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FIREFIGHTING teams deployed to Canada consist of a considerable number of women.

P R O U D

SA teams fight raging wildfires in Canada

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MORE than 400 South African Working On Fire (WoF) firefighters have been deployed to the province of Alberta in Canada to assist with stopping wildfires which have been ongoing since March and have affected 11 provinces.

The request for urgent assistance came from the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre in terms of an existing memorandum of understanding between Canada and South Africa which provides for the exchange of wildland fire management resources.

The wildfires were believed to have been caused by either lightning or accidental human activity. At least 30 000 people have been evacuated from their homes, and smoke emitted from the wildfires has caused air quality alerts and evacuations in the US and Europe.

Some of the firefighters were trained under the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in partnership with WoF and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

This is the fifth deployment of a WoF team to Canada, and they will be on duty for 35 days and spend 28 days on the fire line.

The first group of 200 firefighters and 15 managers left South Africa from the Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport on a chartered aircraft on June 6 and were followed by a second contingent of 200 firefighters and 14 managers on Thursday.

Teams underwent a three-day training exercise at the Kishugu Training Academy in Mbombela, Mpumalanga, to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively combat the wildfire conditions in Alberta.

Linton Rensburg, Canadian deployment head and stakeholder relations manager, said that all firefighters needed to be in possession of a valid Yellow Card which allowed them to fight fires in South Africa. They also had to pass the Canadian and WoF fitness tests, have a minimum 3 years' experience and be in possession of a valid passport.

"Canada is experiencing one of their worst fire seasons. Our firefighters are trained wildland firefighters and these deployees have been specifically prepared to be familiar with conditions in Canada."

Rensburg said that the country had just under 5 000 firefighters stationed at 230 bases. In the current winter fire season, there were about 4 000 firefighters who were providing fire prevention and fire suppression services to landowners.

"The feedback we have received is positive from our first group, their spirits are high and they have been deployed to two fires currently about 180km outside Edmonton in the town of Edson. Their song and dance on their arrival in Edmonton, Alberta, caused a sensation and their video went viral. The song and dance is also done when they go out to the fires," he said.

The first group is expected back home by July 10 while the return date for the second group is July 21.

Barbara Creecy, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, said the extensive experience and training of the firefighters would significantly enhance efforts to effectively suppress and manage the wildfires in Alberta.

"You go to Canada to raise the SA flag and share your expertise and camaraderie with colleagues from other Canadian provinces to save lives, homes, businesses and swathes of vegetation. We are proud that SA is again able to assist Canadian firefighting teams in their battle," she said.

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