

SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING A “SAFETY ZONE” FOR USE IN A WILDFIRE

In a wildfire, everyone may not be able to evacuate the burning area. This has proven true again and again in real life. Sadly, many persons have died trying to evacuate when it was impossible to do so.

If there's only one road to your home, the situation during a fire could be like this:

- The road will probably be overloaded with traffic of people trying to evacuate. Some vehicles may be slow, pulling horse or boat trailers or campers.
- Numerous fire engines, water tankers, bulldozers on wide trailers, and other emergency response vehicles will be trying to enter the area.
- There may be very thick smoke, causing extremely limited visibility and making travel very hazardous.
- Everyone will be experiencing some level of fear, anxiety, and even panic.
- A vehicle could stall or have an accident on the road, blocking traffic in both directions.
- The fire may be on both sides of the road, so no vehicles can get through at all.

Even if there's more than one road, erratic winds may drive the fire in multiple, shifting directions, making evacuation unsafe in any direction.

In such situations, you have two choices – and you must plan ahead and prepare carefully for either one:

(1) Stay at home and defend your house from the fire. This option requires extensive preparation of your home and its surroundings – and serious planning and training for yourself and your family. In remote locations, staying behind could in fact be the best choice for saving your home. Consult your local fire department about this decision, and to obtain advice on training, water supplies, and firefighting tools. Persons who are not able-bodied should be evacuated early if there's any possibility of a fire coming close.

(2) Go to a pre-designated and pre-prepared “Safety Zone” – the subject of this info sheet.

Safety Zones are wide, open areas where you and your neighbors could survive a passing wildfire.

Some places have pre-existing safety zones, such as large parking lots or horse arenas. A large, irrigated lawn or pasture could also be used. But in most rural areas, you will need to create a safety zone.

Fire needs three components in order to exist: heat, oxygen, and fuel. **Fuel is anything that can burn.** This includes grass, weeds, dead leaves, pine needles, twigs, brush, and trees. It also includes wood piles, fences, decks, sheds, cars, and machinery. Take away the fuel, and the fire will not be able to burn!

Safety zones are places where the fuel has been removed. When a fire arrives at an area with no fuel, it will burn *around* the area, but not *through* it. People in the middle of a well-prepared safety zone may feel the fire's heat, but will not be burned.

A safety zone must be flat – for instance, a large grazed field with no trees and brush, or perhaps a wide river bed with little vegetation nearby.

A safety zone must be large. The size depends in part on the nearby vegetation. The radius of a safety zone should be at least 8 times the height of the vegetation that surrounds it. If your zone is a field surrounded by trees 50 feet tall, it should have a radius of 400 feet (a diameter of 800 feet). If the zone is surrounded by brush 5 feet tall, the radius should be at least 40 feet – people in the center should be 40 feet from the brush.

Recent research on safety zones emphasizes that this “8 times” rule applies only on flat ground with no wind. A significant wind can require a safety zone to be much larger to be truly safe. See <http://www.firelab.org/project/firefighter-safety-zones> for more information.

Flammable materials should be removed from a safety zone in advance. Brush should be cut and removed, and grass should be closely weed-whacked. The very center should be cleared down to bare soil. Consider asking your local fire department to help you burn off your safety zone before fire season!

Create your safety zone in the spring, and monitor it every week during fire season. If possible, store water and firefighting tools in a metal box in your safety zone. Backpack pumps that carry five gallons of water, and rake-like tools called McLeods, are excellent choices for trained persons to deal with small fires.

BE PREPARED . . . and LIVE !

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