

# BEFORE HEADING INTO FIRE AND SMOKE AFFECTED AREAS

This information is also on the USW Local 1944 National Health and Safety Committee's [Facebook page](#).

## BEFORE HEADING INTO AFFECTED AREAS:

- Know the location and status of the nearest medical treatment facility and verify the route to reach it is passable.
- Ensure you have all documentation required, and are aware of any notices (evacuation alert, contamination issues provided by the health authority).
- Be sure a clean water supply, electricity, and communication system (including 911 access) is restored, reliable, and readily accessible.
- Be certain areas not yet cleaned or not safe are not accessed, your manager has been notified and have been marked.
- Homes and outdoor areas should be clean and free of environmental hazards before working in the area.
- Ash at sites where CCA (pressure treated) wood was present, such as wooden decks, play structures, and wood chips, may contain high levels of arsenic if these were pre-2002 structures.
- Carbon monoxide: NEVER use generators, space heaters, or any gas or kerosene appliances in enclosed spaces as this may result in carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Ensure that power has been restored and any power cables/poles have been repaired or removed in the work area. If you are not sure of the status of power cables near your work area, ask before starting your work.
- Ensure that you have all PPE for possible chemical exposure and biological hazard exposure, if you are not trained to work in areas with these 2 hazards, it is your responsibility to advise the manager and to not do Dangerous Work.
- Ensure that you have a full safety breakdown of all possible hazards; this may include MSDS, WHMIS sheets, additional training possible remediation by company or by third parties before entering the work area.
- Where the possibility of hazards exists, you should not be working alone at any time.

## POTENTIAL HAZARDS FROM FIRE DAMAGE

- **Ash:** Recent fires may have deposited large amounts of ash on indoor and outdoor surfaces in areas near the fires. This ash may cause irritation of the skin, nose, and throat, and may cause coughing. Ash and dust (particularly from burned buildings) may contain toxic and cancer-causing chemicals including asbestos, arsenic, and lead. For these reasons, children should not be in the vicinity while cleanup is in progress. Even if careful, it is easy to stir up dust that may contain hazardous substances.
- **Debris:** Broken glass, exposed electrical wires (whether or not they are "live"), nails, wood, metal, plastics, and other solid objects commonly found in areas of fire damage can cause puncture wounds, cuts, electrical injuries, and burns from smoldering materials.
- Watch for **ash pits** and mark them for safety. Ash pits are holes full of hot ashes, created by burned trees and stumps. Falling into ash pits or landing in them with hands or feet can cause serious burns. This underscores the need to only enter areas that have been cleaned and examined for safety.
- Workers should not be permitted in residences, fire-damaged buildings or structures until these have been cleared by their local authorities. **Unstable building structures** include: flooring, stairways, railings, balconies, roofing, and fire escapes.
- Materials in storage areas may have moved into unstable positions and could fall. Doors and entryways to storage areas should be opened carefully and if necessary secured prior to entry.
- If a building has been used for storage of chemicals, make sure that you use all confined space entry procedures before entering the building or structure.

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## HAZARDS FROM WATER DAMAGE

- Water damage to building materials and personal belongings can release potentially hazardous chemicals that could cause rashes, infections, or exposures to toxic substances.
- Wet materials are breeding grounds for bacteria and fungi. Potentially harmful microorganisms grow readily on or in non-refrigerated food and liquids. They can also grow on damp building materials, personal belongings, and dead animals.

## UTILITIES

- **Water:** In areas impacted by the fires, water pressure may have been lost or entirely out for periods of time. Check with the water provider to be sure that the water is safe to drink. If the water comes from a private well that has had damage, it may require disinfection. If you are unsure of the cleanliness of the water, it can be heated to a rolling boil for 1 minute to kill potentially harmful bacteria and other microscopic organisms before drinking. If the water looks dirty, do not drink it.
- **Electricity:** Electrical hazards will need to be repaired. Avoid downed or damaged electrical lines.
- **Propane:** If the home propane tank is damaged and leaking, call 911 and the propane service provider. Do not transport leaking BBQ propane tanks in a car or dispose of them in the trash. Contact the hazardous materials section of the local health department for information.

## PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- **Personal hygiene:** If you have had contact with any potentially hazardous substance in a fire-damaged area, wash your hands and any other exposed body part thoroughly with soap and water or bathe them. Remove any exposed clothing and wash separately as soon as possible.

## MASKS

- Use of protective respiratory masks is recommended for adults cleaning up areas at which ash particles cannot be controlled (see [‘Respiratory Protection in Wildfire Smoke: A Guide for Public Health Officials’](#)).
- These should be chemical-cartridge respirator with mechanical filters. Cartridges should be changed every 4-6 hours of use or as soon as they become restricted. N-95 or higher type with exchangeable cartridges.

## FOOD

- Discard any food that may have come in contact with hazardous materials, (e.g. fire retardant, ash, etc.) while in the work area. **When in doubt, throw it out!**