

WHAT IS A WILDFIRE:

Wildfires are a growing natural hazard in most regions of the United States, posing a threat to life and property, particularly where native ecosystems meet developed areas. West Austin is one area susceptible to wildfires. Fires can quickly race out of control if conditions are right. Dry vegetation, high winds and low humidity all add to that danger. That's why the National Weather Service releases red flag warnings and counties enact burn bans. However, because fire is a natural process, fire suppression can lead to more severe fires due to the buildup of vegetation, which creates more fuel.

In addition, the secondary effects of wildfires, including erosion, landslides, introduction of invasive species, and changes in water quality, are often more disastrous than the fire itself.

WILDFIRE SUPPLIES:

Your disaster kit

Your evacuation kit

Special clothing: long sleeve shirts, long pants, heavy boots, gloves, and a bandana.

Large livestock first-aid kit

HOW TO BE PREPARED FOR WILDFIRES:

- Plan several escape routes away from your home (by foot and car) and a meeting place in a large area with little or no vegetation.
- Make sure that fire vehicles can get to your home to fight a wildfire.
- Clearly mark all driveway entrances.
- Clearly display your address.
- Strengthen your house defenses.
- Install a smoke detector on each level of your home, especially near bedrooms; test monthly and change the batteries two times each year.
- Keep an ABC type fire extinguisher. Teach each family member how to use the fire extinguisher and show them where it's kept. Inspect the extinguisher periodically to make sure it is charged.
- Inspect chimneys at least twice a year. Clean them at least once a year. Keep the dampers in good working order. Insulate chimneys and place spark arresters on top.
- Install 1/4-inch mesh screen on vents, entry points, and under the deck to keep firebrands (pieces of burning materials that detach from a fire and are carried by the wind) from entering the house.
- Landscape and maintain your property with wildfire safety in mind.
- Keep a 30 to 100-foot safety zone around your home. Within this safety zone, thin a 15-foot space between tree crowns. Remove limbs within 6-10 feet of the ground.
- Rake leaves, dead limbs and twigs regularly.
- Mow grass regularly.
- Keep leaves and branches off of the roof and out of the gutters.

- Remove branches that extend over the roof.
- Prune tree branches and shrubs within 15 feet of a stovepipe or chimney outlet.
- Place shrubs at least 20 feet from any structures and prune regularly.
- There are no “fire-proof” plants. Select high moisture plants that grow close to the ground and have a low sap or resin content. Native plants are good choices because they are heat and drought resistant. Hardwood trees are less flammable than evergreen trees.
- Use rock, mulch, flower beds, gardens, and green lawns as ground cover for bare spaces and as effective fire breaks.
- Provide at least a 10 to 15-foot separation between islands of shrubs and plant groups to effectively break-up continuity of vegetation, known as “ladder fuels”.
- Clear a 10-foot area around propane tanks and the barbecue.
- Stack firewood at least 30-feet away and uphill from your home.
- Store gasoline, oily rags and other flammable materials in approved safety cans. Place cans in a safe location away from the base of buildings.
- Design your home with wildfire safety in mind.
- Use heat and flame-resistant wall materials such as: fiber-cement sheeting and boards, metal, real stucco, brick, concrete block, stone, or fire retardant-treated lumber.
- Install concrete or clay tiles, metal, or Class-A treated flame-retardant shingles on your roof, instead of wood shakes or standard shingles. This will reduce the chance that airborne burning debris will end up destroying your home.
- Driveways, non-flammable pathways, and rockscaping can help act as a fuel break.
- Do not build eaves, overhangs, large windows, sliding glass doors, decks, and extensions over slopes.
- Windows are conduits for fire to enter your home when they break from the heat. Install metal or frame shutters for your windows. Tempered glass windows withstand higher temperatures than plate glass. Other glass options are: Low E, glass block, fire glass, double glaze, and thermo pane.
- Install 1/4-inch mesh screen on vents and entry points to keep firebrands (pieces of burning materials that detach from a fire and are carried by the wind) from entering into the house.

WHAT TO DO WHEN WILDFIRE DANGER IS PRESENT:

- If you are warned that a wildfire is threatening your area, listen to your battery-operated radio for reports and evacuation information. Follow the instructions of local officials.
- Back your car into the garage or park it in an open space facing the direction of escape. Shut doors and roll up windows. Leave the key in the ignition. Close garage windows and doors, but leave them unlocked. Disconnect automatic garage door openers.
- Confine pets to one room. Make plans to care for your pets in case you must evacuate.
- Arrange temporary housing at a friend or relative’s home outside the threatened area.
- If advised to evacuate, do so immediately
- Wear protective clothing – sturdy shoes, cotton or woolen clothing, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, gloves, and a handkerchief to protect your face.
- Take your Disaster Supplies Kit.
- Lock your home.
- Tell someone when you left and where you are going.
- Choose a route away from fire hazards. Watch for changes in the speed and direction of fire and smoke.
- If you’re sure you have time, take steps to protect your home.

PROTECTING YOUR HOME:

- Close windows, vents, doors, blinds, or noncombustible window coverings and heavy drapes. Remove light weight curtains.
- Shut off all utilities if possible, including bottled gas.
- Open fireplace damper. Close fireplace screens.
- Move flammable furniture into the center of the home away from windows and sliding glass doors.
- Turn on a light in each room to increase the visibility of your home in heavy smoke.
- Seal attic and ground vents with precut noncombustible coverings.
- Turn off propane tanks.
- Place combustible patio furniture inside.
- Connect the garden hose to outside taps.
- Set up a portable gasoline-powered pump.
- Place lawn sprinklers on the roof and near aboveground fuel tanks. Wetting the roof may help if it is shake-shingled.
- Wet or remove shrubs within 15 feet of the home.
- Gather fire tools.

IF YOU CAN'T EVACULATE:

- Be prepared to face intense heat and black, blinding, choking smoke.
- Have a hose, rake, and shovel available. Fill tubs and sinks with water in case pumps fail.
- Wear long sleeve shirts, long pants, heavy boots, gloves, and a bandana.
- Remove combustible materials from around the house; turn off propane tank.
- Inside your house is the safest place to seek temporary refuge as the fire front passes.
- Identify a second area of refuge nearby.
- If the house or propane tank becomes involved in fire, seek secondary shelter.
- Once the fire front passes, be ready to put out fires on your roof or in your attic.

LINKS:

Printable PDF on wildfire safety from the U.S. Fire Administration

<http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa-287-508.pdf>

Wildfire Education Links

http://www.wildlandfire.com/docs/wildfire_edu.htm

Texas Department of Insurance – maps, bans, etc..

<http://www.tdi.state.tx.us/home/wildfires.html>

U.S. Forest Service – current fires and other resources

<http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/>

National Fire Protection Association

<http://www.nfpa.org/riskwatch/RWND/wildfire.html>

SOURCE:

U.S. Fire Administration, City of Austin, U.S. Geological Survey