alberta, currently spread to 280,000 hectares. Click [here](#) for more information on the current situation, re-entry information and how to help.

The fires have destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares and forced an estimated 10,000 people from their homes.

Sixteen homes in the Metis settlement of Paddle Prairie, a community of 544, were lost to flames.

“When you go down a road that you know the fire just swept through at 30 miles an hour and you see homes still standing there. That’s what I call a miracle,” said Kenny Laboucane, a Catholic who lives in Paddle Prairie.

“When those flames go right up to the edge of a house and it doesn’t burn, being traditional Catholic guys that’s our first thought – that’s God at work.

“We’re really thankful for that and we’re grateful that nobody’s been hurt.”

A [gofundme page](#) to support the evacuees of Paddle Prairie has recently been started.

At this point, High Level is the largest community to be evacuated. Over 3,000 residents were ordered by the provincial government to leave early in the morning of May 20. The flames were then just one kilometre outside of the northern Alberta town.

By May 31, the Chuckegg Creek fire had grown to more than 262,000 hectares – three times the size of Calgary.

Three other major wildfires are consuming the province’s forests – the McMillian Complex wildfire at 212,386 hectares, Battle Complex wildfire at 53,900 hectares, and the Jackpot Creek wildfire at 24,700 hectares.

On the morning of May 31, the 949 residents of Peerless Trout First Nation, north of Slave Lake, were ordered to evacuate as the wildfires approached.

Alberta Wildfire has more than 260 firefighters and 28 helicopters battling the Chuckegg Creek fire alone.

Firefighters from as far as Ontario and New Brunswick were making their way to the province to combat these out of control flames.

An evacuation order was issued for Paddle Prairie on May 29, but Laboucane could not stand idly by as his hometown was surrounded by flames.



Fire approached within one kilometre of the town of High Level forcing an emergency mandatory evacuation. Courtesy Rev. Harry Kiggundu

Laboucane and two other residents travelled back to the Métis community the following morning. With a background in volunteer firefighting, they were set to help the 30 firefighters already there.

Describing the scene as they returned, Laboucane said the smoke through town was so heavy you could chew on it.

“We saw the flames flare up as they hit the spruce trees. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a fire come at you, but it roars,” he said.

“They wanted us to leave but we wouldn’t do it. This is where we come from, these are our homes. We know where everything is and where the potential dangers are.”

Driving through the settlement and surrounding countryside, Laboucane has helped assess the damage and report any smaller fires.

Fires were burning on both the north and south ends of the settlement. The last time Laboucane had fought a fire was over 15 years ago, and this is the closest he’s ever seen a forest fire get to the town.

As of May 31, Laboucane said fire crews had succeeded in protecting Paddle Prairie from any further damage.

“We’ve got a full crew of structural firefighters from across the country here. They’ve knocked down the bigger part of the fire and the main part of our settlement is totally protected now,” he said.

“When that big fire hit, they did the best they could. It was travelling at rapid speed; once the wind came, that fire just blasted through here. They estimate it moved some 30 kilometres in 16 hours.

“It’s pretty much impossible to stop a big fire like that; Mother Nature has to step back in to do that.”

Some residents of Paddle Prairie are expected to return soon to help restore power lines and bring in fuel to the fire crews.

Laboucane says it’s hard to know when it will be safe for all to return, but the events of the next few days will be critical.

“Every day the circumstances change,” he said. “It’s not over yet by any means.”

Having no previous experience with wildfires, at first Rev. Harry Kiggundu of Our Lady of Good Counsel did not take notice of reports of growing wildfires in the province.

But when he found out he had to cancel Mass at Paddle Prairie because of the fire danger, he knew things were getting serious.

“That did not feel good because I could not protect my Christians there. Then Monday morning I got the call that the fire was only one kilometre away from town. That’s when the fear enveloped us.”

Kiggundu is now staying at the St. Henry’s Catholic Church in Fort Vermilion. Many of his parishioners are staying at the town’s Community and Cultural Complex. He has kept in regular contact with them.

While food and shelter has been freely provided, Kiggundu says many are stressed and struggling to sleep comfortably.

Monsignor Charles Lavoie, the vicar general of Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan – which includes High Level and Paddle Prairie – says prayer is essential as Catholics deal with these difficult and traumatic situations.

“This is Nature unfolding in its freedom as God has given us,” Lavoie said. “This isn’t God punishing us. Nature is taking its course. I would encourage them to continue to pray, even though they are dislocated from their homes. Put this in the hand of God. God is still at work with his people, even in this situation.”

Kiggundu has encouraged his parishioners to pray that they will return home safe and unharmed. Upon their return, Kiggundu says he plans to hold a Mass to thank God that no lives were lost.