Properties in Burned Areas - FAQs

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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

County of Los Angeles Public Health

PROPERTY DESTROYED OR WITH SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE

Inspecting and Searching for Personal Items

What are the health risks of ash, soot, and fire debris when searching for personal items in destroyed or damaged properties, and how can I stay protect myself?

It is recommended to wait until the U.S. EPA removes visible hazardous materials during Phase 1 of Private Property Debris Removal before going to inspect and search for personal items on your property. Click their Status Map for updates.

If Phase 1 and 2 of fire debris removal and cleanup have not been completed, the area remains hazardous due to unstable structures, sharp metal, and ash with potentially toxic substances.

Fire debris, soot (fine, black powdery substance that forms when things burn) and ash contain harmful substances like dioxins, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons “PAHs”, and heavy metals. They 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. The risks depend on exposure levels and individual health.

If entering before cleanup: wear a properly fitted N95 mask, safety goggles, gloves, long sleeves and pants, sturdy shoes, and ideally a disposable Tyvek suit and shoe covers. Avoid unstable structures, sharp objects, and hazardous debris. Inspect areas cautiously, as hazards like broken glass, exposed nails, or weakened structures may not be immediately visible. Carry a flashlight and stay alert for potential slip-and-fall risks or overhead hazards like loose beams.

Move slowly and carefully to avoid disturbing ash. Lightly spray debris with water before handling and use tools (e.g., tongs) instead of bare hands. Ensure good ventilation if indoors. Try not to get ash and soot in your car. Disposable items can be taken off, put into a plastic bag, and disposed of in the regular trash.

Afterward, wash hands, change clothes, and shower immediately.

For salvageable personal items, clean them thoroughly with soap and water before bringing them indoors. If you’re unsure whether an item is contaminated, place it in a sealed bag or container until it can be properly cleaned.

Children, pregnant individuals, and pets should avoid the area until hazards are fully mitigated.

What precautions should I take when handling fire debris or ash to prevent stirring ash and hazardous particles into the air?
Use wet methods, such as damp mopping, damp wiping, or spraying water lightly before handling items in ash, move fire debris gently, to minimize the release of hazardous particles into the air.

What resources are available to support mental health after experiencing a wildfire?
Wildfires can be traumatic, even if your home is spared. Contact local mental health hotlines or counseling services for support. The Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990) provides free, confidential assistance to individuals coping with disaster-related stress.

Cleaning Up and Handling Debris

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

Do not attempt to remove hazardous materials yourself, an improper handling and disposing of these materials can release hazardous chemicals, fibers, or particles into the air. Certified specialists must handle and dispose of these materials in compliance with all local and federal regulations, including OSHA and EPA guidelines, to prevent health risks and legal penalties.

Right now in Phase 1 of the Private Property Debris Removal, the U.S. EPA certified field teams, inspect properties and safely remove, and dispose household hazardous materials in compliance with all local and federal regulations. Some identifiable asbestos containing items may also be removed, but full clearance isn't achieved until Phase 2 (debris removal) is complete. Check the U.S. EPA Status Map for progress updates.

Once a property clears Phase 1, owners must choose between:

- **Opting in** for free cleanup by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, OR
- **Opting out** and hiring an approved contractor to remove the remaining fire debris, including fire ash and soil, following all safety rules, and regulations.

How do I safely dispose of ash and debris from a destroyed property?
You should not attempt to dispose of ash and debris from a destroyed or severely damaged property on your own. The cleanup process is divided into two phases, managed by different agencies. Phase 1 household hazardous debris removal is free, currently underway, and managed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Properties must pass an EPA inspection and receive Phase I clearance before moving to Phase 2.

Phase 2 fire debris removal – after Phase 1 clearance, property owners much choose to either:

- **Opt in** for free cleanup by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, OR
- **Opt out** and hiring an approved contractor to remove the remaining fire debris, including fire ash and soil, following all safety rules, and regulations.

What actions should I take if my destroyed property has asbestos or lead contamination?
Do not attempt to remove asbestos or lead yourself.

> During Phase 1, the U.S. EPA removes visible asbestos and easily identifiable asbestos-containing items. Full clearance occurs in Phase 2, when all remaining debris—including metals, hazardous trees, fire ash, foundation debris, and contaminated soil—is removed and disposed of per regulations.

How should I store hazardous debris awaiting removal from my property?
Do not attempt to handle, move, or store hazardous materials yourself. Improper handling can release toxic chemicals, fibers, or particles into the air.

> Right now, in Phase 1 of the Private Property Debris Removal, the U.S. EPA certified field teams, inspect properties and safely handle, transport, and dispose of household hazardous materials in compliance with all local and federal regulations.

How are lithium-ion batteries being disposed?
Your home may have fire damaged or destroyed lithium-ion batteries, lithium-ion battery energy storage systems, and electric and hybrid vehicles. These batteries should be considered extremely dangerous, even if they look intact. Lithium-ion batteries can spontaneously re-ignite, explode, and emit toxic gases and particulates even after the fire is out.

- **Do not** touch fire-damaged products with lithium-ion batteries – they can ignite.
- **Do not** start, move, tow, or charge a fire-damaged electric/hybrid vehicles (EV, PHEV, HEV).
- **Do not** use or start a fire-damaged residential energy storage or house battery.
- **Do not** enter enclosed spaces with lithium-ion battery products.
- **Do** call the U.S. EPA hotline at 1-833-R9-USEPA (1-833-798-7372) if you encounter a lithium-ion battery while re-entering your property and/or are unsure if a lithium-ion battery was damaged.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been assigned by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to remove lithium-ion batteries affected by the Los Angeles County wildfires.

For more info, click here for their *Los Angeles Wildfires: Lithium-ion batteries burned by wildfires* factsheet/.

Water Tanks, Wells, and Septic Systems

What should I do if my destroyed property's well or water storage tank is damaged?
Inspect for visible damage, such as cracks or melted parts and document with photos. Once Phase 2 debris removal is complete and your property is cleared to rebuild, hire a licensed contractor for repairs. Have the water tested for contaminants, as wildfires can introduce harmful bacteria and chemicals.

How can I identify and mitigate potential mosquito breeding in stagnant water on a destroyed property?
Stagnant water in pools, fountains, or other areas can attract mosquitoes and spread diseases like West Nile Virus. To prevent this, use mosquito dunks or introduce mosquito fish to control larvae.

What are the steps to obtain approval for rebuilding a conventional septic system after a fire?
Submit a Service Request Application with inspection reports detailing the condition of your septic tank, dispersal system, and related components. If the system is damaged, repairs or upgrades may be required to meet current codes. Obtain approvals from relevant agencies, including the Onsite Wastewater Treatment System Program and provide site plans showing septic system locations and proper spacing from structures and water sources.

How can I obtain a Water Availability Letter for rebuilding my destroyed property?
To obtain a Water Availability Letter, submit proof of your water source, such as a utility bill, well report, or service letter from a potable water hauler. The Drinking Water Program will review your application and may require additional testing or inspections to confirm water safety. Contact your local health department for application procedures and assistance.

Swimming Pools and Spas

My swimming pool or spa was damaged or destroyed by the fire. What resources are available for rebuilding or repairing it?
Fire can damage the pool's structure, deck, equipment and enclosure. Once your property is cleared for rebuilding, follow the steps outlined in the LACDPH Swimming Pools After a Fire guidance. Use professional services for inspection and repairs, and ensure compliance with local codes before reopening.

- For questions about rebuilding or repairing pools or spas after a fire, contact the Environmental Health Recreational Waters Program at (626)430-5360 or email rhealth@ph.lacounty.gov.
- If your pool or spa enclosure was damaged or destroyed, the U.S. EPA or the U.S. Army Corps may install a temporary enclosure to protect workers during Phase 1 and 2 of Private Property Debris Removal.

My swimming pool or spa was not damaged in the fire. What guidelines should I follow to maintain it after a fire?
The swimming pool or spa was likely impacted by smoke, soot, or ash. Do not use it until completing the steps outlined in the LACDPH Swimming Pools After a Fire guidance. Contact your local health department's Recreational Waters Program at (626)430-5360 or email rhealth@ph.lacounty.gov if you have questions.

Rebuilding – Permits, Assistance Programs, and Other Considerations

What requirements are there for temporary housing, such as RVs or mobile homes, on properties affected by fire?
A process for approval of temporary housing, such as RVs or mobile homes, for an owner to be on or near their property in the fire perimeter area is being developed. Typically, the process requires approval for wastewater disposal, either by utilizing existing septic systems or contracting with a licensed sewage pumping service, submitting the necessary applications and inspection reports to the Land Use Program, ensuring potable water is available, and adhering to zoning or planning requirements for temporary structures.

What documentation is needed to apply for rebuilding permits after a fire?
To apply for rebuilding permits, submit site plans, floor plans, and inspection reports. Include details about the

proposed structure and its compatibility with existing infrastructure like septic systems. Provide proof of prior permits for the original structure, if available, and consult local agencies to ensure all documentation meets their requirements. Additional feasibility studies may be needed for expanded floor plans.

How can I verify the structural integrity of fire-damaged buildings before starting rebuilding?
Structural integrity should be assessed by a licensed professional who can evaluate foundations, walls, and critical support structures. They will check for cracks, warping, or weakened materials caused by extreme heat. Obtain a detailed report from the inspection to determine necessary repairs or whether a complete rebuild is required. Do not enter structures that appear unstable until cleared by a professional.

Are there state or local programs to assist with rebuilding destroyed homes?
Local Assistance Centers and Disaster Recovery Centers offer resources, including financial aid, housing assistance, and rebuilding guidance. Public health officials at these centers can provide information on environmental safety and permits. Programs like FEMA disaster assistance or state grants may also be available.

What financial assistance is available for rebuilding properties destroyed by fire?
Financial assistance options include insurance claims, the Emergency Prescription Assistance Program (EPAP) for uninsured individuals, and disaster relief funds. Additionally, nonprofit organizations may provide support for rebuilding costs. Contact local recovery centers or public health agencies for guidance on eligibility and applications.

How can I rebuild my home to be more fire-resistant for the future?
Use fire-resistant materials, such as Class A roofing and ember-resistant vents. Incorporate defensible space by clearing flammable vegetation around structures and installing noncombustible barriers. Follow updated building codes for fire-prone areas and consult professionals specializing in fire-safe design.

Are there recommendations for landscaping or erosion control after a fire?
Use soil amendments, such as compost or mulch, to stabilize exposed soil and reduce erosion. Avoid using ash as fertilizer, as it may contain harmful contaminants. Plant fire-resistant vegetation and cover bare areas with wood chips or clean soil. Consult local resources for erosion control measures suited to your property.

Insurance and Documentation

What steps should I take to document fire damage for insurance claims?
Take clear photographs of all damaged areas and belongings, making a list of items lost or destroyed. Include details such as purchase dates, values, and receipts if available. Notify your insurance provider immediately to start the claims process and provide them with requested documentation. Keep copies of all correspondence and records for your claim. For more resources related to insurance, including *Tips for Wildfire Claimants*, visit the California Department of Insurance's Wildfire Resources webpage.

PROPERTIES WITH MINIMAL OR NO STRUCTURAL DAMAGE

Returning and Assessing Your Property

I am concerned about returning home. Is it safe?
These are valid concerns, as proximity to burn areas before hazardous materials (Phase 1 by US EPA) and fire debris (Phase 2) removal is complete can present health and safety risks, even if your home or school is intact. Individuals with underlying health conditions that can be exacerbated by exposures to soot, ash, and fire debris may want to consult with their medical provider for guidance on when it is advisable to return and ways to reduce your risk of exposure.

During Phase 1 of the debris removal process, which is currently underway, the US EPA is going through fire damaged neighborhoods to safely remove and dispose of visible hazardous materials from burned properties. If you are living near areas with significant fire debris or burned buildings nearby, it is prudent to avoid being outdoors near these properties while hazardous material ls are being removed, even though this process should not result in significant disturbance of ash and other fire debris.

If you're returning to a home in an area with significant fire debris or burned buildings nearby, it may be advisable to wait until all the remaining fire debris has been removed from nearby burned properties before moving back in. Debris removal in Phase 2 may stir up ash and soot, which may affect air quality. Steps will be taken in the process to reduce this risk.

Stay informed about the timeline for debris removal. Follow the U.S. EPA's Status Map to track help you track the progress of their hazardous material removal and see the status of work done at properties. Statuses are updated nightly.

Lastly, as you spend time in the area or reoccupy your homes, continue to monitor your health and the health of your family. Symptoms like coughing, eye irritation, or headaches could be linked to lingering contaminants. 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.

Why is 250 yards the stated safe distance for a house to be from burned areas, especially when ash, soot, and fire dust can be blown by winds much further?
The core message of the "Public Health Advisory Noted for Those Residing Near Burned Structures in Palisades and Eaton Areas" is that people living within 250 yards of burned structures with fire debris in the Palisades and Eaton burn areas are at increased risk of exposure to harmful substances, such as ash, soot, and fire debris, before both Phase 1 and Phase 2 debris removal are completed. The closer the proximity to the fire debris the increased likelihood of exposures. Breathing or directly touching these materials could cause immediate health symptoms and may have long-term health effects. The Public Health Advisory also notes that strong winds and weather fluctuations may increase both the exposure risk and the affected distance. The advisory serves as a warning to these individuals about the potential dangers until hazardous materials and fire debris are properly removed.

How do I assess my property 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 smoke 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 home 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 home, 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 home?

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.

Health Risks, Cleaning, and Precautions

First, read "I am concerned about returning home. Is it safe?" in the Returning and Assessing Your Property section."

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.

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

Individuals, such as children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, or those with respiratory conditions, should take extra precautions or avoid reentering the home 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.

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 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.

What safety measures should be taken during cleanup to avoid exposure to hazardous materials?
Always wear protective gear, including an N95 or P100 respirator, googles, 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.

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.

How do I safely dispose of ash and soot collected during cleanup of my property?
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.

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

How can I safely dispose of burned 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 can I improve indoor air quality in my home?
Keep your doors and windows closed on windy days, when the air quality is poor/unhealthy, and during debris removal activities. Use HEPA air purifiers in frequently used rooms to reduce smoke particles indoors. Replace HVAC filters with a MERV 13 or higher rating and run the system on recirculate mode. Keep windows and doors closed until outdoor air quality improves, and avoid activities that generate indoor smoke, such as burning candles or frying food.

What should I do if I notice health symptoms during or after cleaning?
If you experience coughing, wheezing, eye irritation, or difficulty breathing, stop cleaning and get fresh air or good ventilation right away. Wash exposed skin and change clothes to remove contaminants. 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.

Home Gardens and Soil

Should I test the soil in my garden if my property had no or minimal structural damage?
Testing soils in urban gardens is always a good idea. According UC Cooperative Extension's *Produce Safety After Urban Wildfire* guidance document, "After a wildfire, you can check for soil contamination by collecting

soil samples from your garden and sending them to a lab. Before taking samples, draw a map of your food growing area and label it with the spots where you took your samples from. Mapping of your food growing area and soil sample spots is a good idea so you can correlate your test results, and identify spots of concern in case you need to do more testing, and guess what? It can save you time, money, and help you understand on the ground conditions!

Search UC Cooperative Extension County Master Gardener Program webpages for regional analytical soil labs lists; simply search 'UCCE + the County's Name + Master Gardener Program.' Ask your lab for a heavy metals panel that includes lead, cadmium, arsenic, nickel and mercury. Heavy metals tests typically cost under one hundred dollars per sample. Tests for dioxin and other organic chemicals that may be present in smoke can be hundreds of dollars per sample. If heavy metals are present in your soils, there is a greater chance other contaminants may also be present.

Contaminants detected in post-fire soil testing may have been present there before the fire. You will not know if contaminants are present as a result of fire smoke deposits on your produce or soils unless you have had your soils tested prior to a local fire, or unless you have your produce tested after a nearby fire. See University of California ANR's guides on Soils in Urban Agriculture: Testing, Remediation, and Best Management Practices for more information. Search for ANR Publication 8552 https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/. Also see: http://ucanr.edu/sites/UrbanAg/ on Food Safety."

Is it safe to eat homegrown produce following a wildfire?
Wildfire ash and soot can settle on soil, plants, and produce. To ensure your homegrown fruits are safe, first check for visible ash in topsoil, plants, and trees. While wearing protective gear, pre-rinse your produce outside with a hose or bucket of clean water to remove soil and ash. Wash hands thoroughly before handling produce inside. Remove the outer leaves of lettuce or leafy greens. Rinse and rub produce well under cool running water; peel before cooking or serving. Soak deeply veined greens like kale and fuzzy fruits like peaches in a 10% white vinegar solution to remove soil particles. Avoid root crops that grow in the soil like carrots or potatoes as they absorb more contaminants. Avoid planting crops in contaminated soil. Properly washed fruits from trees are safe to eat. For more information refer to the LACDPH Guidance on Eating Produce from a Home Garden.

What should I do if I'm concerned about contaminated soil?
Wildfires can leave behind ash, soot, and harmful contaminants like heavy metals and chemicals in the soil. Review UC Cooperative Extension's *Produce Safety After Urban Wildfire* guidance document more info and recommendations.

Heavily ash-covered soil may require professional testing to determine safety and more specific remediation steps.

If you're concerned about soil contamination, consider testing it for contamination and avoid disturbing the soil to prevent harmful particles that may be present from becoming airborne. Look for visible ash or unusual residues on the soil surface, and limit contact by keeping children and pets away from the area. If you need to handle or turn the soil, wear protective gear such as gloves, an N95 mask, and long-sleeved clothing. Cover bare soil with mulch, tarps, or ground cover to reduce dust and erosion.

Avoid using ash as fertilizer, especially if the fire burned synthetic materials, which include harmful residues.

If you plan to garden or use the soil for other activities, consider building raised beds or containers to create a barrier between potentially contaminated soil and the clean soil plant roots. Adding compost, manure, and peat moss to your soil may decrease chemical absorption into produce. Covering bare soil with wood chips, grass clippings, compost and more clean soil can also decrease exposure.

Restoration Assistance

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.

How can I repair minor structural damage caused by fire?
Small cracks or burns on walls and ceilings can often be repaired with spackling paste or fire-resistant sealants. Clean soot and smoke residue from affected areas before repainting. For larger repairs, hire a licensed contractor to assess and address structural issues.

What resources are available for restoring landscaping in fire-damaged surroundings?
Consult local agricultural extension offices for advice on erosion control and soil recovery. Use fire-resistant plants and ground covers to reduce future fire risks. Apply soil amendments, such as compost or mulch, to stabilize the soil and improve nutrient content. Avoid using ash as a soil amendment, as it may contain harmful substances.

How can I assess the condition of fencing and other outdoor structures after a fire?
Inspect fencing and outdoor structures for signs of warping, charring, or structural instability. Replace damaged wood fencing with fire-resistant materials like metal or composite. Clean soot and ash from undamaged structures with a mild detergent and water and repaint if necessary.

Are there financial assistance programs for repairing outdoor property damage?
Disaster Resource Centers (DRCs) and federal programs like FEMA may provide financial aid for repairs. Check with state and local agencies for grants or low-interest loans targeting wildfire recovery. Homeowners insurance policies may also cover landscaping and fencing repairs, depending on your coverage.

How can I reduce the risk of mold growth in fire-damaged properties?
Mold thrives in damp environments, making prompt drying of water-damaged areas essential. Use dehumidifiers and fans to remove moisture, and clean hard surfaces with a solution of 1 cup of bleach to 1 gallon of water. Replace water-damaged drywall, insulation, and carpeting to prevent further mold growth.

Water Tanks, Wells, and Septic Systems

What should I do if my property's well or water storage tank is damaged?
Inspect for visible damage, such as cracks or melted parts and document with photos. Once Phase 2 debris removal is complete and your property is cleared to rebuild, hire a licensed contractor for repairs. Have the water tested for contaminants, as wildfires can introduce harmful bacteria and chemicals.

How can I identify and mitigate potential mosquito breeding in stagnant water on my property?
Stagnant water in pools, fountains, or other areas can attract mosquitoes and spread diseases like West Nile Virus. To prevent this, use mosquito dunks or introduce mosquito fish to control larvae.

What are the steps to obtain approval for rebuilding a conventional septic system after a fire?
Submit a Service Request Application with inspection reports detailing the condition of your septic tank, dispersal system, and related components. If the system is damaged, repairs or upgrades may be required to meet current codes. Obtain approvals from relevant agencies, including the Onsite Wastewater Treatment System Program and provide site plans showing septic system locations and proper spacing from structures and water sources.

Swimming Pools and Spas

My swimming pool or spa was damaged or destroyed by the fire. What resources are available for rebuilding or repairing it?
Fire can damage the pool's structure, deck, equipment and enclosure. Once your property is cleared for rebuilding, follow the steps outlined in the LACDPH Swimming Pools After a Fire guidance. Use professional services for inspection and repairs, and ensure compliance with local codes before reopening.

For questions about rebuilding or repairing pools or spas after a fire, contact the Environmental Health Recreational Waters Program at (626)430-5360 or email rhealth@ph.lacounty.gov.

If your pool or spa enclosure was damaged or destroyed, the U.S. EPA or the U.S. Army Corps may install a temporary enclosure to protect workers during Phase 1 and 2 of Private Property Debris Removal.

My swimming pool or spa was not damaged in the fire. What guidelines should I follow to maintain it after a fire?
The swimming pool or spa was likely impacted by smoke, soot, or ash. Do not use it until completing the steps outlined in the LACDPH Swimming Pools After a Fire guidance. Contact your local health department's Recreational Waters Program at (626)430-5360 or email rhealth@ph.lacounty.gov if you have questions.

Permits and Approvals

Do I need a permit to rebuild fencing or landscaping destroyed by fire?
Permits may be required depending on local zoning laws and the scope of work. Contact your local building department to determine specific requirements. Ensure that any new structures comply with fire-resistant building codes.

How do I obtain permits for repairing irrigation systems damaged by fire?
Submit a detailed plan to your local water district, including the location and scope of repairs. Ensure repairs use water-efficient and fire-resistant materials where applicable. Some districts may offer rebates for upgrading to more efficient systems during repairs.

Financial and Insurance Support

Insurance and Documentation

What steps should I take to document fire damage for insurance claims?
Take clear photographs of all damaged areas and belongings on your property and next to your property, making any list of items lost or destroyed. Include details such as purchase dates, values, and receipts if available. Notify your insurance provider immediately to start the claims process and provide them with requested documentation. Keep copies of all correspondence and records for your claim. For more resources related to insurance, including *Tips for Wildfire Claimants*, visit the California Department of Insurance's Wildfire Resources webpage.

Does homeowners insurance cover damage to surrounding property?
Coverage depends on the specific terms of your policy. Many policies cover landscaping, fences, and detached structures, but limits may apply. Contact your insurance provider to confirm your coverage and discuss filing a claim. For more resources related to insurance, including *Tips for Wildfire Claimants*, visit the California Department of Insurance's Wildfire Resources webpage.

Community Support and Resources

Where can I find local programs for recovering from fire-damaged surroundings?
Disaster Resource Centers (DRCs) provide resources for property recovery, including guidance on debris removal, financial aid, and cleanup kits. Community organizations may also offer support for environmental recovery efforts.

What resources are available to support mental health after experiencing a wildfire?
Wildfires can be traumatic, even if your home is spared. Contact local mental health hotlines or counseling services for support. The Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990) provides free, confidential assistance to individuals coping with disaster-related stress.