



PreparedBC

Wildfire Preparedness Guide



On average there are more than 1,600 wildfires in British Columbia every year. Sometimes they burn in areas away from houses or infrastructure, with ecological benefits to the landscape. Other times, they can threaten peoples' homes and livelihoods.

The probability of damaging wildfires has increased in recent years, due in part to the effects of climate change. If you live in a risk area, it's imperative that you take time to get ready.

This guide will help you prepare your household, protect your property and understand what to do if a wildfire is close to your community.

Before a Wildfire

MAKE YOUR PLAN

An emergency plan is a playbook for how you and your household will respond to disasters, including wildfires. Knowing what to do will reduce anxiety and help keep you focussed and safe.

Start by downloading a fill-in-the-blanks emergency plan from www.gov.bc.ca/PreparedBC

It will compile the vital information you'll need and establish how you'll communicate and connect with loved ones, particularly if you become separated. When you're done, make copies for grab-and-go bags at home, at work and in your vehicle.



TIP: Create an annual calendar reminder to update your emergency plan. Review it with everyone in your household at least once a year and refresh stale information.

TIP: Not being able to communicate with loved ones during an emergency can be extremely stressful and detract from your ability to respond and help others. Follow these guidelines for staying connected:

- Keep your phone fully charged. Preserve battery life by dimming your screen and avoiding power-hungry apps and videos
- Create family and emergency contact lists and program them into your phone for quick access
- Texts, emails and social media are best during disasters. Data-based services are less likely to experience major interruptions
- Consider a virtual meeting place. Create a closed Facebook group for family to check in during an emergency

BUILD YOUR GRAB-AND-GO BAGS

In the event of a wildfire, you may need to leave home quickly. Take time now to build grab-and-go bags for each member of your household so you're not caught off guard.

Start with our basic list then consider the additional needs of your household. Do you have pets? Do you have young children? Are you a foster parent? Are you caring for seniors or people with disabilities? If yes, prepare and customize bags specific to their needs.

Grab-and-Go Bag



Basic bag list:

- Bottled water and ready-to-eat food, like high-calorie power bars
- Phone charger and battery bank
- Small battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- Battery-powered or hand-crank flashlight
- Extra batteries
- Small first aid kit and personal medications
- Toiletries and items, such as an extra pair of glasses or contact lenses & solution
- Copy of your emergency plan and copies of important documents, such as insurance papers
- Seasonal clothing and an emergency blanket
- Pen and notepad
- Whistle

For more advice on building grab-and-go bags, go to www.gov.bc.ca/PreparedBC/emergencykit

TIP: Have grab-and-go bags at home, at work and in your vehicle. That way you'll always be ready for the unexpected. Refresh supplies when the clocks spring forward and fall back.

TIP: Pets are part of the family too. Pack them grab-and-go bags with food, water, leashes and carriers. It's a good idea to include a recent picture, along with copies of vaccination records and health information. Consider talking to your municipality, regional district or band office about what organizations or resources are available for animals during emergencies. Plan ahead for where they might stay.



RESEARCH INSURANCE COVERAGE

Home insurance policies in British Columbia cover fire damage and losses. Call your insurance representative to discuss your coverage or contact the Insurance Bureau of Canada at **1-844-227-5422**.

Disaster Financial Assistance is not available for losses due to wildfire, which is why it's important to discuss coverage with an insurance company or representative.

If you leave your home due to a mandatory evacuation order, most homeowner and tenant insurance policies will provide coverage for reasonable living expenses for a specified time.

Know where to find trusted information

If a wildfire is directly threatening your community, the best information sources are your municipality, regional district, band office or local authority. Find out in advance how they'll share vital information, whether it's via Facebook, Twitter, a website or phone number.

Other important sources:

■ [EmergencyInfoBC.ca](https://www.emergencyinfobc.ca)

🐦 [@EmergencyInfoBC](https://twitter.com/EmergencyInfoBC)

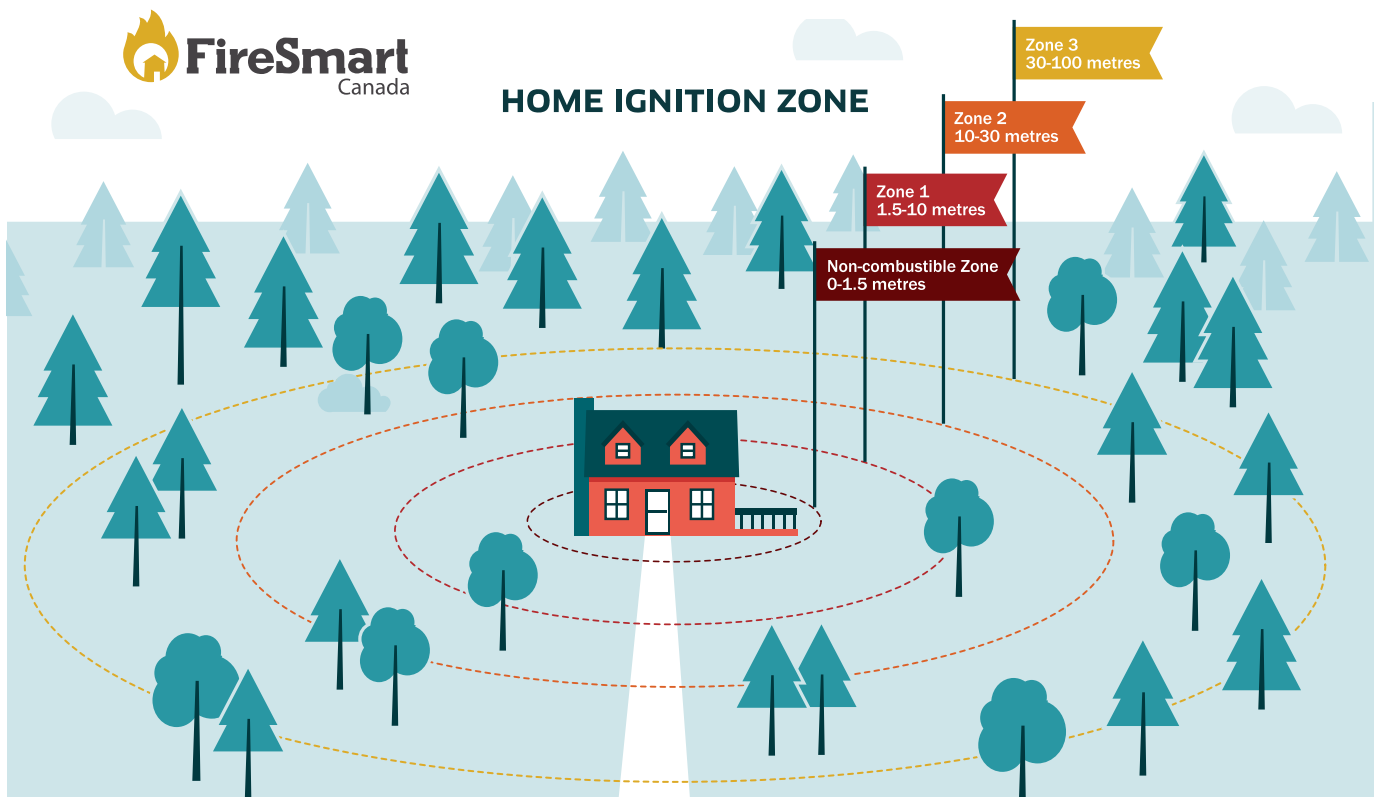
■ [BCWildfire.ca](https://www.bcwildfire.ca)

🐦 [@BCGovFireInfo](https://twitter.com/BCGovFireInfo)

📘 [BC Wildfire Service](https://www.bcwildfire.ca)

PROTECT YOUR HOME

British Columbians play a critical role in mitigating wildfire risks around their homes and properties by undertaking FireSmart™ activities. Simple measures, such as focussing on FireSmart's three priority zones, can make a significant difference to the survivability of structures by decreasing the intensity of a wildfire and slowing its spread.



Non-Combustible Zone (0 to 1.5 metres from a structure or home)

- Remove combustible material (woody shrubs, dry grasses, etc.) down to mineral soil
- Use non-combustible materials, such as gravel, brick or concrete, in areas adjacent to your home
- Clear leaves and evergreen needles from gutters

Priority Zone 1 (1.5 to 10 metres from a structure or home)

- Avoid planting flammable trees and plants, such as cedar, spruce, juniper, pine and tall grasses
- Keep lawns well-watered and mowed
- Move firewood piles, construction materials, storage sheds and other potentially combustible structures into Priority Zone 2

Priority Zone 2 (10 to 30 metres from a structure or home)

- Measure the distance between the outermost branches of trees to ensure a minimum of three metres between them
- Remove small coniferous or evergreen trees that can act as a “ladder” for fire to reach treetops
- Remove branches within two metres of the ground to help stop surface fires from moving into treetops
- Clean up fallen branches, dry grasses and needles to eliminate potential surface fuels

Priority Zone 3 (30 to 100 metres from a structure or home)

- Thin and prune coniferous or evergreen trees to reduce excess vegetation and branches
- Look for opportunities to create a fire break in this zone by creating space between trees

TIP: Complete the FireSmart home assessment to see what changes will make the greatest difference in reducing your home’s risk. You can download the assessment and other FireSmart resources at <https://firesmartbc.ca>

PREPARE YOUR FARM OR AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS

Wildfires can have devastating consequences for the agricultural industry. Having a response plan is critical, especially when livestock relocation may be required. It's up to agricultural producers, like all business managers, to have a comprehensive strategy to manage the risks they face.

To learn more, visit:

www.gov.bc.ca/agriculture/emergency-preparedness



KNOW YOUR EVACUATION STAGES

Be prepared. Understand the evacuation stages used in British Columbia, and what to do for each. This will help you respond quickly and confidently.

Evacuation Alert:

Be ready to leave on short notice.

Evacuation Order:

You are at risk. Leave IMMEDIATELY.

Evacuation Rescind:

All is now safe and you can return home.

Evacuation Alert

This means be ready to leave on short notice. If you're under alert, take the following steps:

- Gather your grab-and-go bags, emergency plan, copies of important documents and cherished mementos. Have them at the front door or already packed in your vehicle
- Ensure your vehicle has fuel. The tank should always be at least half-full
- Move patio furniture, cushions and door mats indoors

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- Take down flammable curtains and window treatments
- Connect garden hoses and fill large containers with water, such as pools, hot tubs and garbage cans. This can assist firefighters and help slow advancing flames
- Ensure your house number is visible. This will help firefighters locate your home quickly
- Disconnect automatic garage door openers so doors can be opened by hand if you lose power

Evacuation Order

This means you are at risk and must leave IMMEDIATELY. On your way out close doors and windows and turn on both interior and exterior lights so your home is visible to firefighters in heavy smoke.

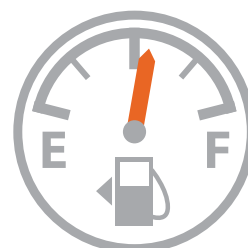
Follow all directions from officials and evacuate using the route(s) they've identified.

An Emergency Support Services (ESS) reception centre may be opened for evacuated residents who are without access to other supports, such as insurance coverage or friends and family who can help. Services may include: food, lodging, clothing, emotional support, information about the crisis and family reunification.

Evacuation Rescind

Once officials determine the situation is safe, the evacuation order will be rescinded and you can return home. Continue to stay tuned for other possible evacuation alerts or orders.

TIP: Always keep your vehicle's gas tank half full in case you need to evacuate on short notice.



During a Wildfire

FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS

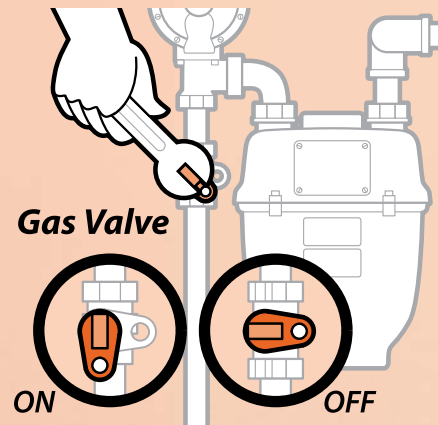
The most important thing you can do is heed all evacuation alerts and orders and follow instructions from your band office, municipality, regional district or local authority. Trust in your preparedness and work your emergency plan.

Natural gas safety

Do NOT shut off your natural gas when you receive an evacuation order. If requested by emergency officials, FortisBC will turn off natural gas service as a precautionary measure, or if there is an immediate threat to infrastructure.

However, if you suspect a gas leak, turn off the gas valve and leave immediately. Once the gas is shut off at the meter, do NOT try to turn it back on. Only a registered gas contractor can do that safely.

Visit www.FortisBC.com for more information.



DEALING WITH WILDFIRE SMOKE

Wildfire smoke can result in poor air quality and may be harmful to health, especially for more vulnerable populations such as children, older adults and those with pre-existing medical conditions. The best way to protect yourself is to reduce exposure.

While you may consider leaving your community due to smoky skies, it is not the most reliable way to lessen your exposure. This is because smoke shifts and travels, which means moving to another community does not guarantee conditions will be better.

In most situations, staying home, and following these tips, will give you the best protection from wildfire smoke.

- Use common sense regarding outdoor physical activity. If your breathing becomes difficult or uncomfortable, stop or reduce the activity
- Stay cool and drink plenty of fluids
- Consider visiting a location, like a shopping mall or community centre, that has cooler, filtered air
- Stay inside as much as possible:
 - Keep windows and doors closed
 - Close fresh air intakes from furnaces, fireplaces or stoves
 - Set air conditioning to recirculate. Keep it running to help filter the air
 - Turn on high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters
 - Consider using a humidifier. It may help remove smoke from indoor air

- Don't use wood stoves, gas stoves or candles. They can make indoor air quality worse
- Don't smoke or use vapour cigarettes

For info about air quality, visit: www.gov.bc.ca/air-quality-advisories

For info about planning for wildfire smoke, visit:
www.bccdc.ca/health-info/prevention-public-health/wildfire-smoke



COPING WITH WILDFIRE STRESS

Alerts, evacuations, loss and worry – wildfires can affect us all. If you are feeling stressed or anxious, you are not alone. Here are some things you can do to manage.

Take care: Stress takes a toll on your physical and mental health. Eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep lowers stress and helps us cope.

Reach out: Talking helps. Whether it's with family, friends, a doctor or counsellor. Crisis lines are available to listen and help any time. You can contact:

- BC Mental Health Support Line 24 hours a day at 310-6789 (no area code)
- KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Line at 1-800-588-8717

Help others: Take care of the vulnerable. Assisting others can help you regain a sense of purpose and community as you confront the challenges together.

After a Wildfire

RETURNING HOME

Getting there:

If you are evacuated, you'll be anxious to return home, but only do so when officials say it's safe. They may identify a specific route or routes. Follow all directions and avoid taking shortcuts.

Re-entering:

Do not enter unless you have official clearance. Once you do, heed the following considerations:

- Wear thick gloves and thick-soled shoes to protect your hands and feet
- Walk around the perimeter, checking for electrical wires, a gas smell or debris that could fall
- Enter with caution and check that the main power breaker is off
- Only use generators outdoors; do not connect to a household circuit
- Do not use your sewage disposal system unless you know it's capable of handling waste

Food and water safety:

- Water: Do not drink, prepare food, or wash in water until officials indicate the water source is safe. Follow recommendations from your local health authority
- Refrigerated food: Discard food that is spoiled, as well as food that has been stored in a refrigerator that has lost power, even if the power has been restored. When in doubt, throw it out

- Frozen food: Discard food that's thawed. If your freezer has been exposed to fire, or has been without power for more than three days, toss the contents
- Canned food: Tinned goods should be safe, unless the can has bulged, rusted or is badly dented. All undamaged canned goods should be washed and disinfected if they've been exposed to smoke. Food stored in glass jars exposed to heat should be thrown out as seals may have broken

Psychological care:

Fear and anxiety are natural reactions to stressful events and can stir up past traumas. To help yourself and your loved ones:

- Accept offers of help. Seek counselling or spiritual guidance
- Focus on positive memories and the skills you've used to get through other hard times
- Be aware of how children are reacting. Reassure them and encourage them to express themselves
- Give yourself and your loved ones permission to grieve
- Practice cultural or spiritual customs that bring you comfort

With support, most people recover within a few weeks; however, some will need more time and help to heal. Watch for warning signs of extended anxiety and contact a medical professional or trusted community leader if they last more than two to four weeks:

- Trouble with eating and sleeping
- Feeling depressed or hopeless; showing low energy or crying often
- Being anxious and fearful
- Trouble focusing on daily activities

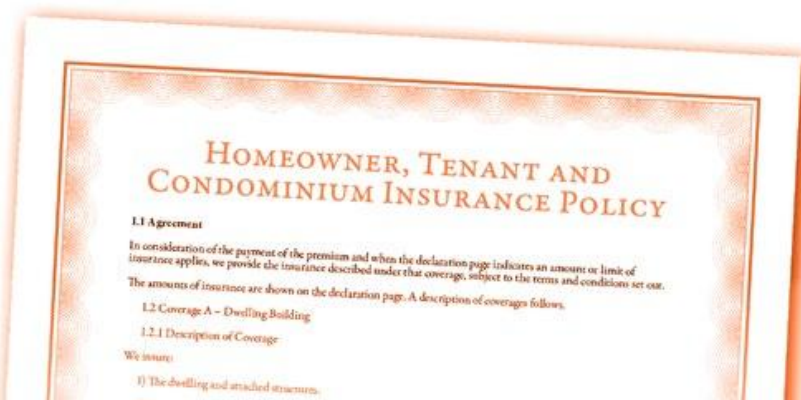
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- Recurring thoughts or nightmares
- Avoiding activities or places that are reminders of the event

TIP: Don't be afraid to seek help after a traumatic event, such as a wildfire and related evacuation. BC's Mental Health Support Line is open 24 hours a day at **310-6789** (no area code). Counselling is also available through the First Nations Health Authority. Visit www.fnha.ca or call the KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Line at **1-800-588-8717**.

Starting the insurance claim process

- Call your insurance representative or company. Most insurers have a 24-hour claims service. Be as detailed as possible when providing information
- List all damaged or destroyed items. If possible, assemble proofs of purchase, photos, receipts and warranties. Take photos of damage incurred and keep damaged items, unless they pose a health hazard
- Keep all receipts related to clean up and living expenses if you've been displaced. Ask your insurance representative about what expenses you may be entitled to and for how long
- If you do not know the name of your insurer or your insurance representative, contact Insurance Bureau of Canada's Consumer Information Centre at **1-844-2ask-IBC**.



TIP: For more information on insurance claims, additional supports, restoration and cleaning, download the “What to do after a fire” guide from the Office of the Fire Commissioner at www.gov.bc.ca/firesafety

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PreparedBC: www.gov.bc.ca/PreparedBC

EmergencyInfoBC: www.EmergencyInfoBC.ca

FireSmart BC: www.FireSmartBC.ca

BC Wildfire Service: www.BCWildfire.ca

Air Quality Advisories: www.gov.bc.ca/air-quality-advisories

FireSmoke Canada: www.Firesmoke.ca

DriveBC: www.DriveBC.ca

FortisBC: www.FortisBC.com

BC Hydro: www.BCHydro.com

BC Centre for Disease Control:
www.bccdc.ca/health-info/prevention-public-health/wildfire-smoke

HealthLinkBC: www.healthlinkbc.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association: BC Division: <https://cmha.bc.ca/>

Office of the Fire Commissioner: www.gov.bc.ca/firesafety

Insurance Bureau of Canada: www.IBC.ca

First Nations Health Authority: www.fnha.ca

First Nations’ Emergency Service Society: www.fness.bc.ca



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This guide was created in partnership with BC FireSmart
and the Office of the Fire Commissioner

