TIPS: RETURNING HOME AFTER A WILDFIRE

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Take extra precaution when returning to homes and businesses after wildfire-caused evacuations. Unseen dangers may linger long after the flames die down. Fires can leave behind surprises ranging from gas leaks and weakened foundations to exposed wires and power lines. Here are tips for safely returning to your home after a wildfire:

1. Wait

- Do not go back into your home until the fire marshal or local fire authority says it is safe.
- Another fire could break out, there still could be burning ash, or downed power lines could present danger.

2. Be prepared and be cautious

- Before going home, prepare for any possible hazards. Wear boots, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt.
- If smoke and ash are present, you need to wear an N-95 dust mask, available at hardware stores (regular masks do not offer the level of protection needed for this type of air pollution). Also be prepared with gloves, a camera, flashlight, and clean drinking water.
- A safe food supply and plenty of clean water should be brought with you since the food in your home may have become contaminated or spoiled and therefore unhealthy to eat and your water supply may be compromised.
- Look out for charred trees and power poles on your property that may be unstable; live power lines that may be on the ground; spot fires and smoldering debris; live embers; and ash pits (holes created by burned trees filled with hot ash).

3. Check for hazards before going inside

- First, check for the smell of gas. If you smell gas, open the doors and windows, leave the house, turn the supply off at the tank or outside valve and contact your utility provider.
- Check for electrical power. If there is power, temporarily turn it off until you've completed your inspection. If there is no power, see if the main breaker is on.
- Check roofs and floors to be sure they are structurally safe.
- Inspect your roof and attic for sparks or embers, and wet them down immediately. Check daily in the attic and crawl space for embers as they can enter attics through attic vents if not properly screened.
• Check for and extinguish any burning embers or smoldering debris found on your roof, in rain gutters, on the porch, or anywhere else on your property. Check back frequently over the course of several days.

4. Be Cautious When Going Inside

• Continue wearing boots, heavy clothing, and rubber gloves when sifting through debris and handling hazardous materials (cleaning solvents, paints, batteries, etc).

• Wear an N-95 mask while sifting through debris to avoid breathing in smoke and ash.

• Beware of hot spots, dust, ash, broken glass, and other sharp objects.

• Listen for public announcements to find out if local tap water is safe for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and/or bathing. Until the water is safe use bottled water for drinking and household use.

• Do not start cleaning or throwing away anything until you have contacted your insurance company.

• Take pictures and/or video, and start a list of damaged belongings.

• Ask your insurance provider what you should do about covering broken windows, doors, and other exposed areas, pumping out water, and any other activities you may need to do to secure your home.

• Do not allow children to play in the area.

• Be aware that animals may have taken shelter in your home, garage, or outbuildings. Leaving a door open will allow animals to return on their own to their natural surroundings. Animals that appear injured or unwilling to leave may require you to call animal control.

• Contact your utility providers (water, natural gas, and electricity) to restore service.

• If you have a propane tank system, contact a propane supplier; turn off valves on the system, and leave valves closed until the supplier inspects your system.

• If you have a household safe, use caution when opening. A safe involved in a fire may hold intense heat for several hours. Make sure the safe is cool. If you open the door before the safe has cooled down, the entering air combined with the high inside temperature may cause the contents to burst into flames. Open only after you have allowed enough time for thorough cooling of the contents inside the safe.

• Don’t attempt to open or save any container of potentially hazardous material (or of unknown content) that has been burned or is bulging.

• Using caution can help reduce potential harmful effects. Play it safe. When in doubt, ask for help or seek advice from an expert.