



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

Fire No.25

Wildfire Evacuation - Returning Home

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You have been evacuated and want to go home. In most states, permission to return home after a wildfire is usually given by a local fire or law enforcement authority such as your county sheriff's office. They deem it safe to return to your home once the wildfire and any home fires have been extinguished and when other hazards, such as downed power lines, do not pose a threat.

Once you are given the "all clear" to go home, there are things you need to know, and do, to make your return home safe.

Returning to Your Property

Be prepared for hazards by dressing properly. Wear boots, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt. As there may be smoke and ash present, you may want a dust mask as well.

Watch out for

- unstable charred trees and power poles
- downed live power lines
- spot fires and smoldering debris
- live embers
- ash pits (holes created by burned trees filled with hot ash)

Before Entering Structures

FIRST - CHECK FOR THE SMELL OF GAS. If you smell gas, turn the supply off at the tank or outside valve.

- Extinguish embers and spot fires using a wet mop, a hose, or by smothering it with wet burlap or soil.



Use caution when returning home after a wildfire.

Photo by Ron Mahoney

- Check electrical power. If there is power, temporarily turn it off until you have completed your inspection. If there is no power, contact your local utility provider.
- Check roofs and floors for structural safety.
- Check for and extinguish any burning embers or smoldering debris found on your roof, in rain gutters, on the porch, or anywhere else on your

property. Check back frequently over the course of several days to make sure they are completely out.

- Continue monitoring your home for signs of smoke or embers for the next 24 to 48 hours.

Inside Your Home

- Open the doors and windows.
- Continue wearing boots, heavy clothing, and rubber gloves when sifting through debris and handling hazardous materials (cleaning solvents, paints, batteries, etc).
- Wear a mask while sifting through debris to avoid breathing in smoke and ash.
- Contact your utility providers (water, natural gas, and electricity) to restore service.
- Check for embers and smoke in the attic and crawl space. Do this every day for several days.
- Beware of hot spots, dust, ash, broken glass, and other sharp objects.
- Take pictures and/or video, and start a list of damaged belongings. DO NOT start cleaning or throwing away anything until you have contacted your insurance company.
- Ask your insurance provider what you should do about covering broken windows, doors, and other exposed areas, pumping out water, and any other activities you may need to do to secure your home.
- Do not allow children to play in the area.
- Be aware that animals may have taken shelter in your home, garage, or outbuildings. Leaving a door open will allow animals to return on their own to their natural surroundings. Animals that appear injured or unwilling to leave may require you to call animal control.

Food and Medication: If in Doubt, Throw it Out

The rule of thumb for food and medications after a fire is if in doubt, throw it out. You should discard any food, beverages, or medications exposed to heat, smoke, or soot. The potency of some medications can be altered by exposure to heat, so check with your doctor before using any prescription or over-the-counter medicines.

Canned goods that are dented, bulging, or rusted or that have been charred or exposed to extreme heat should be discarded. Refrigerators and freezers may not be airtight. If the power was out, discard any meat, seafood, milk, soft cheeses, eggs, prepared foods, and cookie dough that have been above 40°F for over two hours. Do not refreeze frozen food that has thawed.

Throw away the following items if they may have been exposed to fumes, water, or chemicals:

- Fresh food such as produce, dairy, meat, fish, and eggs
- Any opened containers and packages
- Containers with peel-off tops or cork-lined, waxed cardboard, or paraffin (waxed) seals
- Food in cardboard boxes or wrapped in paper, foil, plastic, cellophane, or cloth
- Staples in canisters such as flour, sugar, spices, seasonings, and extracts
- Stored raw foods such as potatoes, apples, and onions



Photo by Ron Mahoney