

More than 440 wildfires now blazing across B.C.

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Another barrage of lightning strikes has increased the number of wild fires now burning in British Columbia. More than 440 fires are now burning across tinder-dry parts of the province.

Officials say they're making progress against the blaze causing the most concern -- because it threatens a town with thousands of residents.

Nevertheless, the so-called Lillooet blaze burning 160 kilometres west of Kamloops still has area residents under one-hour evacuation alert.

Two aggressive wildfires that threatened to join together near the village of Kluskus didn't, easing the concerns of officials who ordered residents evacuated on Friday.

And the so-called Kenny Dam fire has grown in size, but still remains a relatively safe 60 kilometers from the town of Vanderhoof.

The largest blaze, called the Swan Lake fire, is burning across a remote 110-square kilometer area near the Yukon border.

While high winds threaten to keep spreading the flames, officials find some consolation in the fact its remote location minimizes the threat to people and property.

According to Professor Reese Halter, that blaze should be an example to the people who set firefighting strategy in B.C.

A former Vancouver resident who now runs California-based Global Forest Science, Halter told CTV's Vancouver affiliate that, sometimes, doing the right thing can mean doing nothing.

"The policy makers have to let us roll up our sleeves and do things out of the box," he said. "We have to have some fire on our landscape."

Explaining his tough love approach to forest management, Halter says wild fires should be left to burn -- so long as they don't threaten communities.

The result, he says, would be to rid the forest of the dry, low-lying brush that helps flames spread farther and higher.

By dousing wildfires as soon as they're sparked, Halter says the forest fuels just keep piling up and posing a greater risk of an out-of-control blaze.

The strategy also applies in residential areas, where Halter says gardeners should keep vegetation well manicured.

The cost of fighting fires in the province has already been pegged at about \$20 million. That's more than twice what the province spent at this time last year, and almost half of B.C.'s annual firefighting budget.

In 2003, fire damage cost governments \$700 million. That was the worst fire season ever in the province. More than 300 homes were destroyed and about 50,000 people were forced from their homes.