

Wildfires Can Happen Anywhere

Many people think wildfires occur in only certain areas of the United States—but that's not true. A wildfire can happen anywhere and in many different terrains, from prairies and deserts to forests and mountains. Wherever they occur, they are bound to be fast-moving and unpredictable.

Unexpected Causes

Fires are part of a natural cycle in some ecosystems. A wildfire can be beneficial by clearing overcrowded plant material and debris. When the fire burns away dead vegetation, nutrients return to the soil, which encourages biodiversity.

Local conditions, such as droughts and lightning strikes, put areas more at risk. But did you know that most wildfires are caused by people? Almost **85% of wildfires** come from such human activities as leaving campfires unattended, burning debris, operating equipment, negligently discarding cigarettes, and committing intentional acts of arson.

Preventing wildfires resulting from human error requires common sense. For example, campers need to watch their fires and completely extinguish any flames before leaving the area. Those who burn debris on their property need to follow local ordinances and make safe choices, such as not starting a fire under a canopy with low-hanging limbs. Practical thinking can go a long way toward deterrence.

You have probably heard of **Smokey Bear** and his catchphrase, "Only you can prevent wildfires." Smokey's warning and public service announcements remain relevant today.

Discourage Fire Spread

Wildfires disrupt ecosystems and put nearby populated areas at risk. If your property adjoins a natural area, take extra precautions to protect it from potential flames. Create a zone to discourage fire spread. A "fire fuel" break, such as a driveway, parking lot, gravel area, or lawn, can keep wildfires from encroaching on your property. Remove from your property any dry brush or other materials that may burn easily.

Be Prepared to Evacuate

Even if you think you live at a safe distance from potential wildland fires, pay careful attention to weather reports and take fire warnings seriously. If your community has been experiencing extreme weather, such as high winds, then it's far more likely a wildfire will spread quickly and be difficult to douse. It's important that you follow any evacuation orders issued by local authorities. Do not attempt to fight off the wildfire yourself.

Consider packing a go-bag with irreplaceable valuables and important documents, and keep your emergency kit stocked. If you have not already done so, add **respirators or dust masks** “marked NIOSH with N95 or P1000” to your kit.

Once authorities have declared it safe to return to your property, document any damage with photographs or video footage, and contact your insurance company. **Church Insurance** has representatives who can help you put your organization back together after a loss.

Do what you can to prevent fires—and then be prepared to evacuate if one occurs in your area.