

Wildfire Contingency Plans and Safety Tips

The devastating effects of a wildfire are not just limited to rural, wooded, grassy areas. These types of fires also affect urban developed areas, especially those that experience warm, dry weather conditions and are populated with trees, brush and dry grass.

Environmental conditions including extreme heat, drought, high winds and lightning strikes trigger wildfire emergencies. Human actions have also been responsible for these devastating events. According to NASA, longer than average fire seasons in the United States have been attributed to climate change. Every state, with the exception of Delaware and the District of Columbia, has experienced a wildfire event. Last year 57,000 wildfires occurred in the United States, burning 10.3 million acres. In California alone, wildfires burned a record 4.2 million acres, damaging or destroying 10,500 structures and killing 31 people. The states of Texas (6,892 fires), North Carolina (3,872 fires) and Georgia (3,158 fires) follow California as having the most frequent wildfire events.

Considering this information, it is important that businesses and residents throughout the United States have risk management contingency plans in place as well as an understanding of safe practices to take in the event of a wildfire emergency.

Wildfire Contingency Plans and Actions

To prepare employees and facilities for a wildfire emergency, organizations must have an active business continuity plan that is reviewed on an annual basis, updated, and communicated to employees. The following are actions to take and items to include in the plan.

- Review shutdown and evacuation processes, including computer data backup procedures by IT team members and shipping important tools, fleet vehicles, equipment and records offsite.
- Sign up for your community's warning system. The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio also provide emergency alerts.
- Keep important documents in a fireproof, safe place. Create password-protected digital copies.
- Keep an adequate number of appropriate fire extinguishers (5A-60BC multi-purpose type) in strategic locations (such as near loading docks and waste collection areas) and maintain them properly. Train employees on how to use extinguishers correctly.
- Have tools, such as rakes, axes, saws, buckets and shovels, available to help control small fires while waiting for emergency personnel to arrive. Isolate flammables such as gasoline for such items inside a UL-approved metal storage container specifically designed for the storage of flammable materials.
- Work with the local fire department to accomplish the following:

- Invite fire department personnel to tour individual facilities to provide valuable feedback regarding the existing emergency fire response plan.
 - Provide your local fire department and EHS Safety Department Safety Committee with information regarding your building, such as layout, description of occupancies, alarm/fire sprinkler protection systems and water supplies. Maintain side entrances and ensure they are clearly marked.
 - Schedule regular inspections with the fire department.
 - Hold regularly scheduled fire drills to assess time, staff and resource needs.
- Create evacuation routes and safety zones, including:
 - Plan two evacuation routes out of your area. Consider how employees will evacuate on foot if roads are closed or impossible to use, such as if they are blocked by emergency personnel. Stay upwind when possible to avoid smoke inhalation. Be aware of wind shifts that could affect the route of evacuation. Time is the best ally of safe evacuation. When in doubt, evacuate.
 - Remember that ponds, lakes, rivers and landscaping or swimming pools can serve as safety zones.
- Invest in fire mitigation, including:
 - Exterior building surfaces that are either noncombustible or considered resistant to ignition by embers.
 - Create a fire-resistant zone free of leaves, debris or flammable materials of at least 100 feet from your building (for grassland fires and woodland fires, clearance zone should be 330 feet). Clean gutters regularly.
 - Keep grass mowed short and irrigate landscaping regularly.
 - Consider outside sprinklers for exposure protection.
 - Limit yard storage. Remove flammable items, vehicles and propane tanks from property or move them at least 100 feet (30 meters) away from the building.
 - Close and seal building openings with tight-fitting, non-combustible materials. This includes any vents: cover with wire mesh.
 - Install tight-fitting, noncombustible doors, shutters and/or dampers that can be closed when implementing your wildfire plan.
 - Fully close and seal windows and doors.
 - Ensure your interior automatic sprinkler system has an adequate and reliable water supply.
 - Review insurance coverage to make sure it is enough to replace your property.
- Include measures specific to protecting employees in the contingency plan:
 - Keep appropriate emergency supplies on hand, including flashlights, battery-powered portable radios, extra batteries, first aid kits, manual can opener, non-perishable foods and bottled water. If designated employees will be working to protect the property, have appropriate clothing available, such as work boots and gloves, personal protective equipment and sturdy work clothes.
 - Teach employees about wildfire risks and preparedness. Provide information to help employees protect their homes as well.
 - If you are located in a wildfire area, consider advising employees to keep personal disaster supplies and copies of important documents at work in case they need to evacuate from work without being able to get home.

- Gather emergency supplies, including N95 respirator masks that filter out particles in the air you breathe. Keep in mind each person's specific needs, including an updated asthma action plan and medication.
- Pay attention to air quality alerts.

Actions to Take During a Wildfire

If a wildfire threatens, take the following actions.

- Evacuation orders will often be swift and accurate for the affected areas. Be prepared to leave immediately.
- If you are trapped, call 911 and give your location. Turn on lights to help rescuers spot you. Keep in mind the possibility that rescue crews could be delayed or unable to reach you.
- Shut down building air intakes.
- Turn off unnecessary utilities.
- Use an N95 mask to keep out harmful particles as you breathe.

Actions to Take Following a Wildfire

After a wildfire occurs, take the following actions:

- Listen to authorities to learn when it is safe to return to your home/business and whether or not water is safe to drink.
- Avoid hot ash, charred trees, smoldering debris and live embers. The ground may contain heat pockets that can burn you or spark another fire.
- If accessible, check the roof and put out any fires, sparks or embers.
- If there is no power, check to make sure the main breaker is on. Fires may cause breakers to trip. If the breakers are on and power is still not available, contact the utility company. ALWAYS contact 911 if any danger is perceived upon re-entry, and contact local experts before finally moving back in.
- Send text messages or use social media to reach out to family and friends. Phone systems are often busy following a disaster. Make calls only in emergencies.
- Wear a NIOSH-certified respirator and wet down debris to minimize breathing dust particles.
- Examine all HVAC systems, clean surface areas and replace filters before resuming operation.
- Document property damage with photographs. Conduct an inventory and contact your insurance company for assistance.
- Wildfires can lead to an increased risk of flooding due to burn scars, heavy rains or mudflows. The risk of flood remains significantly higher until vegetation is restored, which take up to five years after a wildfire. Consider purchasing flood insurance to assure financial protection from future flooding.

Article sources and additional information:

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