

Wildfire Preparedness



Wildfires are unplanned and uncontrolled fires that burn in natural areas but can spread quickly and devastate communities. They often begin unnoticed and spread quickly in dry conditions. Since 2000, state and federal agencies have documented an average of [70,600 wildfires per year](#). While on average, there were more fires per year in the 1990s (78,600 per year), wildfires since 2000 have burned more land—an average of 7 million acres per year compared to 3.3 million acres per year in the 1990s.

Top Five Years with Largest Wildfire Acreage Burned Since 1960 (Source: [National Interagency Coordination Center](#))

	ACRES BURNED (MILLIONS)	NUMBER OF FIRES (THOUSANDS)
2015	10.13	68.2
2020	10.12	59
2017	10.03	71.5
2006	9.87	96.4
2007	9.33	67.8

About [90 percent of U.S. wildfires are human-caused](#), resulting from unattended campfires, downed power lines, burning debris, equipment use/malfunctions, discarded cigarettes, [and arson](#). Wildfires are also caused by nature through lightning and lava. A fire only needs three elements to burn, known as the fire triangle: fuel, oxygen, and a heat source. Dry weather and drought turn green vegetation into fuel. Strong winds spread fires over a large area, while warm air encourages combustion.

A larger percentage of the U.S. population now resides within wildfire danger areas—more than [72,000 U.S. communities are at risk](#). States [with the most wildfire risk](#) include California, Texas, Oregon, Arizona, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, and Nevada. Wildfires can be destructive to humans, but they play [an important role](#) in nature. They burn dead matter and return nutrients to the soil. They also remove diseased plants and insects from the ecosystem. By burning through thick vegetation, wildfires allow sunlight to reach the forest floor, enabling new growth.

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Impact of Wildfires on Communities (Source: [National Interagency Coordination Center](#))

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Structures Burned	12,306	25,790	963	17,904
Percentage of Residential Structures Burned	66%	70%	46%	54%

Preparing for a wildfire

Wildfires can occur year-round but are most prevalent in the dry summer season. Take steps to [minimize your wildfire risk](#) and prepare staff and residents in case of a wildfire emergency.

- Research the frequency and risk of wildfires [in your area](#).
- Review your organization’s business continuity plan to identify vital operations, points of contact (e.g., federal and non-profit disaster relief organizations, utility companies, and emergency responders), and staff roles and responsibilities during a wildfire emergency. If you don’t have a business continuity plan, you can create one [using our custom tool](#) (please note, you must have an HAI Group member login to access this tool).
- Conduct [tabletop exercises](#) and emergency evacuation drills.
- Clear leaves and other debris from gutters, eaves, porches, and decks.
- Remove dead vegetation and flammable materials from within 30 feet of buildings.
- Create [fuel breaks](#) with driveways, walkways/paths, patios, and decks.
- Keep lawns hydrated and mowed to a height of 4 inches. Dispose of debris and lawn cuttings.
- Maintain a minimum of 18 feet between tree crowns within 30 feet of a structure. A mature tree canopy (a collection of tree crowns) should be no closer than 10 feet from the edge of a structure.
- Ensure all smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are working properly.
- Collect emergency building and survival materials such as insurance documents, respirators, shovels, flashlights, batteries, battery-powered radios, and first-aid kits. Urge residents to [build an emergency preparedness kit](#).

During a wildfire

A top priority is staying informed so your organization can quickly alter plans as conditions shift.

- Pay close attention to emergency information and alerts.
- If authorities issue an evacuation order, ensure staff and residents are aware and follow the order immediately.
- Close building openings to prevent embers from entering (e.g., vents, windows, garage doors).
- Provide staff and residents with N95 respirators to prevent smoke inhalation if there are enough available. Cloth, surgical, and dust masks don’t prevent smoke inhalation.
 - If N95 respirators aren’t available, set up one or multiple rooms with a portable air cleaner or filter to make clean air available for staff and residents, even when it’s smoky in the rest of the building and outdoors.



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- Use high-efficiency filters in your central air conditioning system to capture fine particles from smoke. If your system has a fresh air intake, set the system to recirculate and close the outdoor intake damper.
- Turn off utilities such as gas if there's time to do so safely.
- Fill large containers with water and place them around the property. These serve as water reservoirs.

After a wildfire

Use caution, as hot ashes, charred trees, smoldering debris, and live embers can remain after a wildfire. The ground may contain heat pockets that can burn staff and residents or cause another fire.

- Stay in touch with local authorities and wait for instructions. Be aware that emergency hotlines may be backed up due to high call volume.
- Once given approval by authorities, execute return procedures for staff and residents. If feasible, engage with residents through video or phone calls to provide updates on the property.
- When it's safe to do so, document any damage to your property with photographs to assist in filing an insurance claim.



Contact our Risk Control Services Team

for more resources and answers to your housing organization's risk-related questions.

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