

How to prepare before a wildfire forces evacuation

Published in *The Valley Springs News* / July 31, 2024

There were almost 60,000 wildfires last year in the United States that torched more than 2 million acres.

Notably, more than 100 people were killed in August when wind-driven flames swept the Hawaiian island of Maui, destroying the town of Lahaina.

Where do wildfires occur?

Wildfires can occur anywhere conditions are ripe for them to ignite and spread. The National Park Service says humans are the cause of about 85 percent of all wildfires annually in the U.S.

Texas leads the country with the most wildfires, but Alaska takes the dubious honor of most acres burned. Populous California has the most homes at risk from wildfire, according to the Insurance Information Institute and the National Interagency Fire Center.

How can I prepare?

You should always, no matter where you live and what dangers you face, have more than one way to receive emergency alerts. The federal government's Ready.gov website recommends downloading the FEMA app and setting it to receive real-time alerts. You can also sign up for local alerts through your town, county or state.

Have an emergency plan and make sure everyone understands it. Also have a plan for your office, schools, daycares and anywhere else your family frequents. Your insurance policies and other personal documents, such as your ID and marriage certificates, should be kept in a safe place. Copies should be kept separately, but also somewhere safe.

Know your evacuation zones and routes and practice them, along with your emergency plan, with your family.

At home

As you build, renovate or make repairs, choose fire-resistant materials to help keep your property safe. Make sure you have an outdoor water source with a hose that can reach anywhere on your property. Create a fire-resistant zone at least 30 feet around your home that's free of leaves, debris and other flammable materials.

Make sure you have a room that can be sealed off from outside air if approaching fires cause your air quality to deteriorate. Close all the windows and doors and set up a portable air cleaner to keep indoor pollution under control.

Make an emergency kit

Have an emergency kit on hand with enough supplies for your entire household, including pets, and know where it is. Be careful when packing flammable or combustible household products such as cooking oils, rubbing alcohol and hand sanitizer. Also consider storing N95 masks to protect against smoke inhalation.