

Properties Just Outside Burned Areas - FAQs

February 5, 2025

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
Public Health

EVACUATED PROPERTIES WITH NO DAMAGE

Returning and Assessing Your Property

How do I assess my property for smoke damage?

Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and clothing to protect yourself – including goggles, an N95 or P100 respirator, gloves, long pants, long sleeve shirt, and closed toe shoes.

Walk exterior of home and look for obvious signs of fire and smoke damage. Check for signs of soot and ash buildup on the exterior siding, doors, and windows. Make a note, photograph these areas, and document them for your insurance carrier prior to undertaking any remediation or cleanup.

Walk the entire interior of home and determine the extent of smoke, soot and ash contamination in each room and air vent. Remove from the home to minimize odor problems that could mask smoke odors. If there is a noticeable smoke odor, then you likely have some level of smoke damage. In cases where there is no visible soot or ash, a wipe test, where you wipe a wall or windowsill, confirming no soot or ash, can help determine that there was not significant intrusion of dangerous ash or soot. For situations involving light soot or ash on horizontal surfaces and/or visible airborne particulate and/or noticeable smoke odors, a more thorough cleaning is recommended.

If you notice signs of significant soot, smoke residue, or odors in your home, it's important to assess whether professional cleaning is necessary.

- Do not turn on your HVAC system until the bulk of the soot/ash has been cleaned up. Operating the system prior to removing the bulk of the soot/ash throughout the home will only result in spreading the particulate and re-contaminating surfaces that have already been cleaned.
- If you're filing an insurance claim, they may send a field adjuster to do an assessment and may have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work.

Is there guidance to follow when seeking professional help?

The following guidelines are helpful when selecting a professional cleaning or restoration service contractor for smoke, soot, and ash restoration.

First, if you're filing an insurance claim, check with your insurance company to see if they have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work. If you end up looking for a professional cleaning contract yourself, confirm that the contractor is properly licensed by the State or County and has the

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required bonding and liability insurance coverage. Additionally, you can ask the contractor if they work with your insurance company and verify this with your insurance agent.

You may also want to check references, check with the [Better Business Bureau](#), and/or follow up with past customers to ask about their experiences with a particular contractor prior to signing a contract. It is also essential to request certifications from the contractor, including company and employee certifications from organizations like the [Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification \(IICRC\)](#) and the [Restoration Industry Association \(RIA\)](#).

Before agreeing to start or paying for any work, you should also obtain a detailed, written estimate of the work to be done and the schedule for doing it from the contractor, and do not proceed without one. Make sure to review and understand the terms of the contract and what is required by you, such as payment of your insurance deductible. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property. It is best to avoid contractors who fail to provide specific cost and schedule details in the contract.

What tests should I ask for to see if it is safe to return home?

Generally, the risk in your home is determined by the extent of smoke damage, ie. the smoke, soot and ash conditions, inside your home. Cleaning up the smoke damage reduces that risk inside. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property.

Health Risks, Cleaning, and Precautions

What are the health risks associated with smoke, soot, and ash, and how can I protect myself?

Smoke damage can cause significant physical damage as well as health issues, even if the home is not destroyed or burned by fire. Smoke, soot (fine, black powdery substance that forms when things burn), and ash contain fine particles and toxic substances that can lead to a range of health impacts, including skin and lung irritation, shortness of breath, worsen conditions like asthma, potential exposure to carcinogens, and other short-term and long-term medical conditions. They may also include harmful chemicals such as dioxins, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and heavy metals. Protect yourself by wearing a properly fitted N95 mask, goggles, gloves, closed toes shoes, and long sleeves and pants. Avoid disturbing ash unnecessarily and ensure good ventilation when cleaning indoor spaces. Wash your hands, clothes, and any exposed skin thoroughly after cleanup.

Individuals, such as children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, or those with respiratory conditions, should take extra precautions or avoid reentering the home until it has been cleaned. And everyone should avoid contact with outdoor areas that have not been cleaned. Keep children and pets away from ash-covered areas to prevent ingestion or inhalation.

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been

contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

What precautions should I take to prevent stirring ash and hazardous particles into the air?

To avoid stirring up ash by gently using a damp cloth, mop, or sponge instead of sweeping or vacuuming. If you need to handle larger debris, lightly mist the area with water to keep dust from becoming airborne. Lightly mist with water before gently moving fire debris or items in ash. Avoid using dry sweeping or leaf blowers, as these can disperse ash and soot. Use a HEPA-filter vacuum for fine particles if vacuuming is necessary.

What safety measures should be taken during cleanup to avoid exposure to hazardous materials?

Always wear protective gear, including an N95 or P100 respirator, goggles, heavy-duty gloves, long sleeves and pants, and sturdy closed-toe boots. This gear minimizes direct skin contact, protects the eyes, and reduces inhalation of toxic particles. Before beginning work, wet down debris and clean floors and surfaces with a damp cloth or cleaning pad to reduce airborne particles, and avoid touching sharp or broken materials directly. Remove any visible soot/ash or debris from exterior siding, doors, doorsills, windows, and windowsills using a garden hose and damp cloths first. Be cautious of structural instability or hidden hazards, such as nails or glass in any damaged area. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling debris, and remove and clean your clothing separately from other laundry to prevent cross-contamination.

Are there specific guidelines for cleaning up hazardous materials like lead, asbestos, or heavy metals?

If hazardous materials are present, you should not attempt cleanup without professional assistance. Asbestos and lead require certified specialists for safe removal, as disturbing these materials can release dangerous fibers or particles into the air. Testing by licensed professionals can confirm the presence of these hazards. Ensure compliance with all local and federal regulations, including OSHA and EPA guidelines, to avoid potential health risks and legal penalties. Keep children and vulnerable individuals away from affected areas until all hazards are mitigated.

How do I safely dispose of ash and soot collected during cleanup of my property?

Ash and soot should be handled with extreme caution due to the risk of hazardous particles, such as heavy metals or asbestos. Seal them in durable plastic bags, double-bagging if possible, to minimize the release of particles during transport. Place sealed bags in covered trash bins to prevent them from being disturbed by wind or animals.

What precautions should I take when cleaning soot from outdoor furniture and equipment?

Wear gloves and an N95 mask to prevent exposure to particles. Use a mild detergent and warm water to clean soot from non-porous surfaces, such as metal or plastic furniture. Rinse thoroughly and dry completely to avoid residue buildup. For porous materials like cushions, consider professional cleaning or replacement.

How can I take to clean windows, doors, and screens covered in ash?

Use a hose or bucket of water to gently rinse off ash before scrubbing. Use a damp cloth and cleaning pad to clean windowsills and doorsills. Clean glass surfaces with a vinegar and water solution to remove streaks and residue. Replace or clean screens with soapy water, ensuring they are thoroughly rinsed and dried before reinstallation.

What steps can I take to clean ash-covered driveways and walkways?

Hose down the area to minimize airborne particles, and use a stiff broom to sweep ash into piles. Avoid washing ash into storm drains, as this can harm the environment. Dispose of collected ash in sealed bags in your regular trash.

What steps may help clean smoke-damaged indoor furniture (wood, upholstery)?

- **Wood Furniture:** Gently wipe down with a damp cloth to remove soot. Use a wood cleaner or polish designed for fire-damaged wood to restore the finish.
- **Upholstery:** For fabric furniture, using a HEPA-vacuum just above the fabric followed by steam cleaning can help remove soot and odors. If the upholstery is leather, it may need specialized cleaning products to remove smoke stains and odors. For heavier smoke damage or delicate fabrics, it's best to consult a professional cleaner.

What steps may help to clean smoke damaged clothing and fabric items?

While wearing protective gear outdoors and away from the home, gently shake out visible soot outdoors before washing clothing and linens. Wash items in small loads with detergent. Some suggest adding a cup of white vinegar or other deodorizer to neutralize odors. Repeat the washing process if the smell of smoke persists. Do not use a dryer until all smoke odors are removed, as heat can set the smell permanently. Depending on the amount of smoke damage in your washer or dryer, consider cleaning them inside or having them professionally services and cleaned before using them.

What steps may help to clean electronics with light smoke damage?

Immediately turn off and unplug any electronic devices that may have been exposed to heat or smoke. Use a soft cloth to wipe away soot and ash. Avoid using cleaning products that could damage the device.

For appliances like toasters, blenders, or coffee makers, dampen a cloth with water (and a tiny bit of dish soap for greasy spots) to wipe down the outer surfaces. Avoid getting moisture inside the appliances. If in doubt, consider replacing it.

If the device was exposed to water (from firefighting efforts) or has significant soot or ash contamination, consider replacing it or having it professionally serviced and cleaned. It's often safer to have electronics professionally inspected before attempting to use them again, as the heat from a fire can cause internal damage that's not visible.

What is the best way to clean jewelry and metal items?

Use a mild soap solution and a soft cloth to clean metal items and jewelry. If they are tarnished or heavily sooted, a jewelry cleaner or a paste made of baking soda and water can be used. If the item is valuable or delicate, it's best to take it to a professional jeweler for thorough cleaning.

How should photos and keepsakes be cleaned?

If photos or keepsakes are only slightly damaged, carefully wipe away soot with a soft brush. If they're wet or too smoky, place them in a plastic bag and freeze to prevent further damage until you can clean or restore them properly. For valuable or sentimental items, consult with a professional photo restoration service to ensure proper cleaning.

How can I remove ash and soot from parked vehicles?

Wash vehicles using a gentle hose spray to remove loose ash, then use a mild detergent and water to clean surfaces. Avoid scrubbing dry ash, as it can scratch paint. Rinse thoroughly and check ventilation intakes to remove accumulated debris. If ash has entered the vehicle's interior, vacuum with a HEPA filter and wipe surfaces with a damp cloth.

How do I clean children's outdoor toys and playground equipment?

Wash toys and equipment with a mild detergent and warm water, ensuring no residue is left behind. Replace sand in sandboxes, as ash and soot are difficult to remove effectively. Keep children away from outdoor play areas until cleanup is complete and confirm that no ash remains on surfaces.

How can I safely dispose of smoke damaged vegetation and yard debris?

Collect burned vegetation and yard debris in sealed bags or containers. Avoid burning debris, as it can release harmful particles. Contact your local waste management agency for guidelines on disposal or drop-off at designated facilities. Ensure ash and debris are not placed in green waste bins unless explicitly allowed.

What should I do if I notice health symptoms during or after cleaning?

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

Home Gardens and Soil

Should I test the soil in my garden if my property had no or minimal structural damage?

Testing soils in urban gardens is always a good idea. According to UC Cooperative Extension's [*Produce Safety After Urban Wildfire*](#) guidance document, "After a wildfire, you can check for soil contamination by collecting soil samples from your garden and sending them to a lab. Before taking samples, draw a map of your food growing area and label it with the spots where you took your samples from. Mapping of your food growing area and soil sample spots is a good idea so you can correlate your test results, and identify spots of concern in case you need to do more testing, and guess what? It can save you time, money, and help you understand on the ground conditions!"

Search UC Cooperative Extension County Master Gardener Program webpages for regional analytical soil labs lists; simply search 'UCCE + the County's Name + Master Gardener Program.' Ask your lab for a heavy metals panel that includes lead, cadmium, arsenic, nickel and mercury. Heavy metals tests typically cost under one hundred dollars per sample. Tests for dioxin and other organic chemicals that may be present in smoke can be

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hundreds of dollars per sample. If heavy metals are present in your soils, there is a greater chance other contaminants may also be present.

Contaminants detected in post-fire soil testing may have been present there before the fire. You will not know if contaminants are present as a result of fire smoke deposits on your produce or soils unless you have had your soils tested prior to a local fire, or unless you have your produce tested after a nearby fire. See University of California ANR's guides on Soils in Urban Agriculture: Testing, Remediation, and Best Management Practices for more information. Search for ANR Publication 8552 <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/>. Also see: <http://ucanr.edu/sites/UrbanAg/> on Food Safety."

Is it safe to eat homegrown produce following a wildfire?

Wildfire ash and soot can settle on soil, plants, and produce. To ensure your homegrown fruits are safe, first check for visible ash in topsoil, plants, and trees. While wearing protective gear, pre-rinse your produce outside with a hose or bucket of clean water to remove soil and ash. Wash hands thoroughly before handling produce inside. Remove the outer leaves of lettuce or leafy greens. Rinse and rub produce well under cool running water; peel before cooking or serving. Soak deeply veined greens like kale and fuzzy fruits like peaches in a 10% white vinegar solution to remove soil particles. Avoid root crops that grow in the soil like carrots or potatoes as they absorb more contaminants. Avoid planting crops in contaminated soil. Properly washed fruits from trees are safe to eat. For more information refer to the LACDPH [Guidance on Eating Produce from a Home Garden](#).

What should I do if I'm concerned about contaminated soil?

Wildfires can leave behind ash, soot, and harmful contaminants like heavy metals and chemicals in the soil. Review UC Cooperative Extension's [Produce Safety After Urban Wildfire](#) guidance document more info and recommendations.

Heavily ash-covered soil may require professional testing to determine safety and more specific remediation steps.

If you're concerned about soil contamination, consider testing it for contamination and avoid disturbing the soil to prevent harmful particles that may be present from becoming airborne. Look for visible ash or unusual residues on the soil surface, and limit contact by keeping children and pets away from the area. If you need to handle or turn the soil, wear protective gear such as gloves, an N95 mask, and long-sleeved clothing. Cover bare soil with mulch, tarps, or ground cover to reduce dust and erosion.

Avoid using ash as fertilizer, especially if the fire burned synthetic materials, which include harmful residues.

If you plan to garden or use the soil for other activities, consider building raised beds or containers to create a barrier between potentially contaminated soil and the clean soil plant roots. Adding compost, manure, and peat moss to your soil may decrease chemical absorption into produce. Covering bare soil with wood chips, grass clippings, compost and more clean soil can also decrease exposure.

Restoration Assistance

Is there guidance to follow when seeking professional help?

The following guidelines are helpful when selecting a professional cleaning or restoration service contractor for smoke, soot, and ash restoration.

First, if you're filing an insurance claim, check with your insurance company to see if they have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work. If you end up looking for a professional cleaning contract yourself, confirm that the contractor is properly licensed by the State or County and has the required bonding and liability insurance coverage. Additionally, you can ask the contractor if they work with your insurance company and verify this with your insurance agent.

You may also want to check references, check with the [Better Business Bureau](#), and/or follow up with past customers to ask about their experiences with a particular contractor prior to signing a contract.

It is also essential to request certifications from the contractor, including company and employee certifications from organizations like the [Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification \(IICRC\)](#) and the [Restoration Industry Association \(RIA\)](#).

Before agreeing to start or paying for any work, you should also obtain a detailed, written estimate of the work to be done and the schedule for doing it from the contractor, and do not proceed without one. Make sure to review and understand the terms of the contract and what is required by you, such as payment of your insurance deductible. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is "safe", and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property. It is best to avoid contractors who fail to provide specific cost and schedule details in the contract.

Pets

How can I protect pets from ash and poor air quality?

Keep pets indoors as much as possible, and use air purifiers to improve indoor air quality. Avoid walking pets in ash-covered areas, as they may inhale or ingest toxic particles. Clean their paws after outdoor exposure and ensure they have access to fresh water.

Air Quality

How does poor air quality from nearby areas impact health, and how can I protect myself?

Air quality can change from area to area and from hour to hour, based on your distance from sources of pollution, and the prevailing weather and winds. Poor air quality can affect your health by irritating your lungs, eyes, and throat. It can make breathing difficult, especially for people with asthma, allergies, or heart conditions. Symptoms like coughing, wheezing, headaches, and shortness of breath can worsen in bad air quality.

If the air quality is poor,

- **Stay indoors** as much as possible and keep windows/doors closed.
- **Use an air purifier** with a HEPA filter.
- **Monitor air quality** using apps or websites (check the AQI).
- **Limit outdoor activity** and wear an N95 mask if needed.
- **Stay hydrated** to help your body cope.

How can I improve indoor air quality in my home?

Keep your doors and windows closed on windy days, when the air quality is poor/unhealthy, and during debris removal activities near your property. Use HEPA air purifiers in frequently used rooms to reduce smoke particles indoors. Replace HVAC filters with a MERV 13 or higher rating and run the system on recirculate mode. Keep windows and doors closed until outdoor air quality improves, and avoid activities that generate indoor smoke, such as burning candles or frying food.

Swimming Pools and Spas

My swimming pool or spa was not damaged in the fire but has soot and ash. What guidelines should I follow before using it again?

The swimming pool or spa was likely impacted by smoke, soot, or ash. Do not use it until completing the steps outlined in the LACDPH [Swimming Pools After a Fire](#) guidance. Contact your local health department's Recreational Waters Program at (626)430-5360 or email rhealth@ph.lacounty.gov if you have questions.

Community Support and Resources

Where can I find local resources to help clean my property after an evacuation?

Local Assistance Centers (LACs) and Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) often provide cleanup kits, guidance, and professional referrals for cleaning services. Contact your local public health department for additional resources, including access to protective equipment and cleaning supplies.

How can I access mental health resources after a wildfire evacuation?

Contact the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 for free, confidential support. Local health departments and community organizations may also offer counseling and mental health services for evacuees. Engage with support groups or local recovery events to connect with others experiencing similar challenges.

Are there community programs for vulnerable populations affected by evacuation?

Many local health departments and nonprofit organizations provide targeted assistance for vulnerable groups, including seniors, children, and those with disabilities. Programs may include transportation services, access to clean air shelters, and help with obtaining necessary medical supplies.

Insurance, Documentation, and Financial Assistance

Does insurance cover expenses related to evacuation?

Many homeowner and renter insurance policies provide coverage for additional living expenses (ALE) during mandatory evacuations. Save receipts for temporary accommodations, meals, and transportation costs to support your claim. Contact your insurance provider to confirm eligibility and submit documentation. Notify your insurance provider immediately to start the claims process and provide them with requested documentation. Keep copies of all correspondence and records for your claim. For more resources related to insurance, including *Tips for Wildfire Claimants*, visit the California Department of Insurance's [Wildfire Resources webpage](#).

Are there grants or financial assistance programs for evacuees?

FEMA and state assistance programs may provide financial aid for temporary housing, essential supplies, and other costs associated with evacuation. Local nonprofits and community organizations often offer additional support for uninsured or underinsured residents.

What steps should I take to document property conditions after returning from evacuation?

Take clear photographs of your property, focusing on any changes or issues caused by the wildfire. Note the condition of outdoor areas, such as landscaping and fencing, as well as indoor spaces. Share this documentation with your insurance provider if a claim becomes necessary.

Preparedness for Future Evacuations

How can I better prepare for future wildfire evacuations?

Create an emergency kit with essentials such as medications, important documents, and protective gear. Develop a family evacuation plan, including meeting points and communication methods. Sign up for local emergency alerts to stay informed about evacuation orders.

What steps can I take to make my property more resilient to future wildfires?

Clear flammable vegetation and debris within 30 feet of your home to create defensible space. Use fire-resistant materials for landscaping and exterior structures. Regularly clean gutters and roofs to remove dry leaves and other flammable debris.

How can I ensure my HVAC system is prepared for future wildfire seasons?

Install a MERV 13 or higher filter in your HVAC system to capture fine particles. Schedule regular maintenance to ensure the system operates efficiently during wildfire events. Seal ductwork and install weatherstripping around doors and windows to minimize smoke infiltration.

How do I store important items to protect them during future wildfires?

Use fireproof safes to store vital documents, such as identification, insurance policies, and medical records. Back up digital copies of important files to cloud storage. Keep irreplaceable items, such as family heirlooms, in a location that is easy to access during an evacuation.

NEARBY BUSINESS PROPERTIES

Returning and Assessing Your Business

How do I assess my business for smoke damage?

Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and clothing to protect yourself – including goggles, an N95 or P100 respirator, gloves, long pants, long sleeve shirt, and closed toe shoes.

Walk exterior of home and look for obvious signs of fire and smoke damage. Check for signs of soot and ash buildup on the exterior siding, doors, and windows. Make a note, photograph these areas, and document them for your insurance carrier prior to undertaking any remediation or cleanup.

Walk the entire interior of business and determine the extent of smoke, soot and ash contamination in each room and air vent. Remove from the home to minimize odor problems that could mask smoke odors. If there is a noticeable smoke odor, then you likely have some level of smoke damage. In cases where there is no visible soot or ash, a wipe test, where you wipe a wall or windowsill, confirming no soot or ash, can help determine that there was not significant intrusion of dangerous ash or soot. For situations involving light soot or ash on horizontal surfaces and/or visible airborne particulate and/or noticeable smoke odors, a more thorough cleaning is recommended.

If you notice signs of significant soot, smoke residue, or odors in your business, it's important to assess whether professional cleaning is necessary.

- Do not turn on your HVAC system until the bulk of the soot/ash has been cleaned up. Operating the system prior to removing the bulk of the soot/ash throughout the home will only result in spreading the particulate and re-contaminating surfaces that have already been cleaned.
- If you're filing an insurance claim, they may send a field adjuster to do an assessment and may have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work.

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You may also want to check references, check with the [Better Business Bureau](#), and/or follow up with past customers to ask about their experiences with a particular contractor prior to signing a contract.

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Before agreeing to start or paying for any work, you should also obtain a detailed, written estimate of the work to be done and the schedule for doing it from the contractor, and do not proceed without one. Make sure to review and understand the terms of the contract and what is required by you, such as payment of your insurance deductible. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property. It is best to avoid contractors who fail to provide specific cost and schedule details in the contract.

What tests should I ask for to see if it is safe to return to my business?

Generally, the risk in your business is determined by the extent of smoke damage, i.e. the smoke, soot and ash conditions, inside your business. Cleaning up the smoke damage reduces that risk inside. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property.

Food and Drink Safety

How can I ensure the safety of food and beverages stored during a wildfire?

Inspect food and beverages for signs of contamination from smoke, ash, or soot. Discard any perishable items that were exposed to unsafe conditions or stored in a refrigerator without power for more than 4 hours. Sealed cans and bottles are generally safe but should be cleaned thoroughly before use. Consult local health regulations for additional guidance.

Cleanup and Safety

What safety measures should be taken during cleanup to avoid exposure to hazardous materials?

Always wear protective gear, including an N95 or P100 respirator, goggles, heavy-duty gloves, long sleeves and pants, and sturdy closed-toe boots. This gear minimizes direct skin contact, protects the eyes, and reduces inhalation of toxic particles. Before beginning work, wet down debris and clean floors and surfaces with a damp cloth or cleaning pad to reduce airborne particles, and avoid touching sharp or broken materials directly. Remove any visible soot/ash or debris from exterior siding, doors, doorsills, windows, and windowsills using a garden hose and damp cloths first. Be cautious of structural instability or hidden hazards, such as nails or glass in any damaged area. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling debris, and remove and clean your clothing separately from other laundry to prevent cross-contamination.

What precautions should I take to prevent stirring ash and hazardous particles into the air?

To avoid stirring up ash by gently using a damp cloth, mop, or sponge instead of sweeping or vacuuming. If you need to handle larger debris, lightly mist the area with water to keep dust from becoming airborne. Lightly

mist with water before gently moving fire debris or items in ash. Avoid using dry sweeping or leaf blowers, as these can disperse ash and soot. Use a HEPA-filter vacuum for fine particles if vacuuming is necessary.

How do I safely remove ash and soot from my business premises?

Begin by wetting ash-covered areas with a hose to minimize airborne particles. Use damp cleaning methods such as mopping and wiping down surfaces with mild detergent and water. Avoid using leaf blowers or dry sweeping, as these can spread harmful particles. Collect ash in sealed bags for proper disposal and wear protective equipment like N95 masks and gloves.

How do I safely dispose of ash and soot collected during cleanup of my business?

Ash and soot should be handled with extreme caution due to the risk of hazardous particles, such as heavy metals or asbestos. Seal them in durable plastic bags, double-bagging if possible, to minimize the release of particles during transport. Place sealed bags in covered trash bins to prevent them from being disturbed by wind or animals.

Are there specific guidelines for cleaning up hazardous materials like lead, asbestos, or heavy metals?

If hazardous materials are present, you should not attempt cleanup without professional assistance. Asbestos and lead require certified specialists for safe removal, as disturbing these materials can release dangerous fibers or particles into the air. Testing by licensed professionals can confirm the presence of these hazards. Ensure compliance with all local and federal regulations, including OSHA and EPA guidelines, to avoid potential health risks and legal penalties. Keep children and vulnerable individuals away from affected areas until all hazards are mitigated.

What precautions should I take when cleaning soot from outdoor furniture and equipment?

Wear gloves and an N95 mask to prevent exposure to particles. Use a mild detergent and warm water to clean soot from non-porous surfaces, such as metal or plastic furniture. Rinse thoroughly and dry completely to avoid residue buildup. For porous materials like cushions, consider professional cleaning or replacement.

How can I take to clean windows, doors, and screens covered in ash?

Use a hose or bucket of water to gently rinse off ash before scrubbing. Use a damp cloth and cleaning pad to clean windowsills and doorsills. Clean glass surfaces with a vinegar and water solution to remove streaks and residue. Replace or clean screens with soapy water, ensuring they are thoroughly rinsed and dried before reinstallation.

What steps can I take to clean ash-covered driveways and walkways?

Hose down the area to minimize airborne particles, and use a stiff broom to sweep ash into piles. Avoid washing ash into storm drains, as this can harm the environment. Dispose of collected ash in sealed bags in your regular trash.

What steps may help clean smoke-damaged indoor furniture (wood, upholstery)?

- **Wood Furniture:** Gently wipe down with a damp cloth to remove soot. Use a wood cleaner or polish designed for fire-damaged wood to restore the finish.

- **Upholstery:** For fabric furniture, using a HEPA-vacuum just above the fabric followed by steam cleaning can help remove soot and odors. If the upholstery is leather, it may need specialized cleaning products to remove smoke stains and odors. For heavier smoke damage or delicate fabrics, it's best to consult a professional cleaner.

What steps should I take to clean HVAC systems in my business after exposure to smoke and ash?

Replace HVAC filters with a high-efficiency MERV 13 or higher filter to remove fine particles. Clean ducts and vents to prevent the spread of residual ash or smoke throughout the premises. Consult a professional HVAC technician for thorough inspection and cleaning to ensure the system operates safely and efficiently.

What steps may help to clean smoke damaged clothing and fabric items?

While wearing protective gear outdoors and away from the home, gently shake out visible soot outdoors before washing clothing and linens. Wash items in small loads with detergent. Some suggest adding a cup of white vinegar or other deodorizer to neutralize odors. Repeat the washing process if the smell of smoke persists. Do not use a dryer until all smoke odors are removed, as heat can set the smell permanently. Depending on the amount of smoke damage in your washer or dryer, consider cleaning them inside or having them professionally serviced and cleaned before using them.

What precautions should I take when cleaning electronics exposed to smoke or ash?

Turn off and unplug all electronics before cleaning. Use a microfiber cloth to gently wipe external surfaces and avoid using water or cleaning solutions on sensitive components. For heavily soiled equipment, consider hiring a professional technician to safely restore functionality.

What steps may help to clean electronics with light smoke damage?

Immediately turn off and unplug any electronic devices that may have been exposed to heat or smoke. Use a soft cloth to wipe away soot and ash. Avoid using cleaning products that could damage the device. For appliances like toasters, blenders, or coffee makers, dampen a cloth with water (and a tiny bit of dish soap for greasy spots) to wipe down the outer surfaces. Avoid getting moisture inside the appliances. If in doubt, consider replacing it.

If the device was exposed to water (from firefighting efforts) or has significant soot or ash contamination, consider replacing it or having it professionally serviced and cleaned. It's often safer to have electronics professionally inspected before attempting to use them again, as the heat from a fire can cause internal damage that's not visible.

What is the best way to clean metal items?

Use a mild soap solution and a soft cloth to clean metal items and jewelry. If they are tarnished or heavily sooted, a jewelry cleaner or a paste made of baking soda and water can be used. If the item is valuable or delicate, it's best to take it to a professional for thorough cleaning.

How should photos and keepsakes be cleaned?

If photos or keepsakes are only slightly damaged, carefully wipe away soot with a soft brush. If they're wet or too smoky, place them in a plastic bag and freeze to prevent further damage until you can clean or restore

them properly. For valuable or sentimental items, consult with a professional photo restoration service to ensure proper cleaning.

How can I remove ash and soot from parked vehicles?

Wash vehicles using a gentle hose spray to remove loose ash, then use a mild detergent and water to clean surfaces. Avoid scrubbing dry ash, as it can scratch paint. Rinse thoroughly and check ventilation intakes to remove accumulated debris. If ash has entered the vehicle's interior, vacuum with a HEPA filter and wipe surfaces with a damp cloth.

How do I clean children's outdoor equipment?

Wash equipment with a mild detergent and warm water, ensuring no residue is left behind. Keep children away from outdoor play areas until cleanup is complete and confirm that no ash remains on surfaces. Replace sand in sandboxes, as ash and soot are difficult to remove effectively.

How can I safely dispose of smoke damaged vegetation and yard debris?

Collect burned vegetation and yard debris in sealed bags or containers. Avoid burning debris, as it can release harmful particles. Contact your local waste management agency for guidelines on disposal or drop-off at designated facilities. Ensure ash and debris are not placed in green waste bins unless explicitly allowed.

How should I dispose of hazardous waste, such as cleaning chemicals, damaged by wildfire smoke?

Store hazardous materials in a well-ventilated area and away from flammable items. Contact your local hazardous waste disposal center for instructions on proper disposal. Never pour chemicals down the drain or dispose of them with regular trash, as this can pose environmental and health risks.

What should I do if I notice health symptoms during or after cleaning?

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

Health Risks and Protections

What are the health risks associated with smoke, soot, and ash, and how can I protect myself?

Smoke damage can cause significant physical damage as well as health issues, even if the home is not destroyed or burned by fire. Smoke, soot (fine, black powdery substance that forms when things burn), and ash contain fine particles and toxic substances that can lead to a range of health impacts, including skin and lung irritation, shortness of breath, worsen conditions like asthma, potential exposure to carcinogens, and other short-term and long-term medical conditions. They may also include harmful chemicals such as dioxins, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and heavy metals. Protect yourself by wearing a properly fitted N95 mask, goggles, gloves, closed toes shoes, and long sleeves and pants. Avoid disturbing ash unnecessarily and ensure good ventilation when cleaning indoor spaces. Wash your hands, clothes, and any exposed skin thoroughly after cleanup.

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Employees may experience respiratory irritation, coughing, or eye discomfort due to residual smoke or ash particles. Provide N95 masks and encourage frequent handwashing to minimize exposure. Ensure that workspaces are cleaned thoroughly and equipped with air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

Individuals, such as children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, or those with respiratory conditions, should take extra precautions or avoid reentering the business until it has been cleaned. And everyone should avoid contact with outdoor areas that have not been cleaned. Keep children and pets away from ash-covered areas to prevent ingestion or inhalation.

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

What are the health risks to employees returning to a business affected by smoke or ash?

Employees may experience respiratory irritation, coughing, or eye discomfort due to residual smoke or ash particles. Provide N95 masks and encourage frequent handwashing to minimize exposure. Ensure that workspaces are cleaned thoroughly and equipped with air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

How can I protect employees with respiratory conditions when reopening my business?

Monitor air quality levels and provide HEPA air purifiers in work areas. Limit outdoor tasks during poor air quality conditions and ensure that employees wear protective masks. Offer flexibility for at-risk employees, such as remote work options or modified duties, to reduce exposure.

What should I do if I or my employees experience symptoms related to wildfire smoke exposure?

Common symptoms include coughing, wheezing, headaches, or eye irritation. Move to an area with cleaner air, such as an indoor space with HEPA filtration. Seek medical attention if symptoms persist or worsen, particularly for individuals with preexisting conditions like asthma or heart disease.

Utility Outages and Operational Challenges

What should I do if my business experienced a power outage during the wildfire?

Check with your utility provider for restoration updates and inspect electrical systems for damage. Test appliances and equipment for functionality, and replace any damaged items. Discard perishable food or other temperature-sensitive goods that were without refrigeration for more than 4 hours.

How can I mitigate the effects of internet and communication outages?

Set up backup communication systems, such as mobile hotspots or satellite phones, to maintain contact with customers and vendors. Update your website and social media accounts to inform clients of temporary service disruptions. Consider using cloud-based platforms to access critical business data during outages.

What steps should I take if water services to my business were disrupted?

Boil tap water for at least 1 minute before use if a boil water advisory is in place. Use bottled water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning until normal water services are restored. Contact your water provider to confirm the safety of your supply before resuming regular use.

Financial and Insurance Support

Does business insurance cover losses from wildfire-related disruptions?

Review your policy to determine coverage for losses caused by utility outages, smoke damage, or mandatory closures. Business interruption insurance may cover lost income during forced closures or reduced operations. Contact your insurance provider to file a claim and provide documentation of damages and expenses.

What financial assistance programs are available for businesses impacted by wildfires?

Federal and state programs, such as those offered by FEMA or the Small Business Administration (SBA), provide financial aid and low-interest loans to affected businesses. Local chambers of commerce and nonprofit organizations may also offer grants or support for wildfire recovery. Visit disaster recovery centers for more information.

How can I document losses for insurance or financial assistance applications?

Take photographs of property damage and retain receipts for cleanup, repairs, and replacement costs. Maintain records of lost income during closures or reduced operations. Submit detailed documentation when filing claims or applying for financial assistance.

Permits and Approvals

Do I need permits to make repairs or modifications to my business after wildfire damage?

Minor repairs may not require permits, but structural modifications or significant renovations typically do. Contact your local building department to confirm requirements and ensure compliance with updated fire safety codes. Obtain approvals before starting any work.

What are the requirements for reopening a food service business after a wildfire?

Conduct a thorough inspection of food storage and preparation areas to ensure safety and cleanliness. Replace contaminated food and beverages and sanitize all equipment and surfaces. Contact your local health department for a reopening inspection and adhere to their guidelines.

Community Support and Resources

Where can I find local support for businesses recovering from wildfire disruptions?

Contact local chambers of commerce or small business development centers for resources and guidance. Disaster Recovery Centers often provide assistance with financial aid applications, cleanup support, and navigating regulatory requirements. Public health departments may offer additional resources for addressing environmental concerns.

What mental health resources are available for business owners and employees?

Wildfires and their impacts can be stressful for business owners and employees alike. Contact the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 for free, confidential support. Local nonprofits and health departments may also provide counseling services and stress management resources.

How can I connect with other business owners to share recovery strategies?

Join local business associations or attend community recovery events to network with other business owners. Online forums or social media groups focused on wildfire recovery can also provide valuable insights and support. Collaborate with neighboring businesses to share resources or coordinate reopening efforts.

Preparedness for Future Events**What steps can I take to prepare my business for future wildfires?**

Create an emergency plan that includes evacuation procedures, communication strategies, and backup power solutions. Invest in fire-resistant building materials and maintain defensible space around the property. Train employees on emergency protocols and regularly update your plan to address new risks.

How can I improve indoor air quality in my business during wildfire season?

Install high-efficiency filters in your HVAC system and use portable HEPA air purifiers in frequently used areas. Seal gaps around windows and doors to minimize smoke infiltration. Limit activities that generate indoor pollutants, such as burning candles or using harsh cleaning chemicals.

What supplies should I keep on hand to maintain operations during wildfire-related disruptions?

Stockpile essentials like bottled water, N95 masks, gloves, and backup communication devices. Invest in portable generators to maintain critical operations during power outages. Keep an updated list of emergency contacts, including utility providers and local support organizations.