

Fire Season: Preparing for the Worst

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) is the nation's support center for wildland firefighting. In 2018 they reported over 58,000 wildland fires and nearly 9 million acres of burned land with a cost of over \$3.1 billion. The 2019 fire season predications anticipate a heavier wildland fire year than the previous 3 years. California's rainy season, hot-dry Santa Ana and Diablo winds and the prospect of climate change all influence fire season. All states have some wildland fire risk but the most prominent in addition to California include Texas, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. Businesses must be prepared to mitigate and minimize wildland fire exposures that threaten operations and employee safety. The following are some simple steps that business owners and stakeholders should take to help minimize loss from wildland fires and other emergencies:

1. Create a defensible space around your structures—defensible space includes 3 zones:
 - a. Zone #1 is the non-combustible zone, 0-5 ft. from the building and under any decks or combustible platforms. Plant and material selection is critical in Zone 1. Hardscape and non-combustible mulch products should be used wherever possible. Keep plants watered trimmed, and pruned to avoid the accumulation of dried leaves and foliage that may otherwise act as a fuel source for embers and the like.
 - b. Zone #2 extends from 5-30 ft. from the building structure. Maintain trees and ensure that shrubs are in well-spaced groups. Tree crowns should be at least 10' apart. Remove all dead material, prune tree limbs and branches up to a height of 15'. For shorter trees, low branches should not exceed 1/3 of the tree height.
 - c. Zone #3 range is 30–100 ft. from the building structure. Make sure to maintain plants in this zone that will slow down and reduce the energy of a wildland fire if one were to occur. Keep foliage cut back to minimize fuel loading as much as possible.
2. Creating a written wildfire response plan—your plan should include all potential emergency action plan(s) such as tornadoes, earthquake, water and rain, hail, as well as exposure reduction due to wildland fire.
3. Property and vegetation maintenance—choose landscape that will not contribute to fire loading and growth wherever possible. Non-combustible hardscape and materials is desired when you have wildland fire exposure though they may not be as aesthetically pleasing as other plants, shrubs, and trees.
4. Protect elevated decks by:
 - a. Minimizing or eliminating storage of combustible materials and fuels from underneath the deck.
 - b. Eliminating foliage and trees from under or adjacent to the deck to prevent the possibility of fire spread from the natural environment to the building's structure.
5. Close attic, crawl spaces and ventilation ducts to reduce the possibility of fire and smoke travel throughout the building.
6. Prepare a disaster kit. Each employee should be responsible to put together and manage their own disaster kit. The kit should be able to sustain an individual for a minimum of 3 days and include water and food, flashlight, first aid materials, batteries, moist towelettes, local maps, and whistle at a minimum.

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7. Designate a clean room to offer a fresh air space to building occupants. Even if the fire does not directly impact your operations, smoke and smog levels often reach unhealthy levels during wildfires. Keeping vents and dampers closed and minimizing outside air to maintain a “clean room” on site is desirable and may help prevent acute and chronic health issues from exposure to the fire’s products of combustion.
8. Track broadcasts and alerts using a conventional radio or emergency radio if necessary. This is helpful to track fire progression and determine when there is a safe window to leave if needed.
9. Communicate to your customers to avoid negative backlash associated with delayed deliveries or reduced hours that are a result of the loss. Reducing customer traffic to offices, store fronts and retail locations may also help minimize road congestion and bottlenecks and improve emergency vehicle mobility.
10. Develop and maintain a business contingency or continuity plan to help ensure that your firm can get back up to operational speed as soon as possible. The more detailed and comprehensive your plan the better you will be positioned to handle an emergency and reduce loss or down time with critical operations. Ensure that business partner agreements are conducted before a disaster strikes to prevent gouging and guarantee available services as best as possible. At a minimum, the plan should include contingent locations, back-up power generation, and vendor, and contractor agreements.

Additional Resources:

- <https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/outlooks.htm>

For additional information contact:

Alliant Risk Control Solution Center Toll Free Help Line: 888 737 4752.