

# FAQs: Properties Just Outside Burned Areas – Nearby Business Properties

February 19, 2025

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH



## Returning and Assessing Your Business

### How do I assess my business for smoke damage?

Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and clothing to protect yourself – including goggles, an N95 or P100 respirator, gloves, long pants, long sleeve shirt, and closed toe shoes.

Walk exterior of home and look for obvious signs of fire and smoke damage. Check for signs of soot and ash buildup on the exterior siding, doors, and windows. Make a note, photograph these areas, and document them for your insurance carrier prior to undertaking any remediation or cleanup.

Walk the entire interior of business and determine the extent of smoke, soot and ash contamination in each room and air vent. Remove from the home to minimize odor problems that could mask smoke odors. If there is a noticeable smoke odor, then you likely have some level of smoke damage. In cases where there is no visible soot or ash, a wipe test, where you wipe a wall or windowsill, confirming no soot or ash, can help determine that there was not significant intrusion of dangerous ash or soot. For situations involving light soot or ash on horizontal surfaces and/or visible airborne particulate and/or noticeable smoke odors, a more thorough cleaning is recommended.

If you notice signs of significant soot, smoke residue, or odors in your business, it's important to assess whether professional cleaning is necessary.

- Do not turn on your HVAC system until the bulk of the soot/ash has been cleaned up. Operating the system prior to removing the bulk of the soot/ash throughout the home will only result in spreading the particulate and re-contaminating surfaces that have already been cleaned.
- If you're filing an insurance claim, they may send a field adjuster to do an assessment and may have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work.

### Is there guidance to follow when seeking professional help?

The following guidelines are helpful when selecting a professional cleaning or restoration service contractor for smoke, soot, and ash restoration.

First, if you're filing an insurance claim, check with your insurance company to see if they have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work. If you end up looking for a professional cleaning contract yourself, confirm that the contractor is properly licensed by the State or County and has the

required bonding and liability insurance coverage. Additionally, you can ask the contractor if they work with your insurance company and verify this with your insurance agent.

You may also want to check references, check with the [Better Business Bureau](#), and/or follow up with past customers to ask about their experiences with a particular contractor prior to signing a contract.

**It is also essential to request certifications from the contractor, including company and employee certifications** from organizations like the [Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification \(IICRC\)](#) and the [Restoration Industry Association \(RIA\)](#).

Before agreeing to start or paying for any work, you should also obtain a detailed, written estimate of the work to be done and the schedule for doing it from the contractor, and do not proceed without one. Make sure to review and understand the terms of the contract and what is required by you, such as payment of your insurance deductible. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property. It is best to avoid contractors who fail to provide specific cost and schedule details in the contract.

### **What tests should I ask for to see if it is safe to return to my business?**

Generally, the risk in your business is determined by the extent of smoke damage, i.e. the smoke, soot and ash conditions, inside your business. Cleaning up the smoke damage reduces that risk inside. While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe”, and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property.

## **Food and Drink Safety**

### **How can I ensure the safety of food and beverages stored during a wildfire?**

Inspect food and beverages for signs of contamination from smoke, ash, or soot. Discard any perishable items that were exposed to unsafe conditions or stored in a refrigerator without power for more than 4 hours. Sealed cans and bottles are generally safe but should be cleaned thoroughly before use. Consult local health regulations for additional guidance.

## **Cleanup and Safety**

### **What safety measures should be taken during cleanup to avoid exposure to hazardous materials?**

Always wear protective gear, including an N95 or P100 respirator, goggles, heavy-duty gloves, long sleeves and pants, and sturdy closed-toe boots. This gear minimizes direct skin contact, protects the eyes, and reduces inhalation of toxic particles. Before beginning work, wet down debris and clean floors and surfaces with a damp cloth or cleaning pad to reduce airborne particles, and avoid touching sharp or broken materials directly. Remove any visible soot/ash or debris from exterior siding, doors, doorsills, windows, and windowsills using a garden hose and damp cloths first. Be cautious of structural instability or hidden hazards, such as nails

or glass in any damaged area. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling debris, and remove and clean your clothing separately from other laundry to prevent cross-contamination.

### **What precautions should I take to prevent stirring ash and hazardous particles into the air?**

To avoid stirring up ash by gently using a damp cloth, mop, or sponge instead of sweeping or vacuuming. If you need to handle larger debris, lightly mist the area with water to keep dust from becoming airborne. Lightly mist with water before gently moving fire debris or items in ash. Avoid using dry sweeping or leaf blowers, as these can disperse ash and soot. Use a HEPA-filter vacuum for fine particles if vacuuming is necessary.

### **How do I safely remove ash and soot from my business premises?**

Begin by wetting ash-covered areas with a hose to minimize airborne particles. Use damp cleaning methods such as mopping and wiping down surfaces with mild detergent and water. Avoid using leaf blowers or dry sweeping, as these can spread harmful particles. Collect ash in sealed bags for proper disposal and wear protective equipment like N95 masks and gloves.

### **How do I safely dispose of ash and soot collected during cleanup of my business?**

Ash and soot should be handled with extreme caution due to the risk of hazardous particles, such as heavy metals or asbestos. Seal them in durable plastic bags, double-bagging if possible, to minimize the release of particles during transport. Place sealed bags in covered trash bins to prevent them from being disturbed by wind or animals.

### **Are there specific guidelines for cleaning up hazardous materials like lead, asbestos, or heavy metals?**

If hazardous materials are present, you should not attempt cleanup without professional assistance. Asbestos and lead require certified specialists for safe removal, as disturbing these materials can release dangerous fibers or particles into the air. Testing by licensed professionals can confirm the presence of these hazards. Ensure compliance with all local and federal regulations, including OSHA and EPA guidelines, to avoid potential health risks and legal penalties. Keep children and vulnerable individuals away from affected areas until all hazards are mitigated.

### **What precautions should I take when cleaning soot from outdoor furniture and equipment?**

Wear gloves and an N95 mask to prevent exposure to particles. Use a mild detergent and warm water to clean soot from non-porous surfaces, such as metal or plastic furniture. Rinse thoroughly and dry completely to avoid residue buildup. For porous materials like cushions, consider professional cleaning or replacement.

### **How can I take to clean windows, doors, and screens covered in ash?**

Use a hose or bucket of water to gently rinse off ash before scrubbing. Use a damp cloth and cleaning pad to clean windowsills and doorsills. Clean glass surfaces with a vinegar and water solution to remove streaks and residue. Replace or clean screens with soapy water, ensuring they are thoroughly rinsed and dried before reinstallation.

### **What steps can I take to clean ash-covered driveways and walkways?**

Hose down the area to minimize airborne particles, and use a stiff broom to sweep ash into piles. Avoid

washing ash into storm drains, as this can harm the environment. Dispose of collected ash in sealed bags in your regular trash.

### **What steps may help clean smoke-damaged indoor furniture (wood, upholstery)?**

- **Wood Furniture:** Gently wipe down with a damp cloth to remove soot. Use a wood cleaner or polish designed for fire-damaged wood to restore the finish.
- **Upholstery:** For fabric furniture, using a HEPA-vacuum just above the fabric followed by steam cleaning can help remove soot and odors. If the upholstery is leather, it may need specialized cleaning products to remove smoke stains and odors. For heavier smoke damage or delicate fabrics, it's best to consult a professional cleaner.

### **What steps should I take to clean HVAC systems in my business after exposure to smoke and ash?**

Replace HVAC filters with a high-efficiency MERV 13 or higher filter to remove fine particles. Clean ducts and vents to prevent the spread of residual ash or smoke throughout the premises. Consult a professional HVAC technician for thorough inspection and cleaning to ensure the system operates safely and efficiently.

### **What steps may help to clean smoke damaged clothing and fabric items?**

While wearing protective gear outdoors and away from the home, gently shake out visible soot outdoors before washing clothing and linens. Wash items in small loads with detergent. Some suggest adding a cup of white vinegar or other deodorizer to neutralize odors. Repeat the washing process if the smell of smoke persists. Do not use a dryer until all smoke odors are removed, as heat can set the smell permanently. Depending on the amount of smoke damage in your washer or dryer, consider cleaning them inside or having them professionally services and cleaned before using them.

### **What precautions should I take when cleaning electronics exposed to smoke or ash?**

Turn off and unplug all electronics before cleaning. Use a microfiber cloth to gently wipe external surfaces and avoid using water or cleaning solutions on sensitive components. For heavily soiled equipment, consider hiring a professional technician to safely restore functionality.

### **What steps may help to clean electronics with light smoke damage?**

Immediately turn off and unplug any electronic devices that may have been exposed to heat or smoke. Use a soft cloth to wipe away soot and ash. Avoid using cleaning products that could damage the device. For appliances like toasters, blenders, or coffee makers, dampen a cloth with water (and a tiny bit of dish soap for greasy spots) to wipe down the outer surfaces. Avoid getting moisture inside the appliances. If in doubt, consider replacing it.

If the device was exposed to water (from firefighting efforts) or has significant soot or ash contamination, consider replacing it or having it professionally serviced and cleaned. It's often safer to have electronics professionally inspected before attempting to use them again, as the heat from a fire can cause internal damage that's not visible.

### **What is the best way to clean metal items?**

Use a mild soap solution and a soft cloth to clean metal items and jewelry. If they are tarnished or heavily sooted, a jewelry cleaner or a paste made of baking soda and water can be used. If the item is valuable or delicate, it's best to take it to a professional for thorough cleaning.

### **How should photos and keepsakes be cleaned?**

If photos or keepsakes are only slightly damaged, carefully wipe away soot with a soft brush. If they're wet or too smoky, place them in a plastic bag and freeze to prevent further damage until you can clean or restore them properly. For valuable or sentimental items, consult with a professional photo restoration service to ensure proper cleaning.

### **How can I remove ash and soot from parked vehicles?**

Wash vehicles using a gentle hose spray to remove loose ash, then use a mild detergent and water to clean surfaces. Avoid scrubbing dry ash, as it can scratch paint. Rinse thoroughly and check ventilation intakes to remove accumulated debris. If ash has entered the vehicle's interior, vacuum with a HEPA filter and wipe surfaces with a damp cloth.

### **How do I clean children's outdoor equipment?**

Wash equipment with a mild detergent and warm water, ensuring no residue is left behind. Keep children away from outdoor play areas until cleanup is complete and confirm that no ash remains on surfaces. Replace sand in sandboxes, as ash and soot are difficult to remove effectively.

### **How can I safely dispose of smoke damaged vegetation and yard debris?**

Collect burned vegetation and yard debris in sealed bags or containers. Avoid burning debris, as it can release harmful particles. Contact your local waste management agency for guidelines on disposal or drop-off at designated facilities. Ensure ash and debris are not placed in green waste bins unless explicitly allowed.

### **How should I dispose of hazardous waste, such as cleaning chemicals, damaged by wildfire smoke?**

Store hazardous materials in a well-ventilated area and away from flammable items. Contact your local hazardous waste disposal center for instructions on proper disposal. Never pour chemicals down the drain or dispose of them with regular trash, as this can pose environmental and health risks.

### **What should I do if I notice health symptoms during or after cleaning?**

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

## **Health Risks, Cleaning and Protections**

### **What determines someone's potential risk of exposure to ash, soot, and fire dust after a wildfire?**

Your risk of being exposed to ash, soot, and fire dust after a wildfire depends on a few factors: how close you are to burned structures and the status of fire debris removal for them, which way the wind is blowing, and

how much you come into direct contact with the ash, soot, or fire debris. The closer you are to the burned structures that contain fire debris, the higher the risk. If you're downwind, the wind can carry ash and soot over long distances, increasing the risk of exposure. Additionally, touching or breathing in the ash and soot—whether it's in the air or on surfaces—can raise your risk.

### **How can I assess my potential risk of exposure to ash, soot, and fire dust?**

- **Check your distance from burned structures or parcels and the status of fire debris removal:** Areas in which Phase 1 and 2 fire debris removal has not been completed remain hazardous due to the potential presence of unstable structures, sharp objects in the debris, household hazardous substances, and ash with potentially harmful substances. The closer you are to the burn area, the greater your potential risk of exposure.
- **Watch the wind:** Winds blowing towards your area can carry ash and soot, increasing your risk of exposure.
- **Look for ash or soot:** If you frequently notice ash or soot buildup in your surroundings after cleaning up, it's a sign your potential exposure risk is higher.
- **Monitor air quality:** Poor air quality or visible ash or dust in the air means higher exposure risk to air pollution, which may include fine particles from the fire debris.

### **How can I reduce the risk of exposure to ash, soot, and fire debris?**

Keep an eye on your surroundings for frequent ash or soot buildup on the ground or on surfaces both inside and outside. Be sure to follow the recommended steps for safely handling and cleaning up ash, soot, and fire debris.

#### ***Outdoor Cleaning:***

- a. **Wash Down Outdoor Surfaces.** Regularly and gently hose down driveways, patios, and outdoor furniture with water to remove ash and dust. This keeps it from building up.
- b. **Clean Outdoor Items.** Wipe down outdoor furniture, equipment, and toys with a damp cloth to remove any ash or soot that's collected.
- c. **Clear Ash from the Yard.** Keep your yard, pathways, and garden areas clean by hosing them down or sweeping carefully with a damp broom to avoid kicking up dust.

#### ***Indoor Cleaning:***

- a. **Wipe Surfaces Often.** Use a damp cloth to clean surfaces like counters, shelves, and furniture. This helps stop ash and soot from building up inside.
- b. **Vacuum with a HEPA Filter Regularly.** Use a vacuum with a HEPA filter to clean carpets, rugs, and floors. This helps pick up tiny ash particles and keeps them from floating around.
- c. **Change Air Filters.** Change the filters in your HVAC system or air purifiers often, especially if they are using HEPA filters, to trap ash and help keep indoor air clean.
- d. **Keep Windows and Doors Closed.** During smoky or dusty conditions, keep windows and doors closed to keep ash from getting inside. When air quality improves, open windows to help clear out the particles.

### **Soil Maintenance:**

- a. **Remove Ash and Debris.** Gently rake or remove any large piles of ash and debris from garden beds, lawns, or plant areas. Be careful not to stir up dust into the air.
- b. **Add Organic Matter.** Incorporate organic material, like compost or mulch, into the soil to help restore nutrients that may have been lost due to the fire. This can improve soil structure and enhance plant growth.
- c. **Mulch the Soil.** Add a layer of organic mulch (like wood chips or straw) on top of the soil to help retain moisture, reduce soil erosion, and regulate temperature.
- d. **Monitor Soil Health.** Keep an eye on the soil's condition over time. Consider Continue to water and add organic materials as needed to maintain healthy soil for plant growth.

### **What are the health risks associated with smoke, soot, and ash, and how can I protect myself?**

Smoke damage can cause significant physical damage as well as health issues, even if the home is not destroyed or burned by fire. Smoke, soot (fine, black powdery substance that forms when things burn), and ash contain fine particles and toxic substances that can lead to a range of health impacts, including skin and lung irritation, shortness of breath, worsen conditions like asthma, potential exposure to carcinogens, and other short-term and long-term medical conditions. They may also include harmful chemicals such as dioxins, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and heavy metals. Protect yourself by wearing a properly fitted N95 mask, goggles, gloves, closed toes shoes, and long sleeves and pants. Avoid disturbing ash unnecessarily and ensure good ventilation when cleaning indoor spaces. Wash your hands, clothes, and any exposed skin thoroughly after cleanup.

Employees may experience respiratory irritation, coughing, or eye discomfort due to residual smoke or ash particles. Provide N95 masks and encourage frequent handwashing to minimize exposure. Ensure that workspaces are cleaned thoroughly and equipped with air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

Individuals, such as children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, or those with respiratory conditions, should take extra precautions or avoid reentering the business until it has been cleaned. And everyone should avoid contact with outdoor areas that have not been cleaned. Keep children and pets away from ash-covered areas to prevent ingestion or inhalation.

If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. If skin irritation, wash exposed skin and change clothes if they have been contaminated. For persistent or severe symptoms, consult a healthcare provider. Vulnerable individuals should take extra precautions, take steps to reduce their potential exposure, and talk with their healthcare provider.

### **What are the health risks to employees returning to a business affected by smoke or ash?**

Employees may experience respiratory irritation, coughing, or eye discomfort due to residual smoke or ash particles. Provide N95 masks and encourage frequent handwashing to minimize exposure. Ensure that workspaces are cleaned thoroughly and equipped with air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

### **How can I protect employees with respiratory conditions when reopening my business?**

Monitor air quality levels and provide HEPA air purifiers in work areas. Limit outdoor tasks during poor air

quality conditions and ensure that employees wear protective masks. Offer flexibility for at-risk employees, such as remote work options or modified duties, to reduce exposure.

### **What should I do if I or my employees experience symptoms related to wildfire smoke exposure?**

Common symptoms include coughing, wheezing, headaches, or eye irritation. Move to an area with cleaner air, such as an indoor space with HEPA filtration. Seek medical attention if symptoms persist or worsen, particularly for individuals with preexisting conditions like asthma or heart disease.

## **Utility Outages and Operational Challenges**

### **What should I do if my business experienced a power outage during the wildfire?**

Check with your utility provider for restoration updates and inspect electrical systems for damage. Test appliances and equipment for functionality, and replace any damaged items. Discard perishable food or other temperature-sensitive goods that were without refrigeration for more than 4 hours.

### **How can I mitigate the effects of internet and communication outages?**

Set up backup communication systems, such as mobile hotspots or satellite phones, to maintain contact with customers and vendors. Update your website and social media accounts to inform clients of temporary service disruptions. Consider using cloud-based platforms to access critical business data during outages.

### **What steps should I take if water services to my business were disrupted?**

Boil tap water for at least 1 minute before use if a boil water advisory is in place. Use bottled water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning until normal water services are restored. Contact your water provider to confirm the safety of your supply before resuming regular use.

## **Financial and Insurance Support**

### **Does business insurance cover losses from wildfire-related disruptions?**

Review your policy to determine coverage for losses caused by utility outages, smoke damage, or mandatory closures. Business interruption insurance may cover lost income during forced closures or reduced operations. Contact your insurance provider to file a claim and provide documentation of damages and expenses.

### **What financial assistance programs are available for businesses impacted by wildfires?**

Federal and state programs, such as those offered by FEMA or the Small Business Administration (SBA), provide financial aid and low-interest loans to affected businesses. Local chambers of commerce and nonprofit organizations may also offer grants or support for wildfire recovery. Visit disaster recovery centers for more information.

### **How can I document losses for insurance or financial assistance applications?**

Take photographs of property damage and retain receipts for cleanup, repairs, and replacement costs. Maintain records of lost income during closures or reduced operations. Submit detailed documentation when filing claims or applying for financial assistance.

## **Permits and Approvals**

**Environmental Health Division**  
5050 Commerce Drive, Baldwin Park, CA 91706  
[www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh](http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh)

[2/19/2025]



### **Do I need permits to make repairs or modifications to my business after wildfire damage?**

Minor repairs may not require permits, but structural modifications or significant renovations typically do. Contact your local building department to confirm requirements and ensure compliance with updated fire safety codes. Obtain approvals before starting any work.

### **What are the requirements for reopening a food service business after a wildfire?**

Conduct a thorough inspection of food storage and preparation areas to ensure safety and cleanliness. Replace contaminated food and beverages and sanitize all equipment and surfaces. Contact your local health department for a reopening inspection and adhere to their guidelines.

## **Community Support and Resources**

### **Where can I find local support for businesses recovering from wildfire disruptions?**

Contact local chambers of commerce or small business development centers for resources and guidance. Disaster Recovery Centers often provide assistance with financial aid applications, cleanup support, and navigating regulatory requirements. Public health departments may offer additional resources for addressing environmental concerns.

### **What mental health resources are available for business owners and employees?**

Wildfires and their impacts can be stressful for business owners and employees alike. Contact the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 for free, confidential support. Local nonprofits and health departments may also provide counseling services and stress management resources.

### **How can I connect with other business owners to share recovery strategies?**

Join local business associations or attend community recovery events to network with other business owners. Online forums or social media groups focused on wildfire recovery can also provide valuable insights and support. Collaborate with neighboring businesses to share resources or coordinate reopening efforts.

## **Preparedness for Future Events**

### **What steps can I take to prepare my business for future wildfires?**

Create an emergency plan that includes evacuation procedures, communication strategies, and backup power solutions. Invest in fire-resistant building materials and maintain defensible space around the property. Train employees on emergency protocols and regularly update your plan to address new risks.

### **How can I improve indoor air quality in my business during wildfire season?**

Install high-efficiency filters in your HVAC system and use portable HEPA air purifiers in frequently used areas. Seal gaps around windows and doors to minimize smoke infiltration. Limit activities that generate indoor pollutants, such as burning candles or using harsh cleaning chemicals.

### **What supplies should I keep on hand to maintain operations during wildfire-related disruptions?**

Stockpile essentials like bottled water, N95 masks, gloves, and backup communication devices. Invest in portable generators to maintain critical operations during power outages. Keep an updated list of emergency contacts, including utility providers and local support organizations.

#### **Environmental Health Division**

5050 Commerce Drive, Baldwin Park, CA 91706

[www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh](http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh)

[2/19/2025]

