



RISK FOCUS >>

THE MEDIA SERIES

Reporting From Wildfire Regions

*Tips for journalists travelling to
areas with extreme fire activity*

Wildfires are becoming more common with a changing global climate.

Journalists and media professionals covering them face challenges to do so safely.

Before covering wildfires, journalists should take steps to minimise risk to themselves and others while ensuring the public stays informed.

What is a wildfire?

UNESCO definition: An uncontrolled fire that spreads rapidly across forests, grasslands, or other natural areas. It can ignite due to natural causes, like lightning, or human activities.

The frequency of extreme fire activity more than doubled between 2003-2023.*

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warn that wildfires are expected to become **50% more frequent** by the end of the century. †

* <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-024-02452-2.epdf>

† <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/wildfires-and-health>

Characteristics of Wildfires

- **Speed** - can spread rapidly
- **Unpredictability** - can change direction suddenly with wind shifts
- **Temperature** - can reach 1000+ degrees Celsius (2,000+ degrees Fahrenheit)
- **Smoke and visibility** - smoke can reduce visibility to near zero
- **Spotting** - embers can be lifted ahead and behind of the main fire, igniting new fires around itself

Wildfire Safety Awareness Points

- Wind strength and direction, topography, humidity and temperature all affect wildfires
- Fires tend to burn and spread quicker uphill
- Never assume you can outrun a fire on foot or in a vehicle
- Coordinate with officials rather than entering alone
- Avoid canyons, saddles, or narrow terrain - these are higher risk geographical features
- Do not assume expertise

What to consider before coverage?

Planning and training ahead of time will make it easier and safer to cover wildfires and result in more impactful coverage.

When a wildfire occurs, newsrooms understandably want to capture the images and stories as quickly as possible. To do so effectively and responsibly, a risk assessment is essential.

What should you consider in your planning?

- Important contacts - on the story, in your newsroom, in an emergency, forecasting agencies
- What to take with you - clothing, protective equipment, First Aid kit or equipment
- An evacuation plan based on several potential scenarios - including 'least likely', 'most likely' and 'worst case'
- Your own limitations, risk appetite and those of any organisation you're representing

Do you know who to contact?

During a wildfire, it is possible that a dedicated fire service officer or designated member of staff is appointed to work closely with the media. This is a role that exists in fire services in most countries.

If you are likely to be covering wildfires, or climate-related disasters, take time to identify and get to know these people in advance.

Before you go

Ensure all equipment is tried and tested.

- A respirator that covers nose and mouth and has the correct filter
- Practice how to put the equipment on and adjust quickly and check eyewear fits with your respirator
- Robust heat-resistant, close-fitting eyewear is critical - needs to be compatible with prescription glasses, if you wear them

Before you go

Newsgathering, communications and contingency kit to consider:

- Boots that cover ankles
- Robust gloves
- Sufficient and back-up hydration
- Satellite phones
- Content gathering equipment and back-up batteries
- Relevant paperwork/permissions/ID
- Whatever else you need to do your job

Getting in and out

- Liaise with relevant officials to ensure you are not disturbing emergency services
- Ensure transport is fit for purpose
- Make sure you have more than one route in and out
- Consider a handheld compass
- Paper map of areas
- Do not rely on your phone

During Coverage

- The people whose experiences you are sharing may have faced significant loss and trauma
- Ensure your coverage is sensitive and does not add to any harm they have experienced
- Manage the expectations of those you interview/record
- Recognise that misinformation is a growing issue in covering wildfires

Afterwards

- Remember it takes a long time for places, items, the ground to cool down
- Covering wildfires can be difficult - speak with someone if you feel you need mental health support
- Communities will have been affected - are you going to maintain contact/do follow-up stories?
- Consider sharing your insights and any lessons learned with your wider team

ILS supports global organisations to operate safely and effectively in hostile environments, including wildfires - through Risk Advisory support and safety and security training.

As wildfire seasons grow longer and more intense, are you confident your teams have the awareness, skills and plans in place to operate safely in these environments?

👉 **Let's talk.** If you or your organisation are looking for support, we'd love to hear from you.