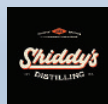
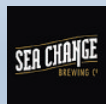


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## Rock'n August Featured Beverages

### Sea Change Brewing Co.

The Wolf Hazy Pale Ale | Man Crush Mandarin Ale  
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### Shiddy's Distilling Co.

#### Wild Peach Pie

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# Our summer of smoke

KEVIN MA

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Last May long weekend should have been game time for baseball fans in St. Albert. The city should have seen 46 teams in town to play some 200 games as part of the Larry Rindero Memorial Tournament.

Instead, what we got was smoke — lots of smoke. A thick cloud of choking particulates from wildfires raging in northern Alberta smothered the city, snuffing out this annual tournament.

It's a smoke-out that has happened many, many times this year in St. Albert. The St. Albert-Edmonton region is on course to set a record for smoke-hours this summer, and it has had profound impacts on the way residents live.

St. Albert Minor Baseball Association president Kurtus Millar said he can't recall ever missing a ball game in town due to smoke prior to last year. This year alone, the smoke has scuttled three weekends of game time, including the Larry Rindero tournament.

"It's been tough emotionally for the kids. They missed two years of baseball due to COVID, and it's a beautiful day outside and they can't play because there's smoke," he said.

St. Albert's summer of smoke could be the first of many due to global heating, researchers say. City residents will have to find new ways to adapt if they want to keep their summer fun from being smoked out.

## So much smoke

St. Albert and much of North America has been choked with an unprecedented amount of wildfire smoke this year. There have been 194 smoke-hours logged at the Edmonton International Airport as of July 17, said Environment Canada meteorologist Terri Lang — that's second only to the 229 seen in 2018, and the year's not yet done. (A smoke hour happens whenever there is enough smoke in the air at a location to limit visibility to 9.7 km.)

With that smoke has come terrible air quality. As of last week, St. Albert's air has ranked eight or above on the 10-point Alberta Air Quality Health Index (where one is low health risk and 10 is very high) for a record 72 hours, reports the Alberta Capital Airshed — and again, the year's

not over yet.

The source of this smoke is our hot, dry weather, said Ellen Whitman, forest fire researcher with Natural Resources Canada. Drought-like conditions this spring plus high winds and heat primed Alberta's forests to burn, with a record 1.76 million hectares (roughly 23 Edmonton's) having gone up in smoke as of July 24.

Global heating raises our risk of wildfires, as warmer air holds more water vapour and dries out forests faster, Whitman said. Scientists such as wild-land fire professor Mike Flannigan have found that global heating creates more dry fuel to burn, more lightning strikes to spark fires, and more dry winds to spread them.

While we can't say that Alberta will see more fire every year from now on (as fire depends on a number of factors), Whitman said current global heating trends mean Alberta should expect more fire-filled summers like this one to come, and along with it more smoke. Flannigan has projected that Alberta will see the amount of land it loses to forest fires in a year double by 2100, resulting in six-to-12 times more smoke.

## The costs

Smoke has real physical and financial costs.

The tiny particles in smoke can penetrate deep into our lungs and blood, and are sometimes made of toxic substances such as benzene, said Anne Hicks, a professor of pediatric respiratory medicine at the University of Alberta. This can cause inflammation, heart attacks, strokes, and asthma, and may be linked to Alzheimer's disease. A January 2023 study Hicks co-authored found that Calgary children with asthma were significantly more likely to have asthma-related visits to the emergency room when the air was fouled by wildfire smoke than at other times of the year.

Dave Sawyer, principal economist for the Canadian Climate Institute, said wildfire smoke in Ontario from June 4-8 likely caused some \$1.28 billion in health care costs due to heart attacks, child bronchitis, premature death, and asthma-related hospital visits. That's not counting costs from firefighting and disruption to business, recreation, and tourism, he added.

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KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

The number of smoke hours at Edmonton International Airport has increased in recent years. A smoke hour is whenever there is enough smoke at a location to limit visibility to 9.7 km.

"We can expect a multibillion dollar impact this year," he said of the cost of this year's fire and smoke.

This summer's smoke is also affecting our farms.

Tam Andersen of Prairie Gardens near Bon Accord said the smoke has led to immediate losses on her farm in the form of cancelled field trips. It has also suppressed bee activity, which affects bee-dependent crops such as apples and squash, and limited photosynthesis, causing canola blooms to fade early. She estimated that this year's canola crop could see a 10 to 30 per cent drop in yield as a result.

Andersen said wildfire smoke was what pushed her to stop selling crops at farmer's markets as of a few years ago.

"I just have this vivid image of being in our booth at the 124th St. Grand Market (in Edmonton) and you couldn't even see down the street," she recalled.

"I so badly wanted to pack up and go home."

## Clearing the air

Andersen said it's been tough for her crews to work through the summer smoke. She encourages workers to wear masks outdoors, and tries to schedule field work for less-smoky days. She is also planting more fruit trees, as those crops are less vulnerable to smoke and suck heat-trapping pollution out of the air.

Sawyer said the first step to addressing

wildfire smoke is to address global heating. That means reducing fossil fuel combustion to slow warming and lower the risk of wildfires.

As reported in the Gazette's This Green House series, heat pumps, green energy, and better windows and insulation can all reduce fossil fuel use and global heating. Better air-sealing lowers fuel use and the amount of smoke getting into your home.

The best way to address the health impacts of smoke is to limit your exposure to it, Hicks said. Stay indoors if you can, wear an N95 or better mask outdoors if you can't, and don't exercise outdoors when the air quality index is seven or above. Install HEPA or MERV-13 filters in your home if possible, or build cheap air purifiers like the Corsi-Rosenthal box. Make backup plans for when smoke blows in on game day, and get out and do your outdoor activities whenever the skies are clear.

Millar said he wasn't sure how baseball would handle smoke in the future. Masks were one solution, as were more games in indoor facilities (although finding the land and money for indoor diamonds could be tricky).

"It's a little scary to be honest," he said of the future of baseball under these circumstances, adding that provincial championships were coming up in just a few weeks.

"Our strategy right now is basically to pray and hope the air quality is good enough for the athletes to compete." ■

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