

Why is Evacuation from Wildfire Different?

Warm dry weather, dense flammable vegetation and structures, steep terrain combine for a volatile wildfire equation. Living within the wildland urban interface means that planning for evacuation in case of wildfire is a necessity.

With some hazards evacuation can be predicted days ahead of time and routes can be pre-determined. When hurricanes or tsunamis are predicted, evacuation routes that move people inland and uphill play key roles. During flooding or potential mudslides, routes chosen are away from waterways or unstable hillsides. After an earthquake the best routes do not depend upon major bridges or other structures that may be unstable.

But for wildfire, such pre-determined evacuation routes are not a viable solution given the variable nature of ignitions and dynamic spread of fire. The homeowner must develop options for evacuation routes and destinations.

Wildfires are Unpredictable.

While fires can follow predictable spread patterns, many factors are unpredictable:

- Wildfires often threaten a community with limited warning. Red flag conditions – hot, dry, windy days – increase the chances of an ignition growing to major conflagration. Where and when an ignition will start a fire cannot be predicted.
- Wildfire typically moves alarmingly fast. As the fire grows larger it can create its own wind from the updraft of flames and produce even more unpredictable fire behavior.
- Wildfire changes rapidly as it burns across the landscape. Fire responds to terrain and fuel characteristics – whether grass, shrubs, trees, homes – moving faster, burning hotter or casting more embers.
- New fires can start ahead of the main fire. As embers are carried in the wind they can land miles ahead to start additional fires.

Evacuation routes may become un-usable

Some evacuation routes may become un-usable during a particular fire incident. As a fire progresses it may call for changes in evacuation plans.

- The changing path of the fire may block potential routes.
- The need for emergency personnel to access the fire may fill available routes to capacity.
- Smoke from fire can reduce visibility and make evacuation routes unsafe.
- Evacuation destinations may be threatened by the fire.

Challenges of no-notice evacuations

No-notice evacuations, whether due to natural or man-made incidents, are always a challenge. Wildfires can be like man-made technical disasters such as hazardous materials releases, chemical spills or terrorist acts that require whole portions of communities to be evacuated. Emergency response agencies require strategies to deal with key challenges such as:

- Limited information
- Ability to incorporate flexibility and compromise existing plans
- Rapid assessment of feasibility of tactics
- Compromised infrastructure (fire blocks, accidents, traffic clogs)
- Limited resources (transportation, road network capacity, personnel, communications)

- Urgency – there may be limited time to prioritize and allocate resources

Why Develop a Family Plan and Practice for Evacuation from Wildfire

Self-evacuation, or use of personal transportation is the most common way for residents to respond to a wildfire. However, the multiple cars and stress levels of their drivers may cause greater congestion on egress routes. When faced with dislocation and potential of unknown, wildfire related dangers, people are likely to be under considerable stress. Under these circumstances, people may not act as rationally as might be normally anticipated. Given the safety concerns during egress it is important to every resident to pre-plan for evacuation from wildfire. Plan at least two different ways to reach major roads or freeways from your home and place of work. Drive all potential routes before you need them and keep an up to date road map in your car for reference.

The number one reason to evacuate from wildfire is safety. You are safer if you leave a threatened area well ahead of the fire. In addition, the presence of residents in the fire zone will slow efforts to fight the fire, as firefighters avert their fire suppression activities to protect lives.

When and How to Evacuate

Evacuation Tips for Wildfire provides an overview of the evacuation process and evacuation checklists to help you plan, including where to get more preparedness help and up to date information. Obvious signs of wildfire include smoke, flames or news from your neighbors. Notifications may include door-to-door notification, siren alert or mobile loud-speaker

In most cases, law enforcement personnel will provide you evacuation directions. However, If you are ordered to evacuate and not given specific instructions, drive carefully toward main roads out of your neighborhood, to connect with major streets or freeways. Once clear of the area go to a friend's house or parking lot out of the hazard area. If you are required to stay away from your home for a long period, shelters will be designated by the Red Cross or other local authorities.

If you have time before you evacuate, review your optional evacuation routes. For road conditions, reports of construction or closures call 511 or connect with Caltrans web site www.dot.ca.gov/cgi-bin/roads.cgi.