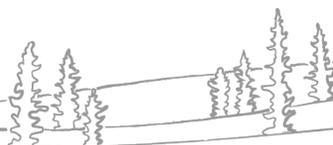


# RETURNING HOME SAFELY AFTER A WILDFIRE

Keep yourself safe and healthy, with these simple checklists

May 2023





## BEFORE RETURNING HOME

### Prepare yourself

Returning home after a wildfire affected the area may be stressful and traumatic. This guide will help you know what to do and where to get help. Before returning home think about what you will see, hear and smell in your community upon return to emotionally prepare yourself and your family. Your community may have changed dramatically. Some things to be prepared for:

- Burnt landscapes and trees
- Burnt buildings and vehicles
- Smell of smoke
- Areas covered in ash and soot

### Initial damage assessment

**Do not return home until the community government announces it is safe to return!**

The community government will have done an initial damage assessment of the community as a whole to make sure it is safe for residents to return.

- Seek guidance from your community government about any significant structural damage or hazardous conditions.
- You may wish to undertake atmospheric testing as it is recommended in all buildings affected by fire where hazardous gas vapours and particulates may be present. This will help understand if your home is safe for occupancy.
- Check with your community government and/or local utility providers to determine whether power, gas, water and sewage services are working.
- Remember to confirm that drinking water is safe from the tap, and that there are no boil water orders in place. If your drinking water is from a private well, have it tested if you can. Run your taps for 5 minutes to remove stagnant water out of your lines.
- Check with your community government regarding the status of core services and about collection or disposal of damaged items, as well as any changes to routine garbage collection services.
- Think about the following:
  - Do you have fuel, food, and water? There may be limited amounts available to you in your community.



- Are your cell phones charged? There may be interruptions or lack of electricity in your community.
- Do you have a radio, a flashlight and an emergency kit?
- Do you have the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)? You may not be able to get this in your community.
- Do you and your returning family members have your tetanus boosters and other vaccinations up to date?
- Do you have all the medications that you will need?
- Will you take your children and pets on the first visit?

Here is a list of recommended items that will help you in the recovery process:

- Camera or video camera
- Notebook and pen to record damage
- Buckets, mops and sponges
- All-purpose cleaner or unscented detergent
- Flashlight
- First aid kit
- Tools (hammer, pliers)
- Trash bags
- PPE (gloves, respiratory protection, proper clothing and shoes, etc.)
- Food and drinking water (recommended 4L per person per day)

### **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Take appropriate safety precautions and use appropriate PPE when entering a smoke impacted building based on the hazards identified.

General PPE requirements in post-fire environments that protect you from head to toe from cuts, scrapes, punctures, slips and other hazards typically include:

- Respiratory Protection (type based on atmospheric testing)
- Protective Outer Clothing (long sleeves and pants)
- Certified steel-toed Boots
- Gloves
- Hard Hat
- Safety Goggles/Glasses
- Leather or rubber gloves, as well as sturdy work gloves for cleaning and removing damaged items
- Hearing protection as required



## RETURNING HOME

Use caution when entering your community and on your property. Even though an initial damage assessment has been completed, other hazards may be present when returning after a wildfire such as:

- Slip, trip and fall hazards from unstable structures, damaged trees, collapsing roofs, open pits, or wet and slippery surfaces.)
- Hot spots (which can still flare up)
- Damaged or fallen power lines, poles, and downed wires
- Ash pits (these are holes in the ground that are hidden by being filled with ash and may still have hot embers)
- Contamination (e.g. toxins such as heavy metals, fire retardant, and other).
- Sharp objects such as nails, metal, concrete, or wood debris.
- Ash, soot, and demolition dust.
- Damaged or leaking household hazardous materials such as kitchen and bathroom cleaning products, paint, batteries, and fuel containers. (Please see how to properly dispose of these items later in this document)
- Small or poorly ventilated areas where carbon monoxide may be present from using pumps, generators, or pressure washers. (As a general rule – DO NOT ENTER TIGHT SPACES).
- Damaged or leaking pesticides or herbicide containers like ant or weed killer.
- Propane cylinders for heating or from a BBQ

Remember to watch animals closely upon your return and keep them under your direct control, follow any new or changing public health guidance.

## TAKE PICTURES

Documentation is key: Take photos of all damage prior to cleaning or throwing out. Document the time you spend working on all recovery activities, this information will be important for insurance or disaster assistance claims.

If you are not insured: check with non-profit organizations, your community government and the Government of the Northwest Territories to see what assistance may be available.



## IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT

Seek guidance from your community government on how and where to dispose of your materials, food and other items if required. Throw out the following:

- If your home was without power for an extended period of time all food in your refrigerator and freezer units should be disposed and your entire refrigerator and freezer units will require sanitization. If it is not possible to sanitize your refrigerator or freezer units, they may need to be disposed.
- Discard any food that has been exposed to heat, smoke or soot. This includes foods like dry goods (i.e. flour, sugar, spices, etc.) even if the package isn't open.
- Even jarred foods, including home canned items, may not be safe as the heat from fire can compromise the safety seal.
- Cleaning products, paint, batteries and damaged fuel containers may need to be disposed of properly to avoid risk.
- Some medications may be affected by heat, smoke and soot. Check with your doctor or health centre to find out if it needs to be thrown out and where to dispose of unused medications that could cause harm to the environment.

## ENTERING AND CLEANING YOUR YARD

### Before you begin

Remember to visually check the stability of the trees around your property. Look for damage on the tree trunk or for visible damage of burned tree roots. Any trees that have been damaged by fire may soon become another hazard. They will need to be cut down and removed. Stay away from damaged or fallen power lines and power poles. Wear appropriate PPE.

- Wet down any remaining fire debris to minimize health impacts to you and your family from breathing soot and ash particles left by the aftermath of this fire. Do not wash the fire debris into the street.
- Use a hose, sprayer or pressure washer on the exterior of your home, driveways, walkways, vehicles, patios, decks and outdoor furniture.
- Rinse off air intakes and air conditioners. Be sure NOT to use air hoses or leaf blowers — you do not want to drive more debris or particles into your home. (Be careful when using pumps, pressure washers or generators in enclosed spaces due to carbon monoxide).
- Attic insulation can retain smoke odours, and you may wish to consider replacing it.



## Chemicals and Heavy Metals

Your yard and surrounding areas may be impacted by fire ash and soot. These materials contain polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) and heavy metals. A fire restoration contractor will be able to provide clean-up services. Wear appropriate PPE.

- Avoid direct contact with ash. If you get ash on your skin, in your eyes, or in your mouth, wash it off as soon as you can.
- Wet down remaining fire debris.
- Scrape up fire ash and soot remaining on your property as much as possible, place it in plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being disturbed.
- Consider adding new, clean soil to gardens if the area was impacted.
- For children's play areas and equipment: clear away any debris and ensure water that may have been used in the fire is gone. If there is fire or structural damage to play equipment, consider blocking access to the area until play equipment is repaired or replaced. Use mild detergent and clean water to wash children's outside toys, play equipment, and recreational equipment. If you suspect or know a sand box was impacted by fire or firefighting materials, the sand should be replaced.

## Fire Retardants and Residue

If your home was sprayed or impacted by fire retardant, these products need to be removed from the outside siding and roof of your house, your vehicles, and any outside toys, furniture, tools etc. before you move back home. See below some common questions about wildland fire retardant in the NWT:

*How will I know if retardant has been used on my property?*

Long term retardant (LC95A) will appear red within the first 12 hours of application, but will fade to orange after 24 hours, and continue to fade with time. Short term retardant (WD881C) appears as a white foam on initial application and dissipates as the water evaporates from the foam.

*Is retardant used by the Department of Environment and Climate Change (ECC) hazardous?*

Long term retardant (LC95A) product used has a human health hazard rating of 0 (as per Section 16 of the Safety Data Sheet, in concentrate form/unmixed with water). Short term retardant has a health hazard rating of 2 (as per Section 16 of the Safety Data Sheet, in concentrate form/unmixed with water). If skin or eye contact occurs, irritation may occur. Rinse with plenty of water. Note: Retardants are NEVER applied in concentrate form.



For more information on the materials see the Safety Data Sheet information:

Long Term Retardant SDS:

[https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/fire/wfcs/products/msds/retard/phoschek/SDS\\_PC\\_LC95A-R.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/fire/wfcs/products/msds/retard/phoschek/SDS_PC_LC95A-R.pdf)

Short Term Retardant SDS:

<https://www.perimeter-solutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PHOS-CHEK-WD881-EN-OSHA-WHMIS-GHS-SDS-2020-06-18.pdf>

*How do I clean retardant?*

Retardants can be cleaned from surfaces using water. Dried retardants may take a bit longer to remove as they rehydrate upon contact with water. If skin contact occurs, wash with soap and water.

## CLEANING YOUR HOME

Smoke can irritate the skin, nose, throat, lungs, and eyes and can cause coughing and wheezing. Lingering smoke and fire ash in your home and yard can temporarily worsen any personal respiratory issues.

- Take appropriate safety precautions and use appropriate PPE when entering a smoke impacted building based on the hazards identified. General PPE requirements in post-fire environments that protect you from head to toe from cuts, scrapes, punctures, slips and other hazards typically include:
  - Respiratory Protection (type based on atmospheric testing)
  - Protective Outer Clothing (long sleeves and pants)
  - Certified steel-toed Boots
  - Gloves
  - Hard Hat
  - Safety Goggles/Glasses
  - Leather or rubber gloves, as well as sturdy work gloves for cleaning and removing damaged items
  - Hearing protection as required
- Use appropriate equipment for all clean-up activities, including:
  - A tool, such as a shovel, to dislodge or move any debris.
  - A first aid kit (including supplies to clean and cover any cut or wound before commencing clean-up).



- If there is no air quality advisory or demolition taking place in the area, get the air circulating inside your house by using a fan and opening your windows.
- Replace your furnace filter and/or air conditioner filter.
- Use a humidifier to reduce ash in the air.
- Consider having heating, ventilating and air conditioning units, and all ductwork professionally cleaned to remove soot, ash, and smoke residue. You can change filters when you first return home and then continue to replace them frequently.
- Wash all interior surfaces with white vinegar, a mild detergent or appropriate cleaning solution and rinse thoroughly. (vinegar helps remove odor and residue from smoke damage - do not use bleach, which has a harmful interaction with fire retardants that may have been used in the area).
- Wash ash or dry clean clothing, linens, and bedding.
- Disinfect and deodorize upholstery and fabric window treatments with spray deodorizing products available at most supermarkets. Do not use odor-masking sprays as they only cover up the problem and do not fix it. You can also steam clean items including carpets, window coverings, upholstered furniture, and mattresses. Steam neutralizes the odor and carbon film left by forest fires.
- Take electronic equipment outside and “blow out” the components with an air hose before using. Ash can cause static charges.
- Remove excess water: If your home was damaged by water used to fight the fire, you will need to get rid of all excess water to prevent mould growth. Before starting any work, ensure proper PPE is worn appropriate to water contaminants, such as a mask and rubber gloves.
  - To help prevent mould growth, clean any water-damaged or water-stained surfaces using warm water and soap.
  - Dry all wet items as soon as possible.
  - Dry wet or waterlogged carpeting as quickly as possible and any underlay should be removed.
  - Steam clean carpets with a disinfectant.
  - Remove excess moisture from the air inside your home using a dehumidifier.
  - Let your insurance company and restoration contractor know as soon as possible if you find any visible mould growth or smell mould inside your home.



## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AND OTHERS

On top of risks your physical health, traumatic events like emergencies and natural disasters can have a big impact on your mental health. Coping with the stress and emotions during the disaster, and in the days and weeks that follow, can be challenging.

### SEEK HELP

If you or someone in your family are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, there are supports and resources available to help, including:

- NWT Helpline: 1-800-661-0844

*If you are having thoughts of self-harm, please seek medical attention immediately, including calling 911.*

### DO SMALL THINGS TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:

- eat nutritious food
- stay hydrated
- try to rest often and listen to your body's need for sleep
- pace yourself on your clean-up activities, and take regular breaks
- prioritize tasks, and don't pressure yourself to tackle it all at once

### LOOK OUT FOR YOURSELF, AND OTHERS, NOW AND OVER THE LONG-TERM

The signs of stress related to a traumatic event do not always appear immediately during or after the event. Signs of trauma, and difficulty coping, may show up now, or in the weeks ahead.

Watch for these signs, and remember to seek help for yourself and your loved ones:

- feeling worried or frustrated more than usual
- feeling hopeless
- thinking about the disaster or traumatic event all the time
- having flashbacks to the event
- experiencing changes in your sleep pattern
- experiencing changes in appetite (eating more or less than usual)
- avoiding people or activities that you usually enjoy
- using alcohol or drugs more



## DESTROYED OR MISSING DOCUMENTS

Be careful: if your documents are located in a safe, do not attempt to open it until the outside is cool to the touch.

ITEM DESTROYED OR MISSING	WHO TO CONTACT FOR REPLACEMENT
Animal registration papers	Community government offices
Bank Books	Bank Branch
Birth certificates – Marriage certificates – Death certificates	Vital Statistics GNWT Department of Health and Social Services
Bonds (completely destroyed)	Write to: Canada Savings Bonds PO Box 2770, Station D Ottawa ON K1P 1J7 Include names and addresses that appeared on bonds, approximate date when purchased, and denominations. Gather all pieces and ashes and keep them for further reference.
Bonds (partially destroyed)	Gather up remaining pieces and ashes, put them in a package and write a letter explaining what happened. Send to Canada Savings Bond address (above)
Children’s Services and Social Assistance identification cards, medical assistance, or social assistance cheques	Your case worker
Immigration documents	Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada
Credit Cards	Issuing credit card company
Divorce papers	Supreme Court where decree was filed or divorce lawyer
Drivers licences and vehicle registration title cards	GNWT Department of Infrastructure
Income tax records	Revenue Canada
Insurance policies	Insurance agent
Land titles	GNWT Lands Titles Office
Medical records	Health centre, family doctor, or specialist
Military discharge papers	Veteran Affairs Canada
Money (partially or completely destroyed)	Nearest Bank of Canada branch (check with your bank on locations)
Passports	Service Canada for Canadians / Your Consulate General for non-residents
Territorial Health Care card	GNWT Department of Health and Social Services
Social Insurance Number (SIN) cards – Canada Pension Plan documents, Employment Insurance documents	Service Canada
Stocks	Issuing company or lawyer
Titles and deeds	Local municipal office
Wills	Family lawyer or estate lawyer