

## Too hot to handle



**By Nate Smelle**

As heatwaves scorch southern Ontario, wildfires rage across Canada and the United States, and catastrophic flooding claims hundreds of lives in Texas, we find ourselves once again at the mercy of a rapidly warming planet. Every time we read, watch, or listen to reports of catastrophic extreme weather events destroying lives and communities, it becomes more imperative for us to admit that these aren't normal or isolated events. They're symptoms of a deeper illness ? a worsening climate emergency ? and a potentially fatal diagnosis that is getting harder to ignore.

Environment Canada's latest heat warnings for the South East Health Unit region are a gigantic red flag waving in the face of a society that has long delayed action. When temperatures remain above 31°C for days and humidex values consistently hit 40°C, it is an understatement to identify the health risks as merely another serious issue for humanity to address. For a growing number of us, inaction will be deadly. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, those with chronic illnesses, and people without stable housing are especially at risk. In fact, these extreme conditions can trigger heat exhaustion, dehydration, respiratory distress, and even death ? all in the span of a few hours.

At the same time, communities throughout much of central and eastern Canada are choking on smoke from relentless wildfires. In Ontario and Quebec, air quality has plummeted, with Toronto at one point ranked among the worst in the world. Meanwhile, Manitoba remains in a declared state of emergency, with over 12,000 evacuees and help being flown in from as far away as Mexico and Australia to battle the flames. In the United States, a freakishly intense rainstorm recently engulfed Texas Hill Country, flooding rivers and killing more than 130 people ? many of them children.

None of this is or should be considered business as usual. Those who deny the climate crisis and try to chalk it up as just bad luck or an exceptional year are only fooling themselves. The planet?our home planet?is heating up at an incredibly dangerous rate. And that is a fact that will not change for anyone just because the tiny-minded, ultra-greedy few profiting off of this destruction tell us it's all a hoax.

These extreme events are intensifying and becoming more frequent due to the changing composition of our atmosphere. A hotter climate holds more moisture, leading to heavier rains and deadly flash floods. It dries out forests, turning them into tinderboxes. It creates heat domes that linger for days, pushing human bodies and infrastructure past their limits.

The science is clear. The consequences are here; and the time for meaningful action is not tomorrow ? it's now.

As individuals, we each have a role to play in both adapting to and mitigating this crisis. Protecting ourselves and our communities during extreme weather events is essential. Health officials advise simple yet potentially life-saving measures during heatwaves: staying hydrated, keeping cool, avoiding direct sun during peak hours, checking in on vulnerable neighbours, and never leaving children, pets, or the elderly in parked vehicles. Staying informed through local health units and Environment Canada updates is also critical.

Those with pre-existing conditions or taking certain medications should consult their doctors about increased risk. Wearing light clothing, using fans strategically (but not as a sole source of cooling), and spending time in air-conditioned public places like libraries, malls, or community cooling centres can prevent heat-related illnesses. Nutrition and hydration also matter: eat fruits high in water content like watermelon and oranges, limit caffeinated drinks, and avoid heavy meals or using ovens during the hottest parts of the day.

We must also remember that public health guidance is not just about personal safety. It is about community responsibility. Climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable – low-income families, Indigenous communities, the unhoused, seniors, and people with disabilities. But checking in is not enough. If we are to become a caring and climate-resilient society, we must check in on those who are most at-risk. It is also crucial that we provide equitable access to resources, and demand stronger, science-based policies at every level of government.

That's where the collective work begins.

Governments must stop treating climate response as a budget item to trim. Disaster preparedness means fortifying our infrastructure, instead of allowing it to crumble. Emergency systems must be rebuilt, not dismantled. Climate adaptation requires robust public services, investment in green infrastructure, and coordinated leadership that sees beyond election cycles.

Meanwhile, individuals and communities must take real steps to reduce emissions and demand accountability. That means reducing our dependency on fossil fuels, limiting the use of polluting machinery, avoiding unnecessary idling, and supporting clean energy initiatives. It means being informed voters, choosing leaders who prioritize climate action, and advocating for stronger environmental policies locally and nationally.

As the writer Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "The Earth is a fine place and worth fighting for." We are at a moment where that fight must be both immediate and unrelenting. "Gloves off and elbows up!" The floods in Texas, the fires in Manitoba and Arizona, and the suffocating heat in Ontario are not distant tragedies – they are flashing warning signs at our doorstep.

The climate emergency is here. Let's not wait for another heatwave, another evacuation, or another hundred lives lost before we act. Let's treat this crisis with the urgency, compassion, and courage it demands – for ourselves, our neighbours, and future generations. We need to start acting like we have everything to lose – because we do.