



Backgrounder — Wildland Fires



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Emergency Information

As residential areas expand into relatively untouched wildlands, people living in these communities are increasingly threatened by forest fires. Protecting structures in recently developed areas from fire poses special problems, and can stretch firefighting resources to the limit.

If heavy rains follow a fire, other natural disasters can occur, including landslides, mudflows and floods. Once ground cover has been burned away, little is left to hold soil in place on steep slopes and hillsides.

A major wildland fire can leave a large amount of scorched and barren land. These areas may not return to prefire conditions for decades. If the wildland fire destroyed the ground cover, then erosion becomes one of several potential problems.

Danger Zones

Danger zones include all wooded, brush and grassy areas—especially those in Kansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas, Tennessee, California, Massachusetts and the national forests of the western United States.

What is a Wildland Fire?

There are three different classes of wildland fires. A surface fire is the most common type and burns along the floor of a forest, moving slowly and killing or damaging trees. A ground fire is usually started by lightning and burns on or below the forest floor. Crown fires spread rapidly by wind and move quickly by jumping along the tops of trees. Wildland fires are usually signaled by dense smoke that fills the area for miles around.

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Help Your Community Get Ready

The media can raise awareness about wildland fires by providing important information to the community. Here are some suggestions:



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- Publish a special section with emergency information about wildland fires. Localize the information by printing the phone numbers of local emergency services, the American Red Cross, and hospitals. Report the areas most at risk from wildland fires and let people know about the advantages of creating a fire safety zone around structures and about using fire-resistant roofing materials when building or reroofing.
- Work with local emergency services and American Red Cross officials to prepare special reports for people with mobility problems on what to do if an evacuation is ordered.
- Print and distribute local building codes and weed abatement ordinances for structures built near wooded areas.
- Report on the advantages of regular chimney sweepings.
- Periodically inform your community of local public warning systems.

Did You Know...

- More than four out of every five forest fires are started by people. Negligent human behavior such as smoking in forested areas or improperly extinguishing campfires is the cause of many fires. The other cause of forest fires is lightning.
- A prescribed fire is a fire that is purposely ignited by land management agencies under controlled conditions for specific management objectives.
- The 1991 wildland fires in Oakland, California, caused 26 deaths and 148 injuries. The fires destroyed over 3,000 structures, left over 5,000 people homeless and resulted in \$1.5 billion in damages.
- In 1990 hot, dry weather conditions in California contributed to brush fires in Santa Barbara County that destroyed more than 600 buildings, caused over \$200 million in damage and killed one person.
- The greater Yellowstone National Park fire of 1988 destroyed or damaged private structures, including 17 mobile homes, 4 dwellings, a general store, 12 garages and outbuildings, 19 cabins and several storage structures, and burned 1,210,730 acres of wildland.