



Learning to Live with Fire – Wildfire Evacuation Checklist

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It is that time of season again in New Mexico where we start to think about wildfires. We are generally past looking for moisture from a snow storm, but rather hoping for a spring shower here or there – to help keep fuel moistures up. We are starting to see our first Red Flag Warnings days (Figure 1). We also look at predictive maps and models and see above an average fire season predicted for the months ahead (Figure 2). We might even be dreading that our favorite hunting ground, camping site, or mountain range could be the next moonscape if all the wrong circumstances align and wildfire crowns out and decimates our corner of the forest. However, I venture to opine that most of us are not contemplating our house burning down this fire season, much less being evacuated under the threat of wildfire. But this would go against trends we see across the West over the last twenty years. In New Mexico, Ute Park, Dog Head, Little Bear, and Cerro Grande all come to mind, but so too do countless more fires that do not have infamous names (*e.g.*, Iron Works Fire) but still resulted in lost dwellings due to wildfire. Given this reality, we have constructed an easy to follow evacuation checklist should you find yourself needing to flee from a wildfire (Figure 3).

Evacuating a home in the face of a wildfire is a precarious and stressful event. Following our checklist, people, prescriptions, and phones are the top three items to secure. In a worst-case scenario, homeowners may have only moments to leave or escape, in which case, evacuating people is obviously the highest priority. If time allows, grab essential medications (*e.g.*, insulin, inhaler, heart medication) and your phone. Just a few short years ago, a phone might not have been on the list, but today this tool can serve as a lifeline in emergencies. Beyond phone calls, it can allow us to send text messages when phone lines are jammed, track our movements, provide an evacuation map, serve as a radio, and receive emergency messages from authorities.

The importance and relevancy of the remaining boxes on our checklist will vary from one individual to the next. Certainly for pet owners, our furry (or not) friends will be at the forefront of our minds when considering what can and cannot be left behind. Pets and photos are the two most cited items people recall when listing items they most miss following the loss of home to wildfire. Grabbing a personal computer (such as a laptop in particular) is an easy way to secure digital photos and in some cases, useful documents. However, it must be noted, most documents, especially those that are government issued, can be replaced. One or two “priceless” heirlooms, keepsakes, or similar (*e.g.*, handwritten recipe, collections, art) may also be grabbed in some cases as you head out the door. Speaking of running out the door, personal items (*e.g.*, change of clothes, toiletries, water bottle, phone and computer charger) and your pocketbook (*i.e.*, purse, wallet, money clip) can make life easier in the short-run if there is time to secure these particulars.

Once the checklist has been completed, it is time to get into your vehicle (presumably a car, but not necessarily), turn on the headlights, and cautiously evacuate. Depending on the nature of the fire, all your neighbors will be out on the road attempting to accomplish the same goal. This can result in traffic bottlenecks. To avoid this scenario, leave as early as possible and be familiar with alternative evacuation routes. Just because authorities indicate, “you have about two hours to evacuate” does not mean the entire two hours to pack up needs to be utilized. Moreover, consider such a timeframe an estimate at best; wildfires do not follow scripted timelines or routes.

Hopefully, you will not need to put our checklist to use this fire season – which seems to be starting sooner and running longer these past few years. But if necessary, following the checklist will help guide you through intentional actions in the face of stressful circumstances in order to achieve a better outcome.



Photo by Miguel Riopa/AFP/Getty

NOTE Do NOT plan to slow down a wildfire or save your house with a garden hose. Intense heat, flames, and blowing smoke will render this approach useless and dangerous.

Figure 1. Red Flag Warnings are issued by the National Weather Service when warm temperatures, low relative humidity, and strong winds are expected to occur simultaneously creating an increased fire danger for the forecast area. If an ignition were to occur given these conditions, fire behavior and growth would be significant and containment would be difficult.

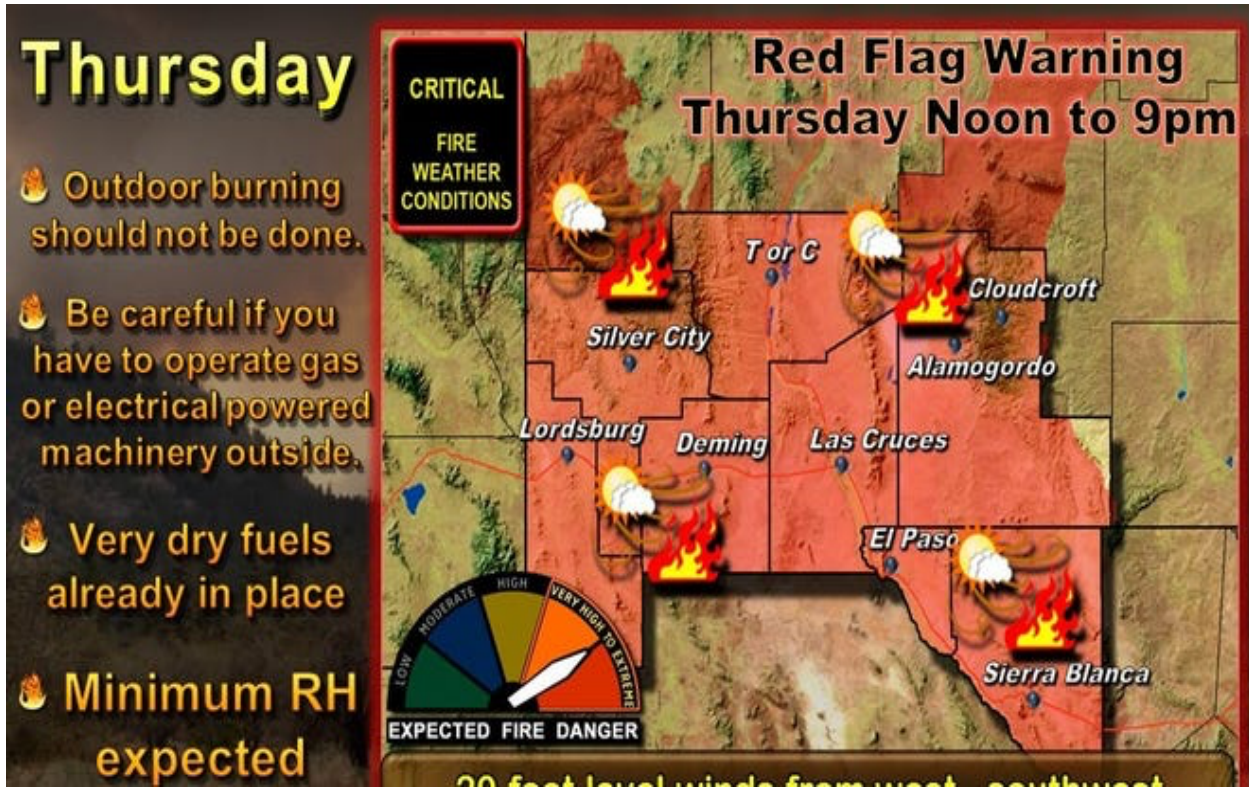


Figure 2. National Weather Service Fire Predictive Services for May and June 2021

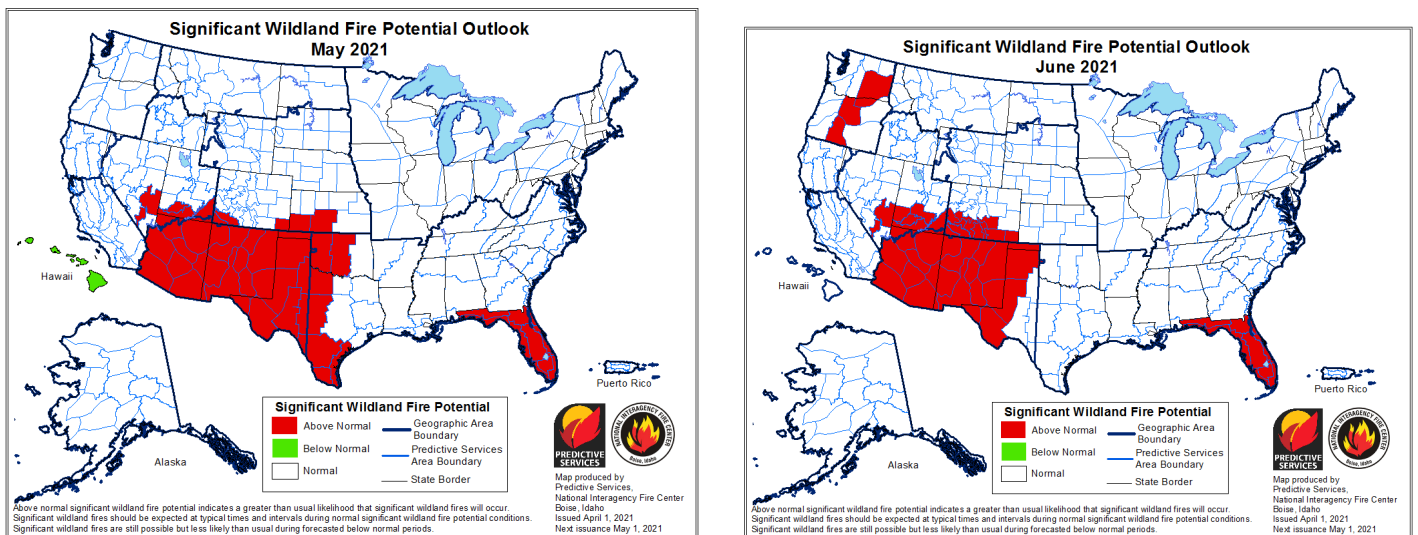


Figure 3. Wildfire Evacuation Checklist

Learning to Live with Fire – Wildfire Evacuation Checklist (10 Ps)

Leave Early **Forget the Garden Hose**

Moments to Respond:

- 1) **P**eople
- 2) **P**rescriptions (for example: insulin, inhaler, EpiPen, heart medication, etc.)
- 3) **P**hone

Minutes to Respond:

- **P**ets
- **P**hotos
- **P**ocketbook (for example: purse, wallet, money clip)
- **P**ersonal Computer (for example, easy to grab laptop)
- **P**ersonal Items (for example: phone & computer charger, clothes, toiletries, water bottles)
- **“P**riceless” _____ (you fill in the blank – sentimental or actual value)
- **P**apers (keep in mind, most documents can be replaced...)

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