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A Snapshot in Safety and Risk

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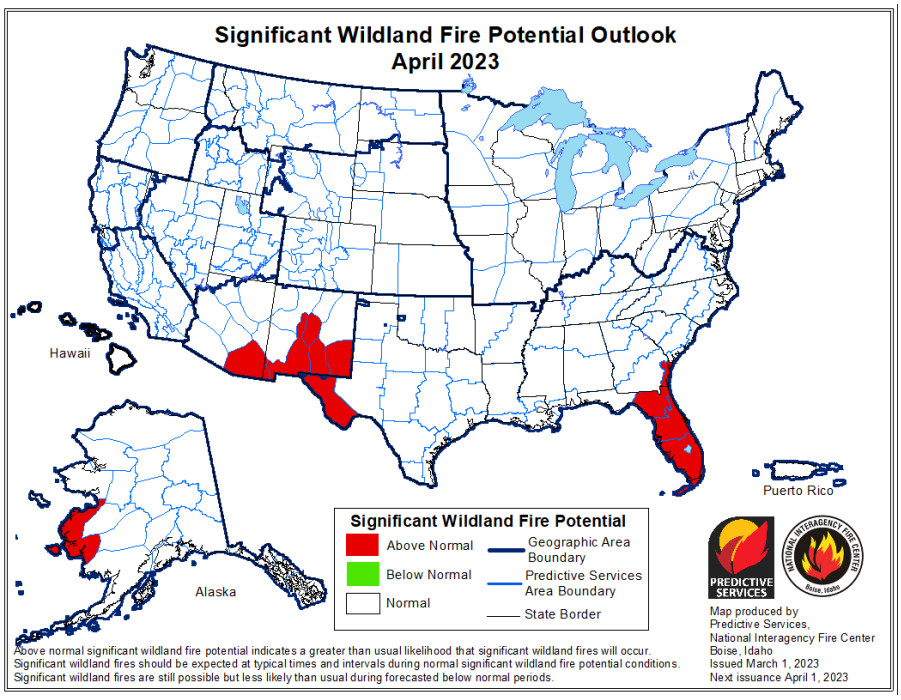
Wildland Fire Season 2023: Risk Outlook and Preparation Guide

Between 2021-2022 wildland fires accounted for over $11 billion in damage throughout the United States. In California alone, over 7,000 fires were recorded, killing 8 people, and affecting 363,939 acres across the state. In 2021 and 2022, smoke from western wildfires discolored skies and threatened public health across the continental United States.

Wildland fires continue to pose an immense challenge to public safety and property protection in every region. Although a series of atmospheric rivers have helped to ease drought concerns in the West, history shows that a wet winter and spring are no guarantee of mild Wildland Fire conditions later in the year.

2023 Wildland Fire Outlook

Significant fire activity was minimal across the US during the first 3 months of the year as consistent upper-level trough passages with enough precipitation limited significant fire potential. However, isolated large fires were reported in central Oklahoma and central Florida. Significant above-normal fire potential was forecast across the west Texas mountains in February, expanding to include much of southwest Texas in March and April. Above normal potential is also forecast in northeast Florida and the Georgia Coast through the period, expanding to include the Florida Panhandle and southeast Georgia in March and April.



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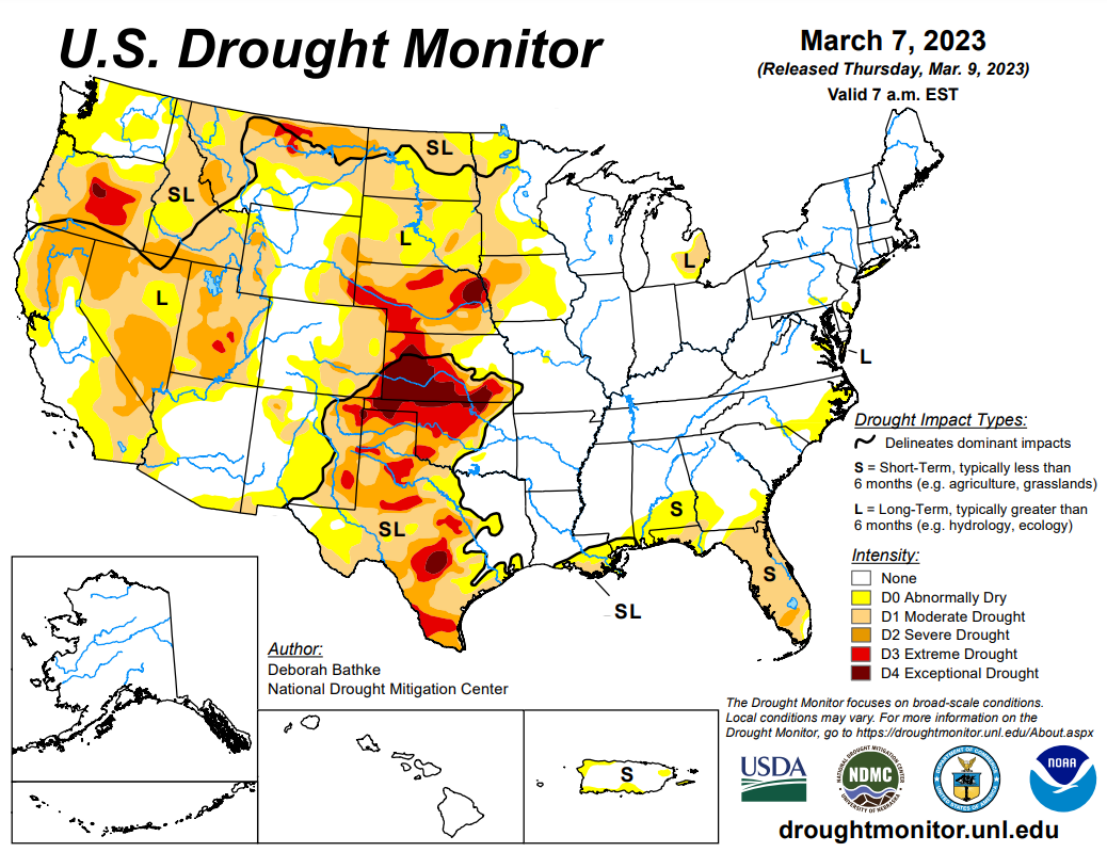
While May is recognized as “Wildfire Awareness Month”, many areas of the United States are prone to the threat of wildfire year-round. Local drought conditions can play a major role in an area’s vulnerability, although this is not the single driving factor. Other factors which will play a significant role in this vulnerability include local topography, prevailing wind patterns, and vegetation (fuel) cover. The drought map shown below is one example of a tool for identifying potential wildfire vulnerability.



Significant drought improvement was observed across California into much of the Great Basin due to the numerous atmospheric river events during the first half of January. However, drought continues in almost half the country, and drought expanded in portions of the southeast Coastal Plain and northern Ohio Valley. Precipitation associated with atmospheric rivers fell across the Southwest during January, with a slight amelioration of drought in portions of eastern New Mexico. The most intense drought remains on the southern and central Plains, with severe to extreme drought also in portions of California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming

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Preparing for Wildland Fire

Create a defensible space around your structures – Know the 3 Zones of Defensible Space

- **Zone #1** is the critical non-combustible zone. It is **0-5 ft. from the building** and under any decks or combustible platforms. Plant and material selection is critical in Zone 1. Hardscape and non-combustible mulch products should be used wherever possible. Keep plants watered, trimmed, and pruned to avoid the accumulation of dried leaves and foliage that may otherwise act as a fuel source for embers and the like. Ensure the non-combustible zone extends vertically at least 6" above grade to include siding, sheathing, and structural framing.
- **Zone #2** extends from **5-30 ft. from the building structure**. Maintain trees and ensure that shrubs are in well-spaced groups. Tree crowns should be at least 10' apart. Remove all dead material, and prune tree limbs and branches up to a height of 15'. For shorter trees, low branches should not exceed 1/3 of the tree's height.
- **Zone #3** range is **30–100 ft. from the building structure**. Make sure to maintain plants in this zone that will slow down and reduce the energy of a wildland fire if one were to occur. Keep foliage cut back to minimize fuel loading as much as possible.

Colorado State Forest Service/Colorado State University

Evaluate your property for the use of non-combustible materials

Areas to examine include **building signage, roofs, fences, exterior walls/siding, and attached structures like awnings and carports**. Your plan may involve replacing combustible materials or perhaps using fire-retardant sprays/foams. Consider selecting classes of roofing materials that are more resistant to fire than others.

Reduce the fuel load in defensible zones by establishing a property and vegetation maintenance plan

Remove dead vegetation and trim area trees regularly. **Choose landscaping that will not contribute to fire loading and growth wherever possible.** Non-combustible landscaping materials like pea gravel and concrete pavers are an excellent replacement for common flammable landscaping like wood mulch, especially in areas directly adjacent to a building (see above for Zone #1). Non-combustible hardscape

and fire-resistant vegetation are desirable, though they may not be as aesthetically pleasing as other plants, shrubs, or trees.

- Tree pruning and spacing are critical elements of reducing the landscaping fuel for wildland fires, especially within Zones #1 and #2 closest to the building.
- Low shrubs should be kept a minimum of 10 ft. away from the lower slope of tree branches and grasses and vegetation beneath tree limbs should be removed.
- Mature/taller trees should have limbs 6 to 10 ft. from the ground trimmed and removed. Shorter trees should be pruned up from the ground as well but trimming lower branches should not exceed 1/3rd of the tree's overall height.

Identify exterior building venting in attics, roofs, eaves, gables, and crawlspaces

Install metal screens of 1/8" or finer across the vents to block windblown embers from entering these spaces. If possible, close attic, crawl space, and ventilation ducts to reduce the possibility of fire and smoke traveling throughout the building. Inspect the screens regularly to ensure the screens have not been damaged or compromised.

Effective smoke response plans should also include establishing procedures to shut down HVAC intakes and set systems to use recycled interior air rather than drawing smoke inside a building. Active HVAC systems under eave areas of buildings can also provide a point of entry for flames if nearby vegetation or other materials are burning. Open-eave designs are more vulnerable to flames – heat can build up in an area between the roof rafters allowing for more rapid fire spread laterally, which increases the likelihood that fire will find a location to enter an attic. Vents that are in the blocking between rafters in open-eave construction are more vulnerable to the entry of embers than vents in a soffit.

Reducing the vulnerability of eaves:

- Inspect open-eave areas for gaps where embers could lodge or pass through into the attic. All vents should be screened, and all other gaps should be filled with durable caulk
- Enclose the under-eave area with a soffit to create an eave that is more resistant to entry from flames.

Protect elevated decks, balconies, and canopies

- Minimize or eliminate storage of combustible materials and fuels underneath these elevated structures.
- Eliminate foliage and trees underneath or adjacent to the deck to prevent fire spread from the natural environment to the building's structure.
- When making future patio furniture purchases select fire-resistant options
- Employ retrofit strategies for older decks and balconies

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Keep a watchful eye on the situation and have disaster kits ready
Monitor broadcasts and alerts using a combination of apps, conventional radio, and emergency radio. This is helpful to track fire progression and determine when there is a safe window to leave if needed.

Each employee should be responsible to assemble and manage their own disaster kit. The contents should be able to sustain an individual for a minimum of 3 days and include water and food, a flashlight, first-aid materials, batteries, moist toilettes, local maps, and a whistle.

Designate a clean room to offer space with fresh air to building occupants
Even if the fire does not directly impact your operations, smoke and smog levels often reach unhealthy levels during wildfires. Keep vents and dampers closed to minimize outside air and maintain a "clean room" on-site; this may help prevent acute and chronic health issues from being exacerbated by the fire's products of combustion.

Communicate with the community
Avoid negative backlash from customers by communicating with them upfront about delayed deliveries or reduced hours that are a direct or indirect result of a fire. Reducing customer traffic to offices, storefronts, and retail locations can also help minimize road congestion and bottlenecks and improve emergency vehicle access.

Develop written wildland fire response procedures within your Emergency Action Plan
The plan will include specific procedures to address any potential emergencies such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, hail, as well as wildland fires. Some of the procedures and responsibilities for these emergencies will overlap such as in the procedures for procuring and distributing necessary PPE and medical supplies.

Establish a business contingency or continuity plan as part of this written response plan to help ensure that your organization can get back up to operational speed as soon as possible.

The more detailed and comprehensive your plan, the better you will be positioned to handle an emergency and reduce loss or downtime with critical operations. Ensure that business partner agreements are conducted before a disaster strikes to prevent gouging and guarantee available services as best as possible. At a minimum, the plan should include contingent locations, backup power generation, and vendor and contractor agreements.

Wildland Fire and Wildland Urban Interface Resources:

- **National Interagency Coordination Center**:
  https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/outlooks.htm
  Provides outlook and general maps for fire potential. Recently released predictive outlook summary. The summary is updated monthly.

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- **California: Fire Hazard Severity Zones:**
  https://ucanr.edu/sites/fire/Prepare/
  Provides fire hazard rating by location within California.
- **DisasterSafety.org:**
  https://disastersafety.org/wildfire/wildfire-ready-business/
- **U.S. Drought Monitor**
  https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/
  Provides weekly updates on drought impacts in the United States and Puerto Rico
- **FEMA National Risk Index**
  https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/map#
  A searchable U.S. map that provides a risk assessment by county for all regions across the United States. Map provides a variety of catastrophes including wildfires.
- **NFPA Publication: Reducing Wildfire Risks In The Home Ignition Zone**
  https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/Training/certification/CWMS/ReducingWildfireRisksHIZ.ashx
  National Fire Protection Association publication describing publications and tasks that can increase a residential property's potential survivability in a wildfire.

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