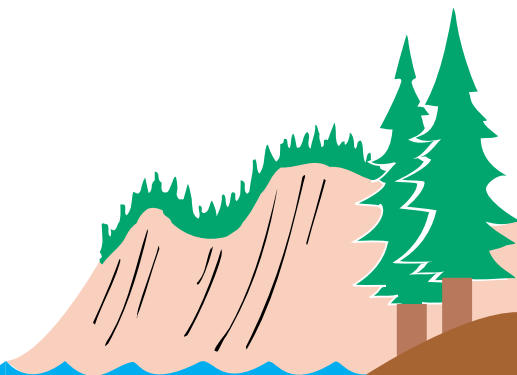




High today: 24
Low tonight: 11
Details page 2

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 2003

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Local air tanker joins blaze battle

Citizen staff

A Prince George-based air tanker is part of the arsenal being used to battle a growing wildfire 125 kilometres southwest of Williams Lake.

An Electra bomber filled with more than 13,620 litres (3,000 gallons) of fire retardant left the city Tuesday morning on one of many trips south to battle the blaze.

Two weeks after it broke out, a wildfire burning near Chilko Lake has grown to an estimated 200 square kilometres, the B.C. Forest Service said Tuesday, and threatens several small communities in the area.

Residents of Scum Lake are on a voluntary evacuation alert and all roads into Scum Lake are closed, as well as the road from Henry's Crossing to Tsuniah Lake. Chilko Lake, Anaham Reserve, Alexis Creek, and Nemiah Valley residents remain on evacuation alert.

"Anyone in these areas should be prepared for the possibility of receiving an official evacuation notice," officials said in a news release.

"Ensuring sufficient supplies of gas, water, food, medications or other essential goods is ap-

propriate at this time."

Originating about five kilometres northeast of the lake, the fire has spread northeast past Brittany Lake and into Nuntsi Provincial Park, which remains closed to the public.

The fire has not yet crossed the Taseko River.

Smoky conditions are expected in the areas of Alexis Creek, Williams Lake, Tatla Lake, Anahim Lake and 100 Mile House due to prevailing winds, and the elderly and anyone with respiratory problems are being advised to avoid vigorous outdoor activities.

On July 22, two three-person initial attack crews, and one 20-person unit crew were sent in been battling an 80-hectare blaze that broke out near Chilko Lake.

As much as 60 per cent of the fire had been contained by Thursday, but winds fanned the flames so that now only 20 per cent is under control.

"With the weather so hot and dry, it doesn't take much," said fire information officer Sheila Smith. Winds reached as high as 30 km/h Tuesday.



Photo by David Mah

Barton Seidl loads 13,620 litres (3,000 gallons) of fire retardant into the belly tank of an Electra bomber Tuesday in Prince George.

"It's really been a challenging fire, and it's continuing to be at this time," Smith said.

With the help of helicopters, air tankers and heavy equipment, about 200 people are fighting the fire.

Meanwhile, the Provincial Emergency Pro-

gram opened operations centres in Prince George and Williams Lake to help residents who may be affected, as well as to deal with the fallout from the McLure forest fire north of Kamloops, which stood at 10,000 square hectares as of Monday.

Forest fire's devastation shocks premier during tour

KAMLOOPS (CP) — B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell described a charred village obliterated by a wildfire as "awful and awesome" after getting a bird's eye view of the area Tuesday.

Campbell, on a one-day visit to southern British Columbia, flew through smoke-filled skies in a helicopter to look at the effects of one aggressive wildfire that started last Wednesday apparently by a discarded cigarette.

The premier expressed amazement at

the extent of the damage and the fire's speed as it annihilated the village of Louis Creek, about 50 kilometres north of Kamloops.

"There's virtually no structures left standing," he said. "The mill is a flat chunk of land. You can see sort of charred areas where something may have once been and you guess what it once was. It's like a vacuum sucked the life out of the area."

Moving north, the blaze started in

the town of McLure, whipped through Louis Creek, then around Barriere, forcing thousands of residents from their homes.

After flying over the area, Campbell peppered officials with questions about firefighting techniques.

His chopper landed at a fire-fighting camp to greet arriving Canadian soldiers, the first of more than 100 brought in from Edmonton to reinforce about 1,000 firefighters in the region.

He shook their hands and thanked them for coming.

"We can all thank the grace of God that we have not lost any life," he said. "That's really amazing when you see the extent of the fires and you see how rapidly they've grown."

Firefighters had apparently started to turn the tide in their fight against the three wildfires threatening communities around Kamloops.

"Last night there was minimal fire be-

haviour and crews made good progress," said fire information officer Kevin Matuga.

Thick, grey smoke blocked the sun where firefighters battled the blaze near Barriere, causing temperatures to dip to 19 Celsius, compared to 32 Celsius, 60 kilometres south in Kamloops.

"A couple more smoky days would be just great," said Brian Kempf of B.C. Forest Services.

— See more stories on pages 3 and 5

Bylaw officers removing dirty needles

by KAREN KWAN Citizen staff

City bylaw officers have plucked "hundreds" of dirty needles from downtown alleys and vacant lots while patrolling streets under a pilot project to improve safety, says the city's bylaw manager.

During the past month, pairs of officers have done daily sweeps of the downtown core, finding pockets of used needles around Third Avenue and George Street, Ken Craig said. "Probably what happens is people might get needles (from the needle exchange on Third Avenue) and go a block away in the alley and do whatever they do and throw the old needle away," he said. "It's dangerous, there's no doubt about that."

Instead of responding to complaints, Craig said the pilot project has bylaw officers, who have recently been trained to dispose of needles safely, on foot trying to uncover problems.

The campaign comes under the city-led Partners for a Healthy Downtown (PHD) initiative, which was established in March to improve the city's safety image. Representatives from the RCMP, downtown business groups, and social service agencies are also involved.

Bylaw officers are also on the lookout for other safety or social problems,

Craig said, such as graffiti, garbage on streets and drunken loiterers, and are making contact with business owners and street people about their concerns. But he said the group is still looking at long-term solutions to deal with the problems.

"If there's an immediate health issue, they know enough to take action, but if we can solve it as a group and have businesses involved maybe it's a better thing," he said.

He said there's no timeline for completing the pilot project.

Downtown business owner Bruce High said he's seen many needles littering alleys and vacant lots, even behind his own store, and is worried someone will be injured or contract a disease. He said he's been picking up dirty needles around his store for years. "Someone has got to do something. This is scary stuff, something is going to happen," said High, who owns Monkey Forest/Lizard River on George Street. "If the needle exchange wants to hand them out, they should have someone to go around and collect them," he said.

Chief medical health officer Dr. Lorna Medd said it's not practical to expect the needle exchange to go out and collect needles from streets because there are so few staff. She said requiring drug-users to exchange a dirty nee-



Photo by David Mah

A pile of dirty needles litters a back alley Tuesday in downtown Prince George.

dle for a clean one would lead to more sharing and spread diseases, although people are urged to return used rigs. "But the risk of transmitting Hepatitis C and HIV far outstrips the risk of a needle lying in a gutter," she said. Over the longer term I think that we would certainly be willing, as a health author-

ity, to look at other innovative approaches to minimize the problem of discarded needles," Medd said.

She said concerned citizens are also encouraged to help clean up needles, and the Northern Health Authority, which runs the exchange, can recommend how to dispose of needles safely.

City council to ponder panhandling bylaw

Citizen staff

A proposed bylaw to curb aggressive panhandling is expected to go before city council next week.

The draft bylaw, modeled after one in Vancouver, would target money-seekers who become obstructive or aggressive, said city bylaw manager Ken Craig. "It's perfectly legal to panhandle. They just can't be obstructive or aggressive," he said. "We've had reports where people have been knocked to the ground, that sort of thing," he said.

The city has been considering ways to restrict panhandling since last fall, and city staff have discussed the issue with RCMP and the Downtown Business Improvement Association.

Former RCMP Supt. Steve Leach has said a bylaw would help police deal with complaints over panhandling. Currently, he said police can only get involved if someone crosses the line. "If panhandling, as it is today, is aggressive enough to constitute a criminal offence of assault or intimidation, certainly then the police can

deal with it," he said. But Leach said police aren't called to these types of incidents very often.

Some councillors have expressed concern that a panhandling bylaw could be struck down by the courts over Charter issues, which has happened in other municipalities. But administrative services director Rob Whitwham has said it appears the City of Vancouver's bylaw has withstood a court challenge. The proposed bylaw is also expected to address issues such as workload for city staff and RCMP enforcement.

TODAY

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PAGE 13

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INDEX

Annie's Mailbox15

Bridge23

Business16-18

City, B.C.3,5,13

Classified20-24

Comics14

Coming Events2

Crossword14

Entertainment15

Horoscope23

Lifestyles15

Movies15

Nation6

Sports8-12

Television15

World7,19

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