<u>If a Wildfire Threatens</u>

Evacuate or Not: It's Your Decision

Whether you will stay with your home and defend it or evacuate when wildfire threatens is a complex decision. A rational assessment of all the relevant factors cannot be made at the last moment. You need to plan ahead by considering whether you are physically and emotionally prepared to defend your home *and have adequately prepared your home to survive a wildfire*.

Remember, the decision is yours. You have a legal right to remain with your home and defend it, whether you own or rent it. Every situation is different—what's right for you may not be right for your neighbors. You must be confident that you are making the best possible decision for the safety of yourself and your family and the survival of your property.

Personal Factors to Consider…

Are your house and property prepared for wildfire?

Both your house and property must be prepared for wildfire before the fire starts. Your home and buildings should be of fire resistant materials. Your vegetation should be thinned and pruned, and all debris should have been removed from your home ignition zone.

Are you physically able to defend your home?

You must be fit enough to carry out sustained physical work, such as watching for and putting out spot fires, for perhaps up to five or six hours after the fire front has passed. You must be sufficiently able-bodied to withstand heat, smoke, and fatigue while you work. It is best if several able-bodied people are able to defend the home.

Are you mentally prepared to face fire?

Wildfire can be a frightening experience. It will be hot, dark, windy, smoky, and noisy. The air will be thick with burning embers. You may not be able to predict where the fire is coming from, or how fast it is traveling. Embers lodging against your house may cause it to ignite. Windows may break. You will not know how long the crisis will last. While the main fire will pass through in minutes, the smoke, heat, and burning embers may continue to threaten you for some hours. You may have to deal with feelings of panic, fear, confusion, isolation, and fatigue.

Are any members of your household unable to cope?

You should consider evacuating any elderly, very young, ill, or disabled members of your household.

Are you prepared to stay with your house after the fire has passed?

Experience shows that houses have ignited and burnt down several hours after the passage of the fire front. People have left their houses after the fire has passed and

returned several hours later to find their homes in ruins. You will need to closely monitor the inside and outside of your house to ensure that smoldering embers do not go unnoticed.

Planning for Evacuation

If you assess your situation and decide you cannot stay and defend your home, evacuation is an option. However, for the safety of your family, you must plan as carefully as you would if you were planning to stay.

When will you leave?

If you decide to evacuate, do so early. Case studies show that this is a life-determining decision. It may be appropriate to go to your chosen refuge on any day on which the danger of wildfire on the island is extremely high (for example, if there is a wildfire burning somewhere in the islands). If you decide to wait until there is a fire burning closer to the Highlands, you must leave well in advance of the arrival of the fire front. Never wait until the last moment.

Where will you go?

Decide in advance where you will go, and ensure that it is a safe area. Find out if there are designated refuge homes near you. If you plan to take shelter in a refuge home, talk to the owner of the home, and find out where you can park your vehicle, how to get into the house, and the location of ladders, hoses, shovels, etc., that may be needed to protect the refuge home. Alternatively, you may wish to shelter with friends or relatives somewhere else on the island.

How will you travel?

Travel by car if possible. If you plan to travel with a neighbor, organize this well in advance. Plan your route to your refuge, and determine alternate routes in case the fire blocks your chosen route. Be sure to allow additional time for slow traffic conditions and poor visibility.

What will you take with you?

Pack survival equipment (wool blankets, drinking water, medicines) with any essential documents or possessions (insurance policies, bank records, etc.). If you plan to evacuate pets, bring along a supply of food for them. Keep a list ready, so you can pack the car quickly when needed.

What if family members are separated?

Plan what you will do in the event your children are at school and/or other family members are at work. Find out the school policy if wildfire threatens. Don't allow panic to drive anyone out in life-threatening conditions searching for missing family members.

Preparing to Defend Your Home

If you decide not to evacuate during a wildfire, have all of the following items ready ahead of time. Make sure everyone who might be sheltering in your home knows where to find them.

What you will need…

- Hoses - enough garden hose to reach all corners of the home, including the roof
- Shovels to remove flammable vegetation from around the house before the fire arrives and to smother spot fires with dirt
- Metal ladder long enough to allow you to check the roof and eaves
- Metal buckets and mops to extinguish burning embers
- Towels. When wet, towels can be placed in vulnerable places to prevent spot fires starting on windowsills and can seal gaps under doors when sheltering in the home
- Flashlight to help you check eaves for burning embers. Include supply of batteries
- Portable radio to listen for emergency warnings and information about the fire's progress
- First aid kit to treat minor injuries/ burns
- Drinking water. To prevent dehydration, drink water every ten minutes
- Protective clothing to protect you from radiant heat and smoke. Everyone who will be sheltering in your house should have these items:
  - Wide brimmed hat or hardhat
  - Coveralls or a long-sleeved shirt (preferably wool) and long pants. Cotton and other non-synthetic materials are also good and may be easier to find than wool. The point is to reduce body exposure as much as possible with materials that will not melt
  - Goggles and leather work gloves
  - Sturdy leather shoes or work boots and wool socks
  - Mask, handkerchief, or towel to place over your nose and mouth
  - Wool blankets to protect skin from radiant heat

What to expect as the fire front approaches…

There will be a shower of sparks and embers before the main fire front approaches. This shower of embers will continue for several hours after the fire has passed. You should also expect strong winds and heavy smoke, which will make it dark, reduce visibility, and make breathing unpleasant.

The main fire front will generally pass within five to 15 minutes. During this time the radiant heat will become unbearable even if you are wearing protective clothing. You will need to retreat indoors ***before the heat becomes hard to tolerate***. Be sure to take along any firefighting equipment that may melt if left outside.

What to do outside your home before the fire arrives…

- Move all flammable furniture, doormats, woodpiles, or vegetation that could catch embers and ignite to at least 30 feet from the house. Roll up or remove awnings and exterior blinds.
- Dampen all areas on the side of the house facing the direction of the fire.
- Block the gutter outlets and hose down the roof to fill the gutters.
- Turn on your garden/roof sprinkler system if you have one (should be generator-powered)

As the Fire Front Passes

What to do inside your home…

- Close all windows and doors.
- Fill the kitchen sink, laundry tub, and bathtub with water. Soak towels to place in any crevices.
- Fill buckets with water to put out spot fires.
- Place fire extinguishers in an easily accessible place.
- Place a ladder near ceiling access to inspect roof space periodically for fires. Extinguish them, if necessary.
- Keep everyone together in a part of the house where you can watch what the fire is doing. Stay clear of windows.
- If windows break, extinguish any sparks or embers that enter the house.
- If furniture catches fire, use a fire extinguisher to put out the flames.
- ***Remain indoors until you are absolutely sure the fire front has passed.***

After the Fire Front Has Passed

As soon as possible after the fire front has passed, go outside to inspect for spot fires. Be sure to wear your protective clothing.

- Hose down the house, paying special attention to the roof and eaves, window frames, stairs, decks, and latticework. Extinguish all flames and smoldering or burning embers.
- Patrol your home for three to four hours after the fire. Watch for embers, and extinguish spot fires while they are still small. Be vigilant!