

# Fact Sheet

# Wildfires

NIMS Integration Center  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
500 C Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20472



# FEMA

Wildfires often begin unnoticed. They spread quickly, igniting brush, trees, and homes. If you live where urban development meets wildlands, or on a remote hillside, in a valley, prairie, forest or brushland where flammable vegetation is abundant, your residence could be vulnerable to wildfires. Wildland fires are usually triggered by lightning or accidents.

## Know Your Risk and What to Do

- Contact your local emergency management office to learn about evacuation routes and emergency plans.
- Learn about the history of wildfire in your area.
- Be aware of recent weather; a long period without rain increases the risk of wildfire.
- Get additional information from the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)), the American Red Cross ([www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)) and the USDA's U.S. Forest Service ([www.nws.noaa.gov](http://www.nws.noaa.gov)). For current warnings check [www.nws.noaa.gov](http://www.nws.noaa.gov).
- Inquire about emergency plans and procedures at your child's school and at your workplace.
- Make a family disaster plan that includes out-of-town contacts and locations to reunite if you become separated. Be sure everyone knows home, work and cell phone numbers, and how to call 9-1-1.
- Assemble a 3-day disaster supplies kit with food, water, medical supplies, battery-powered radio and NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards, batteries, flashlights, and other items. For more information about assembling a disaster supplies kit, visit [www.fema.gov/areyouready/](http://www.fema.gov/areyouready/).
- Gather important documents such as birth and marriage certificates, Social Security cards, passports, wills, deeds, and financial and insurance records. Store them in a fire and flood safe location or safe deposit box.

## Before a Wildfire

- Mark the entrance to your property with address signs that are clearly visible from the road.
- Keep lawns trimmed, leaves raked, and the roof and rain gutters free from debris.
- Stack firewood at least 30 feet away from your residence.
- Store flammable materials, liquids, and solvents in metal containers outside your residence at least 30 feet away from structures and wooden fences.
- Create defensible space by thinning trees and brush within 30 feet around your residence. Beyond 30 feet, remove dead wood, debris, and low tree branches.
- Landscape your property with fire resistant plants and vegetation to prevent fire from spreading quickly. For example, hardwood trees are more fire-resistant than pine, eucalyptus, or fir trees.
- Make sure water sources, such as hydrants, ponds, swimming pools, and wells, are accessible to the fire department.
- Use fire resistant, protective roofing and materials like stone, brick, and metal to protect your residence. Avoid using wood materials. They offer the least fire protection.
- Cover all exterior vents, attics, and eaves with metal mesh screens no larger than 6 millimeters or 1/4 inch to prevent debris from collecting and to help keep sparks out.
- Install multi-pane windows, tempered safety glass, or fireproof shutters to protect large windows from radiant heat.
- Use fire-resistant draperies for added window protection.
- Have chimneys, wood stoves, and all home heating systems inspected and cleaned annually by a certified specialist.

## Before a Wildfire (Continued)

- Insulate chimneys and place spark arresters on top. Install insulation between the chimney and the roof, attic, or other inflammable materials it might touch. The chimney should be at least 3 feet above the roof.
- Remove branches hanging above and around the house.
- Obtain a free copy of **At Home in the Woods**, a collection of fire mitigation practices currently underway in the wildland/urban interface, by visiting [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov).

## Follow Local Burning Laws

- Before burning debris in a wooded area, make sure you notify local authorities and obtain a burning permit
- Use an approved incinerator with a safety lid or covering with holes no larger than 3/4 inch.
- Create at least a 10-foot clearing around the incinerator before burning debris.
- Have a fire extinguisher or garden hose on hand when burning debris.

## During a Wildfire

- If advised to evacuate, do so immediately. Take your disaster supplies kit and choose a route away from the fire hazard.

If you are sure you have time:

- Shut off gas at the meter. Only a qualified professional can safely turn the gas back on.
- Seal attic and ground vents with pre-cut plywood or commercial seals.
- Turn off propane tanks.
- Place combustible patio furniture inside.
- Connect garden hose to outside taps. Place lawn sprinklers on the roof and near above-ground fuel tanks. Wet the roof.
- Wet or remove shrubs within 15 feet of your residence.
- Gather fire tools such as a rake, axe, handsaw or chainsaw, bucket, and shovel.
- Back your car into the garage or park it in an open space facing the direction of escape. Shut doors and roll up windows. Leave the key in the ignition and the car doors unlocked. Close garage windows and doors, but leave them unlocked. Disconnect automatic garage door openers.
- Close fireplace screens.
- Close windows, vents, doors, blinds or noncombustible window coverings, and heavy drapes. Remove flammable drapes and curtains.
- Move flammable furniture into the center of the residence away from windows and sliding-glass doors.
- Close all interior doors and windows to prevent drafts.
- Place valuables that will not be damaged by water in a pool or pond.
- Watch for changes in the speed and direction of the fire and smoke.

## The Recovery Process

- For individuals' and families' immediate needs contact the American Red Cross or other local voluntary agencies.
- If you have property damage, contact your insurance company as soon as possible.
- For information on helping children deal with disaster, visit [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov) or get a copy of FEMA 478 **Helping Children Cope with Disaster**. To obtain other fact sheets and publications call the FEMA publications warehouse at 1-800-480-2520. You can also visit DHS' [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov).

Dangerous Wildfire Myth!	The Facts:
<b>When the ground is damp from recent snow melt, there is no concern about spring wildfires.</b>	Dead leaves and brush can dry out and ignite even if the ground underneath is damp. These "fine fuels" are also referred to by wildfire experts as "1-hour fuels" because they need only about an hour of sunlight and breeze to dry them out to a point where they are combustible.

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