



Terence Corcoran: Experts won't blame Fort Mac's fire on climate change. Neither should we

If everybody else is throwing around claims about links between future climate change and today's forest fires, allow me to take a stab at it: Corcoran



Ian Willms/The New York Times



TERENCE CORCORAN

We need to talk about climate change. That was the headline on an article by Eric Holthaus in Slate magazine earlier this month as the Fort McMurray fire disaster raged. Holthaus is a U.S. meteorologist who in 2013 gave up air travel after he said he once “broke down in

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tears” at the airport over climate and decided he just couldn’t fly any more. “Since climate change is such a pressing global problem,” wrote Holthaus about Fort McMurray, “there’s no better time to have that conversation than now — when we can see what exactly inaction might continue to cause.”

London’s The Guardian talked about climate change with a column by Montreal environmental writer Martin Lukacs. “The arsonists of Fort McMurray have a name,” wrote Lukacs, “the fossil fuel corporations.” At The Tyee, writer Ed Struzik referred to “the new era of infernos” and how “there isn’t an expert out there who doubts that climate change is the biggest reason why we’re losing the battle to control wildfires.”

The insurance industry, previously not all that concerned about forest-fire risk, now faces record losses in Fort McMurray and is therefore ready to lay the blame on climate change. Insurers picked up \$700 million of the \$1.1-billion lost in the Great Slave Lake fire of 2011. Fort McMurray would be maybe a billion or two more. “We’ve come to the belief over the last few years that (climate change) is driving an exponentiality of the curve rather than a linear trend only,” said one insurance executive last week.

Well, if everybody else is throwing around claims about links between future climate change and today’s forest fires, allow me to take a stab at it. As I reviewed the scientific research on Canadian forest fires, I found no consensus around the claim that climate change is to blame for Fort McMurray’s fire or that manmade climate change is creating a new era of infernos.

Trends in Canadian wildfires, while perhaps showing a minor rise, are far from conclusive indicators of a climate-induced explosion of events. Nor does there appear to be much official scientific evidence that climate change is responsible for whatever trend might exist. The annual area burn total over the last 40 years (see graph) is far from convincing.

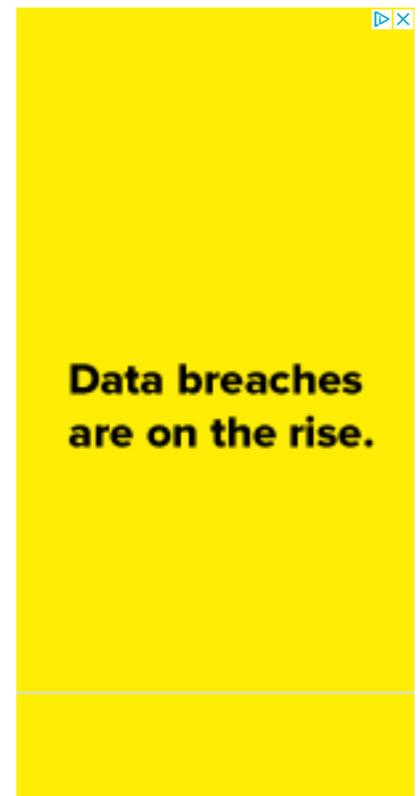
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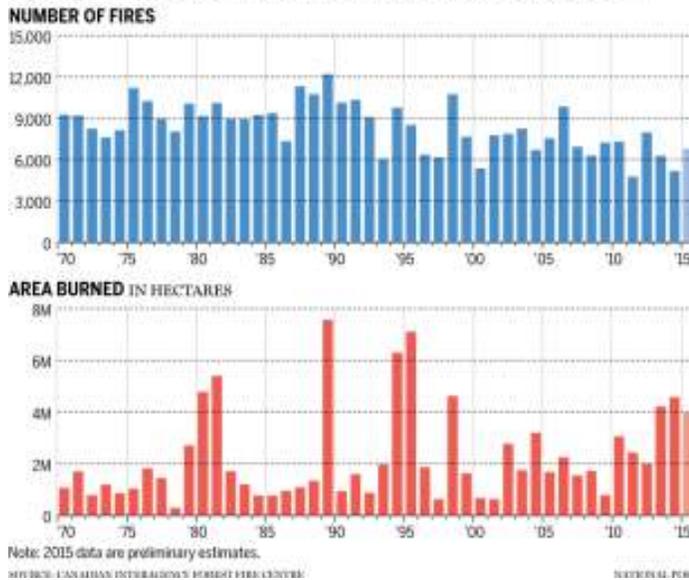
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More importantly, a 2013 draft report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded only that it is "possible to examine trends showing increased" wildfire events in North America. But these trends "have not yet been positively attributed to anthropogenic climate change." The final 2014 report said an increased wildfire trend in North America had been "detected but not attributed" to manmade climate change.

Has there been a big change in the evidence and the science over the last two years? Maybe yes, maybe no. That's the nature of science, said David Price, one of Natural Resources Canada's leading climate experts. "When you are probing the edges of the known, there is going to be debate."

Most scientists, including wildfire specialists, generally resist linking current or recent fire conditions with climate change, with good reason. There is no clear link. Even diehard backers of climate-change theory are usually careful to provide a familiar but evasive explanation: The climate conditions that might produce an increase in dramatic wildfires do not yet exist, they say, but if they did exist Fort McMurray is exactly the kind of wildfire we would see. That's like paying for a night in the Waldorf's presidential suite and being asked if you won the lottery. No, you say, but this is where I would stay if I had won the lottery.



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Yan Boulanger, a forest ecology research scientist at Natural Resources Canada (NRC), said in an interview that “one cannot rely at all on this event” as an indicator of climate change. “What one can say is that such situations will occur more often” under different future climate-change scenarios. But such change is projected for 2041 or 2071 or 2090, not 2016.

NRC’s David Price is on the side of the warmists. He believes a big change has occurred in the Canadian environment and “things are beginning to ring true.” At the University of Calgary, biology professor Edward Johnson also hears a ring of truth, but not the full truth. “I believe that climate warming is going on,” he said in an interview. “The question is: Is there a causal chain here with fires?”

For that causal chain to exist, scientists would have to nail down evidence that global warming is behind the more proximate contributor to the Fort McMurray fire: El Niño, the band of warm air that sweeps into Canada periodically and causes dramatic variations in Canadian weather. There is no doubt, say scientists, that El Niño fostered the conditions that led to the Fort McMurray fire. But is there a causal link between global warming and the intense El Niño phase that just came to an end?

At this point, said Johnson, “evidence is increasingly pointed towards global warming having some effect. But it’s not clear yet exactly where it’s increasing the area burned and whether in some parts of the country — e.g., the East — it is decreasing the area burned.”

Paul Roundy, associate professor of atmospheric and environmental sciences at the University of Albany in New York, also points to El Niño as the culprit. In a recent commentary, he notes that 2016’s El Niño “spent most of its lifetime” hovering over the Rockies and Alberta, creating ideal conditions for low snow levels and a warm spring. “Climate change is unlikely to explain the specific timing of this event in April to May,” he said. “Instead, natural variability associated with an extreme El Niño event likely enhanced the dry warm conditions that generated the extreme fire we’ve seen in ... Canada.”

Adding to the doubt that global warming caused Fort McMurray’s fire is the fact that it appears to have been a fluke event, the product of a situation in which “the planets were really badly aligned,” said NRC’s Boulanger. The level of dryness in the forest was high, although by no means the highest on record. The fire appears to have been caused by human activity, not by lightning, it started close to an urban population and it was fanned by high winds.

The latest estimate of the area burned at Fort McMurray is more than 500,000 hectares so far. That’s not particularly large by Canadian forest-fire standards. In 2014, wildfire destroyed 3.4 million hectares in the Northwest Territories. In Manitoba, fire destroyed 2.5 million

hectares in 1989. The Haileybury Fire destroyed 500,000 hectares in Ontario's New Liskard area in 1922 and killed 43 people. As many as 1.7 million hectares were burned out in the 1950s' Chinchaga fire in northern Alberta and British Columbia. It's described as the single largest fire in North American history.

In another location or time, the Fort McMurray blaze would have been just another forest fire. When that 2014 fire burned millions of hectares in the Northwest Territories, news coverage was thin and commentaries were mostly routine. No lives were lost, few were threatened, and property losses were minimal.

As recently as 2012, a comprehensive report from the University of Waterloo's Climate Change Adaptation Project dismissed the insurance risk of these kinds of events. "Wildfires have not been viewed as a significant risk by the Canadian insurance industry," it said, adding that other risks — urban flooding, winds and tornados — were far more serious.

The insurance industry covered 65 per cent of the losses from the Great Slave Lake fire. Even after that, insurers minimized the threat of forest fires to their business. One reason may be that the RCMP concluded that the Great Slave Lake fire was the work of a real arsonist, not carbon emissions.

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In the wake of Fort McMurray, the insurance industry is now making new claims about a climate link. But the claims are without scientific basis. Munich Re, the Swiss Reinsurance giant, points out on its own website that while "climate change may be partly to blame" for a rise in claims from floods, winds and other natural catastrophes, it says the real contributor to new risk is economic. The rising loss trend, it said, "is being principally driven by increasing values and the settlement of exposed regions (in other words, by socio-economic reasons)."

To put it bluntly, Fort McMurray's fire was far from unusual. The sensational evacuation events and horrific images of destroyed homes and neighbourhoods are a function of the fact that 80,000 people lived in a fire-prone area that would have been mostly empty territory 50 years ago.

Rather than point to climate change, the focus should be on what could and should have been done by people, governments and businesses to acknowledge the risk of living on the edge of a well-known fire threat, and to prepare. There's even a website for that. It's called FireSmart, which advises against using cedar shingles, flammable siding and building homes surrounded by trees—all common in Fort McMurray.

The University of Calgary's Edward Johnson says the trouble is that municipalities have difficulty imposing regulations on private properties. The solution, he says, lies with insurance companies. "If you have a house, and you've done all these things to protect your house from burning in forest fires, then you (should) get better breaks on your insurance. And if you don't, you pay more."

The Fort McMurray fire, having consumed more than half-a-million hectares, continues to burn. There's no reason to talk of climate change.

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