

SAFETY MATTERS

RISK
MANAGEMENT
NEWSLETTER

IN THIS ISSUE

SEPT. 25, 2026

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PROTECTING SCHOOLS FROM WILDFIRE

OBJECTIVE Understand risk factors to educational facilities associated with wildfires in California, wildfire mitigation strategies, and what to do during and after a wildfire event.

Wildfires in California, which are expected to increase in intensity and frequency due to climate change, have been a longstanding and frequent threat to Californians. They are a significant threat to property and public safety for residents and businesses in California. The following information includes risk factors to educational facilities, fire mitigation strategies, and what to do during and after a wildfire.

WILDFIRE PREVENTION

The following prevention strategies should be considered to mitigate risks associated with wildfires:

Determining Your Facilities Wildfire Risk

Low-risk areas typically have:

- A humid climate with a short dry season
- Flat terrain with no grades greater than 9 percent
- Limited wildland or conservation area exposure
- Sites that are not crowded by trees or dead grass
- Manmade fuels located > 50ft from the buildings
- A fire hydrant within 300 feet
- Easy access for fire trucks



Moderate risk areas typically have:

- Short dry season: less than 3 months.
- Sloped/hilly terrain: average grades of 10-20%.
- Wildland exposure: shared border with brush, small trees, grass, or conservation land, plus trees close to the building.
- Fire response factors: manmade fuels within 50 feet, a hydrant within 500 feet, and fire-truck access.





High-risk areas typically have:

- Long dry season: more than 3 months.
- Steep terrain: average grades over 20%.
- High vegetation risk: forested wildland within 100 feet and crowded vegetation within 30 feet.
- Limited fire response: manmade fuels within 30 feet, no hydrants, and limited truck access.

Understanding Fire Hazard Severity Zone Rating

Educational facilities can obtain information regarding their fire hazard severity zone rating from local fire officials. The fire hazard severity zone maps are available online and provided by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) as required by the Public Resources Code 4201-4204.

Defensible Space and Weed Abatement Program

A defensible space around an educational facility means using ignition-resistant materials on and around the facility to help it withstand flying embers and radiant heat. By creating and maintaining a minimum of 30 ft. of defensible space around structures, removing dry tree limbs and shrubs, using fire-resistant landscaping if possible, adhering to local fire and building codes, and complying with weed abatement ordinances.



Operations and Maintenance

Daily maintenance outside of the facility, such as regularly checking rain gutters, maintaining walkways, evacuation routes, and ensuring that exits are clear of obstructions. In addition to outdoor maintenance, indoor areas should be maintained in accordance with fire life safety codes, such as classrooms and common areas. These areas should only contain flame-resistant curtains, draperies, and decorative materials.

Emergency Planning

Educational institutions should have regularly scheduled reviews and updates as applicable to emergency operations planning and regular training for students, staff and faculty.

WILDFIRE PROTECTION

Recommended steps during a wildfire event

- **Ensure safety** - follow your campus's emergency evacuation plan and know the location of your evacuation assembly area.
- **Check local air quality** - the Current Air Quality Index (Current AQI) is the method used by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) to report air quality in real time. Current AQI can be checked at <https://www.airnow.gov/>.
- **Respiratory Protection** - With certain exceptions, employers must reduce workers' exposure to wildfire smoke in the following ways:
 - a. If feasible, provide an enclosed location with filtered air so that employee exposure to particulate matter (PM)_{2.5} is less than the current AQI of 151, or to the extent feasible.
 - b. If that is not feasible or adequate, consider relocating to another outdoor location where the current AQI for PM_{2.5} is lower, changing work schedules, reducing work intensity, or providing more rest periods.
 - c. With respiratory protective equipment if employers cannot reduce workers' exposure to PM_{2.5} to a current AQI of less than 151.





Wildfire Smoke Protection

Wildfire smoke is composed of harmful chemicals and tiny particles suspended in the air that present a significant health hazard for workers exposed to it. These particles can irritate the lungs and cause serious or even fatal health effects, such as:

- Reduced lung function
- Bronchitis
- Worsening of asthma
- Heart failure

Provide proper respiratory protective equipment, such as disposable filtering facepiece respirators (NIOSH-approved particulate respirators, such as N95 filtering facepiece respirators), half-facepiece respirators, or full-facepiece respirators*.

The employer must provide enough respirators for employee use on a voluntary basis when the current AQI for PM_{2.5} is equal to or greater than 151 but does not exceed 500. The employer must require employees to use respirators when the current AQI for PM_{2.5} is greater than 500.

WILDFIRE SMOKE MITIGATION IN FACILITIES

Building and HVAC Upgrades

- Seal gaps around windows, doors, vents, outlets, and other openings.
- Use MERV 13 or higher HVAC filters to capture fine smoke particles.
- Seal filter racks to prevent unfiltered air bypass.
- During smoke events, recirculate indoor air and consider smoke scrubbers where smoke exposure is frequent.

Supplemental Air Cleaning Solutions

- Deploy Portable Air Cleaners: Use portable air purifiers equipped with High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters in occupied spaces to reduce airborne contaminants.

Operational Best Practices

- Monitor Indoor Air Quality: Implement air quality sensors to continuously assess indoor pollutant levels, enabling timely responses to deteriorating conditions.
- Establish Maintenance Protocols: Develop and adhere to maintenance schedules for HVAC systems and air purifiers, ensuring filters are replaced as needed, especially during peak wildfire seasons.

Post Wildfire Event

- Do not enter district property until cleared by the fire department or proper authorities.
- Do not turn on gas, water, or electrical systems until the site is deemed safe.
- Once cleared, document damage with photos and prepare a property inventory.
- Report all damage and follow wildfire cleanup safety guidance.



Resources

- [Cal/EPA - Guidance for Schools During Wildfire Smoke Events](#)
- [California Code of Regulations, Title 8](#)
 - [§5141.1 Protection from Wildfire Smoke](#)
 - [§5144. Respiratory Protection](#)
- [Fire Hazard Severity Zones Maps](#)
- [Using the Air Quality Index](#)
- [AQI-Based Decision-Making Matrix for Wildfire Smoke Events](#)
- [N95 Mask Commonly Asked Questions](#)
- ["Using Disposable Respirators" \(in English and Spanish\)](#)
- [Watch Duty App](#)

This California Schools JPA Safety Matters is not intended to be exhaustive. The discussion and best practices suggested herein should not be regarded as legal advice. Readers should pursue legal counsel or contact their insurance providers to gain more exhaustive advice.





SIGN-IN SHEET

PROTECTING SCHOOLS FROM WILDFIRE

Facilitator: _____ Facilitator's Signature: _____

Date: _____ Organization: _____ Department: _____

Participants:

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