

# Returning to your home or business after a wildfire

Damages to your home or business after a wild fire may create additional hazards which may not be obvious. This TIP Guide is designed to assist home and business owners with some mitigation tips to keep in mind when re-entering your building.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) suggests the following non-exhaustive list of damage mitigation tips to consider:

- Evaluate all utilities on the property for fire damage. Also check power lines coming into the house. Call your gas company to evaluate service. Contact your utility company immediately if you find downed power lines or smell gas.
- Look for external damage to the home before entering. Examine the foundation for cracks or other damage. Inspect porches and overhangs to be sure they are adequately supported. If any portion of the foundation has been compromised, it may not be safe to enter the building.
- Enter the house carefully. If the door sticks at the top as it opens, it could mean the ceiling is ready to cave in. If you decide to force the door open, stand outside the doorway as you do so to avoid being hit by falling debris. Look before you step. Floors and stairs may be slippery or covered with debris. Watch for broken glass, nails and other hazards. Check the roof and attic immediately for hidden hot spots or embers and watch for flare-ups for several hours after the fire.
- Be alert for gas leaks inside the house that might not be obvious from outside. Do not strike a match or use an open flame unless you know the gas has been turned off and the area has been well ventilated. Instead, use a flashlight to check for damage.
- Turn off the electricity. Even if the power company has turned off electricity to the area, be sure to turn off your circuit breakers if it is safe to do so. Do not use appliances or motors that have been damaged until they have been repaired or replaced. If you use generators due to the loss of power, make sure they are used outside. Conduct all cooking on camp stoves and grills outside, if at all. Gas and charcoal fumes can be deadly.

Loss Control TIPS

- Flying ash could potentially clog gutters and drains preventing proper drainage of water. Blocked drains can cause excessive water damage to your home or building. Drains should be inspected and adequately cleared.
- Do not breathe the ash from the fires. Ash can irritate your respiratory system. Use appropriate masks to protect your airway. If there are no downed power lines in the area, water down the area around your home to reduce flying ash. Keep all windows closed to prevent odors from the burning area from entering your home.
- Be careful when removing burned items from the home. Handle all burned plastics with rubber gloves as possible toxins can come off the plastic.
- Do not allow children to play in burned areas. Trees may be weak and could fall unexpectedly; holes in the ground may be covered with ash and not visible.

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# Reoccupying Buildings Impacted by Wildfire Smoke

This document provides some general guidance for building owners with respect to occupying structures that have been subjected to extensive smoke from wildfires, but not involved with the fire itself.

**The first, and foremost, advice is to carefully follow the recommendations and requirements of local authorities and emergency personnel. They are in the best position to advise you of any special concerns or precautions you need to take.**

The United States Department of Health and Human Services advises residents and building occupants in areas impacted by the smoke from wildfires as follows:

HHS wants residents to be aware of health and safety hazards from wildfires. Smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and other plant materials. Smoke can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system, and worsen chronic heart and lung diseases. HHS advises that people in the affected areas take precautions, and recommends taking the following protective actions:

- Limit exposure to smoke
- Pay attention to local air quality reports.
- If you are advised to stay indoors, keep indoor air as clean as possible. Keep windows and doors closed unless it is extremely hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside. If you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, seek shelter elsewhere.
- Do not add to indoor pollution.
- When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home.
- Do not smoke, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air.
- Follow your doctor's advice about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease, Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.
- Do not rely on dust masks for protection. Paper "comfort" or "dust" masks commonly found at hardware stores are designed to trap large particles, such as sawdust. These masks will not protect your lungs from smoke. An "N95" mask, properly worn, will offer some protection. For more information about effective masks, see the Respirator Fact Sheet provided by CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

LOSS CONTROL TIPS

The nature of smoke is dependent on a number of factors including the fuel and the temperature of the fire. In general, smoke from a wildfire contains gasses and particulate matter. Subsequent to the fire event and clearance to re-enter structures it is anticipated that the gasses from the fire will have dissipated. However, there may be residual particulate matter, especially since the size of particles from wildfires can be very small and can easily pass through almost all commercial air filters.

- You may wish to consider adding these steps in resuming your business operations:
- Check with local health authorities with regard to any special hazards that might be created by the particulate in your location. Particulates from wildfires are generally considered to contain ash, but if the fire consumed agricultural facilities, warehouses, or industrial properties, special hazards may exist from chemical residues or fibers. Follow any special precautions offered by authorities without exception.
- Surfaces in your workspace may be covered with very fine particulate. Do not disturb these settled materials. Rather, contract for a thorough building cleaning by a qualified cleaning contractor. The use of HEPA filtered vacuums in the building should be required to limit the likelihood of putting more particulate into the air. Cleaning should be completed prior to re-occupancy.

- Your heating/air conditioning system may have captured particulate during the event. Your HVAC contractor should be asked to replace the filters on the air conditioning system and make a thorough assessment of the need for cleaning air handlers, ductwork, etc. If needed, system cleaning should be conducted prior to re-occupancy.
- If fine particulate entered the structure, it may have also entered computer systems and other sensitive electronic equipment. Make an assessment and clean as necessary with a HEPA filtered vacuum before re-energizing this equipment.
- Employee concern is likely to be high regarding physical and health hazards. Develop consistent messages to your employees to inform them of the actions you're taking to protect their health and safety. Be receptive to employee complaints and concerns. Use HR and outside resources as needed to counsel employees effectively.

#### **Additional Resources:**

Federal Emergency Management Agency  
<http://www.fema.gov/>

Cal Fire  
<http://www.fire.ca.gov/index.php>

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