



Fire & Disaster Cleaning Best Practices for Domestic Employers & All of Us

Purpose

This is a set of guidelines for all of us, but especially employers of house cleaners, on how best to support their employees during and after fires and other climate related natural disasters.

Key Takeaways

- Always put health first!
- Plan ahead. Create a plan with your family and employee(s) before a fire occurs.
- It is never too late to take steps to protect safety and health.

You'll Learn

1. [What to do during a disaster in an area impacted by fire or smoke](#)
2. [How to prepare for a future fire or disaster](#)
3. What to do after the fire, including [Tips for Safe Clean-up after a Fire](#)
4. [Additional Resources](#) on Safe Clean-up Practices, Disaster Aid for Immigrants, and Disaster Preparedness

Table of Contents

What to Do During a Disaster in an Area Impacted by Fire or Smoke	2
Support The Worker in Your Home When Their Work or Lives Have Been Disrupted by Fires	3
How to Prepare for a Future Fire or Disaster	3
Safe Cleanup After a Fire	4
Clean-up Work Safety Tips	4
Common Hazards in Post-Fire Clean Up	5
Equipment and Tools to Provide Workers	6
Additional Resources	6
On Safe, Fair, and Non-toxic Cleaning	6
Aid for Immigrants Impacted by Fire	6
General Fire Preparation and Recovery Resources	6
General Fire and Recovery Resources	7



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What to Do During a Disaster in an Area Impacted by Fire or Smoke

In fire zones, evacuate safely: If you are in a fire zone, listen to the local emergency instructions and follow their evacuation orders.¹ Do not require the worker in your home to come to work if your home is threatened, and be sure they know that they should not come to work. If workers are already at your home and you hear of possible evacuation orders, communicate with your employees immediately, ensure they have transportation, and know the safe routes to leave the area.

Legal tip!² California law forbids an employer to require an employee to enter or remain in a mandatory evacuation zone.³ Additionally, employees have the right to leave or refuse to report to work in a disaster area if they believe it is unsafe to remain.⁴

In smoky places, protect your worker's health: If you are near a fire, do not require the worker in your home to work outside or indoors if it exposes them to hazardous smoke. You can find the local Air Quality Index (AQI) at [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov). Based on your age and health conditions, some environments can be considered more hazardous.

- **For work outdoors**

- Above 100 AQI, employees with sensitivities (like asthma) to particulate matter or other air pollution should not work outdoors.
- Above 150 AQI, the air is considered unhealthy for everyone. Outdoor work should be avoided.

- **For indoor work**

- Filter your air using HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters. Regardless of official air quality, domestic workers should always be provided N95 masks.

Furthermore, we recommend *reducing the workload, rescheduling work until the air quality is better, and encouraging workers to take time to [rest or take breaks](#) as needed.*

Legal tip! California requires employers to protect the health of workers if the AQI for airborne particulate matter 2.5 micrometers or smaller (PM2.5) is 151 or greater by communicating the

¹ You can track active fires in California by visiting <https://www.fire.ca.gov/Home>. Download an app that alerts you if you are in an evacuation zone at protect.genasys.com.

² WorkSafe generously reviewed the legal tips in this guide. Learn more about their great work at <https://worksafe.org>.

³ It is unlawful to direct an employee to enter or remain in an area subject to a mandatory evacuation (Labor Code Section 6311.5).

⁴ Employees who believe it is unsafe to remain at a worksite may leave or refuse to report to work, and an employer cannot retaliate or threaten any adverse action in response. (Labor Code Section 1139).



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hazard, providing proper training, filtering the air, and providing respiratory protective equipment such as N-95 masks.⁵

Support The Worker in Your Home When Their Work or Lives Have Been Disrupted by Fires

- If the worker in your home lives in a fire zone, they may also need to evacuate or shelter in place and will be unavailable to work.
- If they rely on transit to get to your home, learn how the fire/disaster has impacted their ability to show up on time and be ready to adjust their schedule (e.g. change the start time or offer a ride).
- Compensate for any day of missed work caused by fire or smoke.
- Consider offering additional paid time off to take care of personal preparedness needs or attend to their own home.
- Be sure that your employee can take paid sick time they've earned (1 hour for every 30 hours worked) to care for themselves or their loved ones.
- Help the worker in your home connect to financial support if they have been impacted by a fire. Many undocumented workers are not eligible for FEMA and government aid, but access private relief funds via nonprofits and mutual aid organizations. You can find a list of aid resources for immigrants at the end of this guide.
- If the disaster has made it difficult or impossible for you to continue to employ a worker in your home, consider helping your employee find a new job. We recommend providing 1 week of severance pay for every year they have worked for you.

How to Prepare for a Future Fire or Disaster

- Create a [work agreement](#) that includes an emergency/disaster plan.⁶
- Ensure that you are offering your employee the [paid sick leave](#) that they have a right to. Domestic workers, like most CA employees, accrue 1 hour of paid sick leave for every 30 hours worked and can use up to 5 days or 40 hours (whichever is higher) for paid sick leave to care for oneself or a loved one.⁷
- Have an emergency and evacuation plan for your family and your employees, including supplies like clean water and a go bag. Emergency preparedness resources are linked below.

⁵ Department of Industrial Relations, California Occupational Safety and Health Wildfire Smoke guidance <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/doshreg/Protection-from-Wildfire-Smoke/Wildfire-smoke-emergency-standard.html>

⁶ Look to www.domesticemployers.org for sample work agreements.

⁷ For more details on paid sick leave and other domestic employment responsibilities, see <https://domesticemployers.org/resource/california-legal-faq-checklist>.



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Safe Cleanup After a Fire

The following is guidance provided by the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley.

Ash, soot, and other material can be toxic given the mix of materials that has burned. This is why agencies with trained staff are doing the initial clean up to get rid of hazardous materials,

- If you have a lot of ash and soot, you should hire a professional company because of the risks involved. This cost may be covered by home insurance.
- If you have only a little ash in your home, then follow the tips below.

Clean-up Work Safety Tips

If you have only a little ash in your home and are going to handle the cleaning on your own or with a housecleaner, make sure you follow these precautions:

- Before doing any cleaning, survey the area to look for dangers (see list of hazards below).
- Provide N95 or P100 masks. Note that it can be more challenging for workers to breathe while wearing these masks. We urge caution for workers who have heart or lung conditions.⁸
- Extend the time allocated for your employees to perform their work or reduce the scope of duties. Encourage workers to take time to rest and reduce the intensity of their work.
- Provide gloves and make sure workers are wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, as they also should avoid skin contact with ash or soot. Wash up as soon as possible if any ash comes into contact with skin. (See full list of protective gear below.)
- Provide an air cleaner (“air purifier”) that is the right size for your room or house. If it is the type that has a filter, choose one that uses HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters.⁹
- Provide a HEPA vacuum for vacuuming ash or soot, as they have “high-efficiency particulate air” filters to filter out the small particles.
- Encourage your employee to avoid generating dust or lifting ashes. They should not sweep or use leaf blowers or other actions that lift the ash.
- Provide water spray bottles and rags or mops to clean up ash. When ash is sprayed with a little water and then wiped up, it won’t blow up into the air.
- Encourage your employee to change work clothes to avoid bringing ash and dust home.
- Do not ask a worker to lift heavy loads. If possible, get help from a second or third person or divide the weight to load several lighter packages.

⁸ N95 masks should not be confused with KN95, which loop over the ears. The straps should go over the head.

<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/images/N95-Mask-DOS-DONTS.jpg>

⁹ For a full list of certified air cleaners, visit <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/list-carb-certified-air-cleaning-devices>.



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- Do not ask a worker to move any tank or pipes that have come out of place, or containers of paint or chemicals. Only qualified people can remove them.
- Make sure that stairs, ceilings, and other structures have been inspected and are safe before working on or under them.
- Do not ask a worker to operate equipment that runs on gasoline or diesel inside a building.
- Cleaning soot can cause streaking, so it is good to test a small area first. To avoid more toxic products, try first with a dry sponge to remove some of the soot. Then use a mild dish detergent with a microfiber cloth or sponge to see if that does the job. (You still need to provide N95 respirators and gloves for this.) If you need to use chemical products, read the label, follow precautions and provide recommended protective gear.¹⁰

Legal tip! In California, Occupational Safety and Health laws apply to ash and soot clean-up, regardless of worker type. These laws require employers to filter the air, provide HEPA grade vacuum cleaners, provide respiratory equipment like N95 masks, and take other feasible precautions.¹¹

Common Hazards in Post-Fire Clean Up

There are many hazards that fires can create. Before your employees do any cleaning, survey the area to look for dangers and adopt our recommendations for “Tips for Clean-up Work Safety.”

1. **Ash, soot, and dust** are dangerous because they come from burned materials that could include plastics, lead, asbestos, computers, chemicals, etc.
2. **Heavy items** that can strain muscles if improperly lifted and **unstable structures** (such as damaged trees or buildings) or surfaces that can fall.
3. **Tanks, pipes, and other equipment** containing hazardous materials such as propane or sewage.
4. **Containers containing paint, cleaning products or pesticides, or discolored soil and water.**
5. **Machinery** such as pumps, generators, and pressure washing machines which can emit deadly carbon monoxide gas.
6. **Damaged electrical cables or burned wires near water.**
7. **Closed or confined spaces that are not well ventilated.**
8. **Dust by demolition of concrete or brick.**
9. **Cleaning products.** Most conventional cleaning products contain dangerous ingredients. Learn more at www.ewg.org.

¹⁰ More on cleaning up soot: <http://ph.lacounty.gov/eh/docs/safety/how-to-clean-up-smoke-soot-from-fire-en.pdf>

¹¹ Cal/OSHA’s Resource on Worker Safety and Health during Fire Clean-up
<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/wildfire/Worker-Health-and-Safety-During-Fire-Cleanup.html>



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Equipment and Tools to Provide Workers

- N-95 Mask or respirator with P100 filters
- Helmet
- Gloves of Nitrile for cleaning ash or soot and of leather to move and lift items
- Boots
- Work clothes with long sleeves and long pants
- Protective goggles
- Earplugs for loud noise

Additional Resources

- **For health and safe clean-up:** Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley lohp.berkeley.edu
- For more information on **domestic worker rights on the job:** California Domestic Workers Coalition www.cadomesticworkers.org
- For more information for **employers about fair employment practices:** Hand in Hand: The Domestic Employers Network www.domesticemployers.org

On Safe, Fair, and Non-toxic Cleaning

- [Safe Cleaning After a Disaster](#)
- [Volunteer Industry Guidelines to Protect the Health and Safety of Domestic Workers and Day Laborers](#)
- [Disaster-related Hazardous Waste Removal](#)
- [Sample Work Agreements](#)
- *En Español:* [Return Home Ash Cleaning Guide](#)
- *En Español:* [Housecleaning Work Agreement](#)

Aid for Immigrants Impacted by Fire

- [We Care Fund](#) for domestic workers (hosted by the National Domestic Workers Alliance)
- [Open Air Worker Emergency Fund](#) (hosted by Inclusive Action)

General Fire Preparation and Recovery Resources

- [Staying Safe After a Fire](#) (English)
- [Staying Safe After a Fire](#) (Spanish)



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General Fire and Recovery Resources

- [Disability Rights CA- Fire and Emergency Resources for Disabled Californians](#)
- [California's Environmental Protection Agency resources for fire response and recovery](#)
- [Red Cross's preparing for emergencies](#)