

Get Ready—It's Going to Start Heating up in May

May is Wildfire Awareness Month. As of March 4, 2022, there have already been 8,349 wildland fires consuming almost 200,000 acres of land this year. These figures are significantly higher than recent years for the same time period.

In many parts of the United States, wildfire season is a year-round threat, and the regional risk can shift and vary from month to month based on local conditions. As weather becomes warmer and/or wildland vegetation (fuels) start to dry out, wildfire risk increases.

Much of the West, Plains, and Texas remain in a state of drought; however, abnormally dry conditions are present in Florida and portions of the Carolinas. These conditions are expected to linger and even expand in the coming months. Drought conditions are expected to appear in central Oregon in May and return to coastal California as early as June.



Now is the Time to Prepare

Organizations must be prepared to mitigate and minimize wildland fire exposures that threaten operations and employee safety. The following are some simple steps that property owners and stakeholders should take to help minimize loss from wildland fires and other emergencies:

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1	<p>Create a defensible space around your structures—defensible space includes three zones:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Zone #1 (Critical) is the non-combustible zone, 0-5 feet 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. Make sure to extend this non-combustible zone at least 6” above grade and include siding, sheathing, and structural framing. b. Zone #2 extends from 5-30 feet 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 feet 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	<p>Evaluate your landscaping—choose landscape that will not contribute to fire loading and growth wherever possible. Non-combustible hardscape and materials are desired when there is wildland fire exposure, though they may not be as aesthetically pleasing as other plants, shrubs, and trees.</p>
3	<p>Establish a landscaping maintenance plan. Have procedures to keep live vegetation trimmed and remove the accumulation of dry vegetation.</p>
4	<p>Inspect and protect elevated decks, balconies, and canopies by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<p>Close attics, crawl spaces, and ventilation ducts to prevent fire and smoke from traveling throughout the building. Install non-combustible screens 1/8” or finer on exterior vents to reduce the possibility of windblown embers from entering these spaces. Inspect the screens regularly to ensure their integrity.</p>

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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 three days and include water and food, a flashlight, first aid materials, batteries, moist towelettes, local maps, and a whistle at a minimum.
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 computer and mobile apps, conventional radio, and/or emergency radio. This is helpful to track fire progression and determine when there is a safe window to leave if needed.
9	Mitigate negative backlash from customers by communicating with them upfront about delayed deliveries or reduced hours that are a direct or indirect result of a fire. Reducing customer traffic to offices, storefronts, and retail locations can also help minimize road congestion, bottlenecks, and improve emergency vehicle access.
10	Create a written wildfire response plan —your plan should include all potential emergency actions that must be taken in the event of wildland fires.

A comprehensive plan will also include business contingency or continuity procedures to help ensure that your organization 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 recover from an emergency and reduce downtime with critical operations and the loss associated with it.

Ensure that business partner agreements are cemented before a disaster strikes to prevent price gouging and guarantee needed services. At a minimum, the plan should include contingent locations, back-up power generation, and vendor and contractor agreements.

Additional Resources

- National Interagency Fire Center—Wildland Fire Potential Outlook
https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf
- U.S. Fire Administration—Fire Prevention and Public Education
<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/prevention>

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For additional information contact:

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