



PURPOSE

This plan is written for households that may face wildfire, ember exposure, smoke, evacuation, utility interruption, road closures, or post-fire hazards. It is designed to be read before fire season and used as an action guide when conditions change quickly.

THE FAMILY PRIORITY ORDER

- 1 LIFE SAFETY**
- 2 EARLY EVACUATION**
- 3 ACCOUNTABILITY**
- 4 ESSENTIAL MEDICAL / COMMUNICATION NEEDS**
- 5 PROPERTY ONLY WHEN TIME ALLOWS**

ReadyParent Preparedness Series | Wildfire Edition

Source-informed by FEMA / Ready.gov, U.S. Fire Administration, U.S. Forest Service, CDC, EPA AirNow, NFPA, and American Red Cross guidance.

OPERATING PRINCIPLE

Wildfire is a time problem before it becomes a fire problem.

Wildfires can accelerate, change direction, throw embers far ahead of the visible flame front, close roads, degrade air quality, interrupt electricity and cellular service, and force communities to evacuate with little notice. A family that waits to see flames before acting has already surrendered its most valuable safety margin: time.

The objective of this plan is not to defend a house. The objective is to keep the household informed, mobile, medically supported, together or accounted for, and able to relocate before conditions become dangerous. Property protection is secondary and should only be attempted when it can be completed without delaying evacuation.

FAMILY DECISION RULE

If authorities issue an evacuation order, leave. If fire behavior, smoke, falling ash, road congestion, power loss, or a household medical need makes you believe waiting could trap your family, leave before an order. You do not need to wait for flames to reach your neighborhood to make a safe decision.

What wildfire can do to a household

The immediate threat is not limited to direct flame contact. Wind-driven embers can ignite roofs, decks, vegetation, outdoor furniture, vents, fences, sheds, vehicles, and debris around a home. Smoke can create hazardous particulate exposure even many miles from an active fire. Evacuation routes may become congested or close with little warning. Families should therefore prepare for both rapid departure and periods of smoke exposure when evacuation is not required.

Before fire season begins

Every adult and age-appropriate child should know the household's primary evacuation direction, at least one alternate route, the location of go-bags, where pets will be loaded, who is responsible for medications and documents, and where the family will reunite if members are separated. Practice the departure sequence with the same vehicles, pets, car seats, mobility equipment, and supplies you would actually use.

PART ONE

HOW TO PREPARE

Wildfire preparation has two jobs: reduce the chance that the home ignites, and reduce the time it takes the family to leave. Both should be completed before smoke is visible and before an evacuation warning is issued.

Build the home's ember and fuel defense

The area immediately around the structure matters because embers often find small, ordinary fuels first. Treat the house, attached structures, and surrounding property as one ignition system. The closer material is to the home, the more aggressively it should be managed.

AREA	DISTANCE	FAMILY STANDARD
Immediate	0–5 ft	Keep this area as noncombustible as practical. Remove leaves, needles, dead vegetation, wood mulch, cardboard, stored fuel, and other burnable material. Keep roofs, gutters, decks, porches and areas under decks clear.
Near	5–30 ft	Keep vegetation lean, clean and maintained. Remove dead branches and ladder fuels, space plants, trim branches away from the roof and chimney, and relocate firewood or small propane cylinders away from the structure.
Extended	30–100+ ft	Reduce continuous fuels and dense vegetation where property size and local rules allow. Maintain access for emergency vehicles and avoid fuel arrangements that can carry fire toward structures.

Inspect vents, eaves, soffits, roof edges, siding gaps, garage-door seals, decks, fencing attached to the house, and any place where wind-blown embers could collect. Use ignition-resistant upgrades appropriate to your home, local building code, insurer requirements, and wildfire exposure. If you are unsure where to start, request a wildfire home assessment from your local fire department, state forestry agency, Firewise program, or qualified professional.

Make evacuation mechanically easy

- Keep vehicle fuel at least half full during wildfire season; increase that margin when fire weather or nearby incidents elevate risk.
- Park vehicles facing the direction of departure when conditions are deteriorating. Keep keys with the responsible adult, not in a drawer that may be forgotten during a rushed exit.
- Know at least two routes out of the neighborhood. Drive them in daylight and after dark. Identify bridges, narrow roads, gates, washes, railroad crossings, and choke points that could fail or become congested.
- Choose a nearby family meeting location outside the immediate neighborhood and a second destination outside the community. Pick an out-of-area contact who can receive check-ins if local networks are overloaded.
- Plan where you can take pets. If you have livestock, trailers, loading equipment, or animals that cannot be moved quickly, establish a separate early-relocation trigger. Large-animal evacuation started at the same time as household evacuation is often too late.

DEPARTURE STANDARD

A family should be able to move from “we are leaving” to wheels rolling in roughly 10 minutes when bags are staged and responsibilities are assigned. If your real departure takes much longer, simplify the load plan.

PREPAREDNESS THAT TRAVELS

Stage the supplies that preserve mobility

The evacuation load should support several days away from home without turning the vehicle into a moving warehouse. Prioritize life safety, medication, identification, communications, water, clothing, pet needs, and the ability to function if lodging or shelter arrangements change.

Keep these items immediately accessible

- Go-bags for each household member with seasonal clothing, sturdy footwear, hygiene items, flashlight/headlamp, power bank, charging cables, and basic food and water.
- At least several days of essential prescription medication when medically and legally feasible, plus a written medication list, allergies, diagnoses that matter in an emergency, prescriber and pharmacy information, and copies of insurance cards.
- NIOSH-approved N95 or P100 respirators for adults and children who can wear them properly. Respirators reduce smoke-particle exposure when fitted correctly; they do not make a dangerous fire environment safe and do not supply oxygen.
- Copies or encrypted digital backups of identification, insurance policies, property inventory, vital records, emergency contacts, and key account information.
- Pet carriers or restraints, food, water, bowls, medications, vaccination records, waste supplies, identification, leash/harness, and a current photo of each animal.
- Paper road map, small cash reserve, vehicle emergency equipment, and backup means of receiving alerts when cellular data is unreliable.

Protect the indoor air before you need it

Wildfire smoke can affect families even when there is no evacuation threat. Designate one room that can be kept closed from the rest of the home and supplied with a correctly sized portable air cleaner if available. Use high-efficiency HVAC filtration that your system can safely accommodate, keep replacement filters on hand, and learn how to place the system in a recirculation mode if appropriate. Avoid activities that add indoor particles, such as smoking, burning candles, using unvented combustion sources, or unnecessary frying during heavy smoke.

Monitor local air quality using AirNow or your local air-quality authority. Children, older adults, pregnant people, and people with heart or lung disease may need earlier protective action. Follow individualized medical advice for asthma or other conditions that can worsen with smoke exposure.

Create a wildfire-ready household rhythm

When a Red Flag Warning, extreme fire weather, or a nearby incident raises concern, shift the household into a higher readiness state before evacuation notices begin. Charge devices. Fuel vehicles. Bring pets closer to the house. Confirm everyone’s location. Move go-bags to the departure point. Check official incident and local emergency channels. Avoid errands that separate the family or place members on roads likely to be used for evacuation.

PART TWO

STAY SAFE DURING A WILDFIRE

During a wildfire, information can become fragmented. Do not base family decisions on a single social-media post, a distant view of smoke, or the absence of visible flames. Use official evacuation information, local emergency alerts, fire-agency updates, weather information, and what you can directly observe around your route and home.

When a wildfire is nearby but no evacuation notice has been issued

1. Account for every household member. Determine who is home, who is at work or school, who is driving, and who may need help relocating.
2. Bring pets inside or place them in the location where they can be loaded immediately. Begin livestock relocation early according to the separate animal plan.
3. Place go-bags, medications, documents, pet supplies, and mobility equipment in or beside the evacuation vehicle. Do not block access routes with last-minute packing.
4. Charge phones and backup batteries. Keep emergency alerts audible. If your jurisdiction uses zone-based evacuation mapping, know your zone.
5. Review the primary and alternate routes. If traffic, fire activity, or road closures make the preferred route questionable, select a safer route before departure.
6. Close windows and doors to reduce smoke entry. Set HVAC to recirculate if your system supports it and if doing so is consistent with manufacturer guidance. Run portable air cleaners in occupied areas.
7. If time permits and conditions are safe, complete only quick exterior actions that reduce ember exposure, such as moving combustible furniture or doormats away from the house and closing garage doors and windows. Stop immediately if these actions could delay evacuation.

Do not climb onto a roof, enter smoke, use garden hoses to “fight” an approaching wildfire, or remain behind to protect property when evacuation is appropriate.

When you receive an evacuation warning or pre-evacuation notice

Treat a warning as the start of departure operations, not as permission to begin organizing. Families with young children, older adults, mobility limitations, medical equipment, large animals, limited transportation, or only one practical escape route should strongly consider leaving during this phase rather than waiting for a mandatory order.

- Load people first, then medical needs, then pets, then staged go-bags. Everything else is optional.
- Send a brief message to the out-of-area contact with who is together, where you are heading, and the route if known.
- Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, sturdy closed-toe shoes or boots, and eye protection if ash is falling. Keep respirators accessible for smoke exposure.
- Do not let the fuel tank get low while deciding whether to leave. Evacuation traffic can turn a short drive into hours.
- If you choose to remain during a warning, set a hard family departure trigger based on official status, distance, smoke conditions, road access, darkness, wind, or household needs. Do not renegotiate the trigger repeatedly as conditions worsen.

EVACUATION IS A LIFE-SAFETY OPERATION

When an evacuation order is issued

Leave immediately using the safest available route. Do not delay departure to gather additional property, take video, finish yard work, or wait for another household member who has already been directed to a separate safe location.

Drive calmly and predictably. Keep headlights on when visibility is reduced. Close vehicle windows and vents to outside air when smoke is heavy and use recirculation if available. Follow law-enforcement and fire personnel instructions even if the route differs from your normal plan. Emergency responders may be routing traffic away from hazards you cannot see.

Do not stop on road shoulders to watch the fire. Do not block fire apparatus, gates, hydrants, or intersections. Avoid shortcuts onto unpaved or unfamiliar roads unless officials direct you there. Fire can cross roads, and smoke can remove visual references very quickly.

If family members are separated

Do not send a household member back into an evacuation zone to reunite. Use the communication plan: each person travels to the designated safe destination or follows the instructions for their current location. One adult coordinates accountability through the out-of-area contact. Text messages may work when voice calls do not.

If you cannot evacuate safely

Call 911 if you are in immediate danger and explain your exact location, number of people, medical needs, and what is preventing evacuation. Follow instructions from emergency personnel. A home, vehicle, or open area near wildfire is not a substitute for early evacuation. Conditions vary too much for a generic “shelter in place” tactic to be considered reliably safe.

IF TRAPPED IN A VEHICLE

If fire or smoke makes travel unsafe and you cannot reach a safer area, call 911 and follow dispatcher instructions. Do not intentionally drive through flames or dense smoke when the roadway ahead cannot be seen. Keep the vehicle positioned where responders can find you and avoid parking in heavy vegetation when a safer cleared area is available.

If smoke, not flames, is the primary hazard

Stay indoors with windows and doors closed when public-health guidance recommends doing so. Use cleaner indoor air, reduce physical exertion, and monitor symptoms. A properly fitted N95 or P100 can reduce inhalation of fine particles when you must be outside, but a respirator is not a reason to remain in an evacuation area. Cloth masks and ordinary face coverings do not provide equivalent protection from wildfire smoke particles.

Seek medical help for severe breathing difficulty, chest pain, confusion, fainting, bluish lips or face, or other concerning symptoms. People with asthma, COPD, cardiovascular disease, pregnancy, or other conditions should use the action plan given by their healthcare professional and may need to relocate to cleaner air sooner.

PART THREE

AFTER THE DISASTER

The visible fire front may be gone while serious hazards remain. Re-entry is a controlled phase, not the end of the emergency. Utilities may be damaged, trees unstable, ash contaminated, roads restricted, and small hot spots hidden under debris.

Do not return until the area is officially reopened

Wait for local authorities to say your specific area is safe for re-entry. An evacuation order being lifted does not mean every road, structure, or utility is safe. Bring identification and proof of residence if local officials require it. Expect checkpoints, detours, limited access, and interruptions to power, water, gas, internet, and cellular service.

Approach the property as a hazard scene

- Look for downed or sagging power lines, damaged utility poles, leaking propane tanks, gas odor, unstable walls, damaged chimneys, burned trees, holes, weakened decks, and smoldering material before approaching the structure.
- Do not touch, drive over, or step near downed electrical lines. Report them to the utility or emergency services.
- If you smell gas or hear hissing, move away from the area and contact the gas provider or fire department from a safe location. Do not operate switches, start vehicles near the leak, or create an ignition source.
- Avoid hot ash, charred debris, burned structures, and tree bases that may still contain heat. Children and pets should stay away from ash and debris until the area has been assessed and cleaned appropriately.
- Use sturdy footwear, long sleeves, long pants, gloves, and appropriate respiratory protection when ash or dust may be disturbed. Wet methods or professional cleanup may be needed to keep fine particles from becoming airborne.

ASH IS NOT ORDINARY DIRT

Wildfire ash can contain fine particles and residues from burned building materials, vehicles, plastics, treated wood, chemicals, and household contents. Do not allow children to play in it, do not use leaf blowers to move it, and avoid dry sweeping that sends particles back into the air.

Check water, food and refrigeration before using them

Follow local public-health and utility notices regarding drinking water. If a boil-water, do-not-drink, or do-not-use advisory is issued, follow it exactly; boiling does not remove every possible chemical contaminant. Discard food that was exposed to heat, smoke, chemicals, or unsafe temperatures. When in doubt about refrigerated or frozen food after a prolonged outage, use USDA or local public-health guidance rather than appearance or smell alone.

Document before cleanup when it is safe to do so

Photograph and video exterior and interior damage before moving or discarding property, unless leaving an item in place creates a safety hazard. Record damaged rooms, structures, vehicles, equipment, landscaping, and serial numbers when available. Contact your insurer promptly and ask what emergency repairs are authorized, how debris should be handled, and whether the insurer needs an inspection before major cleanup begins.

RECOVERY IS STILL PREPAREDNESS

Re-establish a safe household, not just an occupied house

A family should not resume normal living simply because the structure is standing. Confirm that electrical, gas, water, septic, HVAC, and structural systems are safe. If the home experienced direct fire exposure, significant ember entry, heat damage, or firefighting operations, use qualified professionals where needed before restoring normal use.

Indoor smoke and ash cleanup

Keep windows and doors closed when outdoor air quality is poor, even during cleanup. Replace HVAC filters more frequently if they load with smoke particles and use a filter rating appropriate for the system. Portable HEPA air cleaners can help reduce indoor particles. Clean hard surfaces with methods that capture dust rather than redistribute it. Wash smoke-exposed fabrics and bedding. If contamination is extensive, includes building fire residues, or involves asbestos, lead, chemicals, sewage, or damaged insulation, professional remediation may be appropriate.

Family health after the event

Continue to monitor air quality for days after the fire. Smoke conditions can return with wind shifts or new fire activity. Watch for persistent coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, unusual fatigue, headaches, dizziness, eye irritation, or worsening of existing conditions. Follow medical advice for anyone with smoke-sensitive health conditions.

Wildfire evacuation and loss can also disrupt sleep, routines, appetite, school, work, and children's sense of safety. Restore predictable routines where possible, limit repeated exposure to distressing footage, answer children's questions plainly, and seek professional support when distress is intense, persistent, or interferes with normal functioning.

Reset the family system before the next threat

Within the first weeks after returning, replace used medications and supplies, clean respirators or replace disposable ones, recharge backup power, repair go-bags, update documents, correct weaknesses discovered during evacuation, and revise routes or meeting points that did not work. A wildfire plan is only useful if it improves after being tested by real conditions.

After-action question: What caused delay, confusion, separation, loss of information, or unnecessary risk? Fix those issues before the next fire-weather period.

FAMILY WILDFIRE READINESS STANDARD

The plan is ready when the family can answer these questions without guessing.



Where will we go if we must leave tonight?



What are our primary and alternate routes out?



Who is responsible for children, pets, medications, documents, and vehicles?



How will we communicate if local cellular service is overloaded?



What evacuation notice system does our community use, and are we enrolled?



Which household members need more time because of age, disability, medical equipment, or transportation limitations?



When will livestock or large animals be moved?



Where are our go-bags and respirators right now?



How much fuel is in the evacuation vehicle?



What is our early-departure trigger before a mandatory order?



Which room can function as cleaner indoor air during smoke events?



Who is our out-of-area accountability contact?

PRACTICE STANDARD

Run the household departure drill at least once before peak wildfire season and again whenever vehicles, pets, medications, family members, or living arrangements change. The goal is not speed for its own sake. The goal is calm, repeatable movement without forgotten people, animals, medical needs, or critical supplies.

REFERENCE BASIS

AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES USED FOR THIS PLAN

This ReadyParent plan consolidates widely accepted U.S. wildfire preparedness, evacuation, smoke-safety, home-hardening, and recovery guidance. Local evacuation orders, fire restrictions, public-health directives, building codes, and emergency instructions always take priority because wildfire behavior and community procedures vary by location.

Ready.gov — Wildfires: <https://www.ready.gov/wildfires>

Family evacuation readiness, alerts, supplies, N95 respirators, and wildfire actions.

Ready.gov — Evacuation: <https://www.ready.gov/evacuation>

Evacuation routes, vehicle fuel, destinations, and transportation planning.

U.S. Fire Administration — WUI / Defensible Space: <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/wui/communities/take-action.html>

Home ignition-zone and defensible-space actions.

National Fire Protection Association — Preparing Homes for Wildfire: <https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/wildfire/preparing-homes-for-wildfire>

Home ignition-zone principles and immediate-zone risk reduction.

CDC — Wildfire Safety: <https://www.cdc.gov/wildfires/safety/how-to-safely-stay-safe-during-a-wildfire.html>

Smoke exposure, respirators, and health precautions.

EPA AirNow — Be Smoke Ready: <https://www.airnow.gov/wildfires/be-smoke-ready/>

Clean-air room and household smoke preparation.

EPA AirNow — When Smoke Is in the Air: <https://www.airnow.gov/wildfires/when-smoke-is-in-the-air/>

AQI, activity reduction, indoor air, and respirator guidance.

American Red Cross — Wildfire Safety: <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/wildfire.html>

Preparedness, evacuation, re-entry, ash, and recovery safety.

U.S. Forest Service — Fire Adapted Communities: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/fac>

Defensible-space and community wildfire-resilience principles.

Publication note

Guidance reviewed August 2026. This document is educational preparedness guidance and does not replace instructions from local emergency management, fire departments, law enforcement, public-health authorities, utilities, insurers, healthcare professionals, or licensed building and remediation professionals.