

Returning Home After a Wildfire

Coming home after a wildfire can be difficult. The damage is often unknown until you return days or weeks later. Before returning home ALWAYS check with officials before attempting to return to your home. Once home, check for the following:

- Check grounds for hot spots, smoldering stumps, and vegetation.
- Check the roof and exterior areas for sparks or embers.
- Check the attic and throughout your house for any hidden burning sparks or embers.
- Check for fire damage to your home, turn off all appliances and make sure the meter is not damaged before turning on the main circuit breaker.
- Contact 911 if any danger is perceived.
- Consult local experts on the best way to restore and plant your land with fire-safe landscaping.

Although wildfire damage can be immeasurable, the danger is not over after the flames are put out. Flash flooding and debris flows, structural damage, road instability, and damaged trees are just some of the dangers that exist after a wildfire. Keep these tips in mind:

- Stay away from your home or business until fire officials tell you it is safe to return.
- Flash floods are a very real and potentially deadly hazard after a wildfire, particularly as a result of rain falling over a burned area upstream of your location. Stay away from burned forests, storm channels, and natural drainages (rivers, creeks, and engineered channels can convey deadly flows of water and debris, especially after a wildfire). If your power is out, have a battery-powered radio to listen for emergency updates, weather forecasts, reports of flash flooding, and news reports.
- Be aware of and use extreme caution around trees, power poles, and other tall objects or structures that may have lost stability during the fire. Most burned structures and surfaces will be unstable. Stay out of burned forests during windy conditions, as burned trees are easily downed by wind. Do not touch any power lines.
- Keep a “fire watch.” That means look for smoke or sparks throughout the house and on rooftops (e.g., in gutters), etc. Look for ash pits or hidden embers. Stay away – they can burn you.
- Before inspecting your home, first check for the smell of gas. Turn off power until you’ve completed your inspection. Use a battery-powered flashlight to inspect a damaged home. (Note: the flashlight should be turned on outside before entering. The battery may produce a spark that could ignite leaking gas, if present.)
- Do not drink or use water from the faucet until emergency officials say it is okay; water supply systems can be damaged and become polluted during wildfires or as a result of subsequent post-fire flooding. If your well has been damaged by fire, contact a local licensed and bonded well constructor or pump installer to determine the extent of the damage and what must be done to either repair or decommission the well.

- Discard any food that has been exposed to heat, smoke, flood waters, or soot.
- Utilities: If there is no power, check to make sure the main breaker is on. If the breakers are on and power is still not present, contact the utility company. If you have a propane tank or system, contact a propane supplier, turn off valves on the system, and leave valves closed until the supplier inspects your system. If you have a heating oil tank system, contact a heating oil supplier for an inspection of your system before you use it. If you have a solar electrical system, this system should be inspected by a licensed technician to verify that the solar panels and electrical wiring are safe for continued operation.

Before cleaning up following a wildfire:

1. Start a list of damaged belongings, document damage with photographs, and contact your insurance provider.
2. Decide whether to (a) participate in a government-run debris removal program, which requires signing a right-of-entry form; (b) hire a private contractor for debris removal at your expense; or (c) conduct debris cleanup yourself.

WHO CAN HELP?

In cases of wide-scale need, the local Emergency Manager or other government representatives will coordinate with government agencies, public safety officials, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials to secure public facilities (such as emergency shelters), identify government assistance for special needs populations, and obtain emergency food and water supplies. In California, county offices work with the State of California Office of Emergency Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Public meetings are vital sources of information on programs and services available in your community after a wildfire. Often, recovery assistance requests need to be coordinated through your local jurisdiction or post-wildfire coordinator, while other programs can be requested by individuals and households. Please note that programs and funding levels can change from year to year, and assistance may not always be available. You may also find additional assistance from community volunteers and local organizations.

Watershed Impacts After a Wildfire

The aftereffects of a wildfire on watershed can be drastic causing immediate issues and long-term effects. Rates of erosion and runoff can increase to dangerous levels following wildfires in California. Normally trees, shrubs, grass, and other protective ground cover help prevent soil detachment and allow rainfall to infiltrate into the soil. After a wildfire the extreme heat can bake the soil to the point that water is unable to penetrate and can cause excessive runoff in a post wildfire area.

Before leaving a burned area, CAL FIRE will implement post-fire suppression repair efforts. This work includes:

- Installing water bars (ditches cut at an angle into the soil) on dozer fire lines.
- Removing soil and organic debris from streams where fire lines crossed, and mulching fire line approaches where appropriate.
- Bringing road drainage structures back to pre-fire condition.
- Treating/reducing large concentrations of downed trees (slash) near roads and structures.
- Repairing damaged land improvements (e.g., water pipes, fences, gates) related to suppression activities.
- Addressing public safety issues, such as flagging/marking hazard trees threatening roads or structures for removal by professional fallers, and mapping/reporting downed power and phone lines.

Following selected wildfires, California state Watershed Emergency Response Teams (WERTs) are deployed to conduct post-fire assessments.

- WERTs identify types and locations of threats to life-safety and property (i.e., collectively known as “Values-at-Risk” or VARs) from debris flows, flooding, rockfall, and surface erosion that are elevated due to wildfire.
- WERT members develop preliminary emergency protection measures for the identified locations, and communicate the findings to responsible local emergency management agencies.

Local jurisdictions may be able to obtain funding for implementation of emergency protection measures and mitigation projects from FEMA or the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This work may include installation of structure protection for identified Values-at-Risk, such as K-rails, sand bags, and Muscle Wall.

Even with these efforts, post fire communities are still at risk and need to be prepared for flood, debris flows, mud (hyper concentrated) flows, and surface erosion.