

How to Keep Your Pet Safe When Wildfires Strike

The most heartbreaking wildfire stories often involve lost pets, but these tragedies are preventable. To give your pet the best chance of survival, the time to prepare isn't when flames are near but long before they appear.

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- Wildfires are becoming more frequent and destructive, especially in fire-prone regions. A solid evacuation plan is essential to ensuring your and your pet's safety before disaster strikes
- Pets face multiple dangers during wildfires, including burn injuries, smoke inhalation, and panic-induced flight. Toxic gases in wildfire smoke exacerbate health problems, especially in pets with asthma or heart disease
- A pet emergency kit is essential for wildfire preparedness. Pack at least a seven- to 10-day food, water, and medications supply. Include familiar items like a blanket or toy to help reduce stress, and ensure their ID tags are up to date
- Evacuate as early as you can and assign family members to handle multiple pets. Secure pets in properly fitted harnesses or carriers, and relocate livestock if time allows. Never leave animals tied up or confined if you need to leave them behind, as they need a chance to escape
- After returning home, check for hazards before letting your pets inside. Monitor for smoke inhalation symptoms and provide comfort to reduce post-disaster stress. Seek veterinary care if needed

Your pet trusts you to keep them safe, but when wildfires strike, are you ready to act? These disasters have grown more frequent and destructive, particularly in regions like California.¹ Wildfires are fast-moving, unpredictable, and deadly, leaving affected people little time to react, and in the chaos, pets often become lost, injured, or left behind.

The heartbreak of losing a pet during a wildfire evacuation is devastating and all too common, but it doesn't have to be this way. Proper preparation and a well-thought-out plan can dramatically improve your chances of keeping your entire family — including your animal companions — safe when disaster strikes.

The Dangers Wildfires Pose to Pets

During wildfires, burn injuries pose an immediate danger to pets. Hot pavement, falling embers, or direct contact with flames cause severe burns, especially to their paws and skin. Panic increases risk because the loud sounds of sirens, helicopters, and emergency vehicles trigger pets' fight-or-flight response, causing them to bolt, hide, or resist being secured. Once loose, they face a greater chance of injury, smoke exposure, dehydration, or becoming lost.

Smoke inhalation is another serious threat. Wildfire smoke contains toxic gases like carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, and benzene, which damage your pet's lungs, cause breathing difficulties, and lead to long-term health problems.^{2,3} If your pet has been exposed to wildfire smoke, monitor them closely for the following symptoms and seek veterinary care if any appear:⁴

- Coughing or gagging
- Eye irritation and excessive watering
- Nasal discharge
- Rapid breathing
- Disorientation or unsteady movement
- Difficulty breathing, including open-mouth breathing and noisy respiration
- Inflammation of the throat or mouth
- Wheezing or asthma-like symptoms
- Fatigue or weakness
- Loss of appetite or decreased thirst

For pets with pre-existing health conditions, wildfire smoke and heat worsen existing illnesses and cause serious complications. Pets with asthma, heart disease, or respiratory issues may struggle to breathe even with minimal smoke exposure. Senior pets or those with mobility problems may have difficulty evacuating, making early action necessary. High-risk pets may also need extra medical care and close monitoring during and after evacuation.⁵

Wildfire Preparedness — Six Essential Tips to Keep Your Pet Safe

Wildfire season typically peaks between late spring and early fall, with the highest risk from May through November in many fire-prone regions. However, in drought-affected areas, wildfires happen year-round.⁶ When a fire breaks out, you may have little time to react, and scrambling for supplies at the last minute puts you and your pet in danger. Taking these steps now will ensure you're ready to evacuate quickly and keep your pet safe before disaster strikes:^{7,8}

1. **Pack a pet emergency kit** — Have at least a seven- to 10-day supply of food, bottled water, and food and water bowls. If your pet eats canned food, remember to bring a manual can-opener. Include any prescription medications your pet takes, with dosing instructions and a copy of their medical records and vaccination history.
2. **Make sure your pet has proper identification** — Your pet should always wear a collar with an ID tag with your current phone number and address. If your pet isn't microchipped, schedule the procedure immediately to increase their chances of being reunited with you. If your pet is already microchipped, verify that your contact information is current in the registry.
3. **Pack familiar items to keep your pet at ease** — Evacuations are overwhelming for pets, but familiar scents and objects may help keep them calm. Bring your pet's favorite toy, blanket, or bed to provide comfort. If your pet is prone to anxiety, pack calming treats or pheromone sprays to help ease their stress. Keeping them comfortable will make the evacuation process smoother.
4. **Use a secure carrier or leash** — Pets often panic during emergencies, and even the most well-behaved animals may try to flee. Keep a sturdy, well-ventilated carrier or crate ready for transport, especially for cats and small animals. Label it with your contact information in case you get separated. Train your pet to be familiar with their carrier beforehand, so they don't resist being placed inside during an evacuation. If you're only using a collar or harness, make sure it's properly fitted to prevent your pet from slipping out and escaping in fear.

5. **Plan your evacuation route and safe destination** — Not all shelters or hotels allow pets, so you need to know where you'll go before an emergency happens. Look for pet-friendly shelters, hotels, or friends and family members who can accommodate you and your pet. Never assume you'll find a place at the last minute, as emergency shelters fill up instantly. Having multiple options gives you the best chance at evacuating smoothly without putting your pet at risk.
6. **Stay informed and act early** — Sign up for emergency alerts and monitor local fire conditions so you're aware of any developing threats. Monitor emergency updates through local news, weather apps, or official sources like the fire department or emergency management agency. If an evacuation warning is issued, leave early rather than waiting for a mandatory order. Doing so will help you avoid dangerous road conditions and give you enough time to evacuate safely.

How to Safely Evacuate Your Animal Companion During a Wildfire

When authorities issue an evacuation order, don't wait — leave as quickly as you can. Wildfires spread fast, and delaying your departure could put you and your pet in danger. If an evacuation order has not yet been issued but air quality is deteriorating, keep your pet indoors with windows and doors closed to limit smoke exposure while you prepare to leave. Follow these steps to evacuate safely:^{9,10,11}

- **Evacuate people first** — Your safety, and the safety of those with you, comes first. While pets are family, never put yourself or others at risk if conditions become too dangerous. The best way to protect your animals is to ensure you can evacuate safely and get them out as soon as possible.
- **Secure and transport pets next** — If you have multiple pets, assign different family members to handle them so they are transported efficiently. If you're evacuating alone, focus on moving pets in the safest, most efficient way. Load small pets into carriers first, then leash and secure larger pets to prevent them from panicking or escaping. If you have limited space, prioritize pets that are transported quickly while arranging help for others.
- **Move livestock only if time allows** — If conditions are safe and you have enough time, relocate horses and livestock to a predetermined safe area. If you can't evacuate them, open gates and remove any restraints so they have a chance to escape on their own.
- **Check evacuation routes** — Wildfires spread unpredictably, so monitor emergency updates and adjust your route to avoid areas with heavy smoke or active fires. Drive with headlights on, windows rolled up and extreme caution, as smoke severely limits visibility.
- **Find transportation if you don't have a car** — Contact friends, neighbors, or local authorities immediately for assistance. Some areas offer designated evacuation transportation, such as buses or emergency shelters with pickup points. Use them early before services shut down.
- **Find a safe shelter if evacuation isn't possible** — Move to a fire-resistant building made of brick or concrete. Close all windows and doors, and seal gaps with wet towels or duct tape to keep smoke out. Keep your pet with you at all times, either on a leash or in a secure carrier. Continue checking emergency updates and be prepared to evacuate if conditions change. Call emergency services and let them know your location so they are aware that you need assistance.
- **Never restrain animals if you must leave them behind** — If you cannot evacuate livestock or pets, do not tie them up or confine them in cages or stalls. This gives them the best chance of escaping and avoiding danger.

Helping Your Pet Recover After a Wildfire

Once the fire is contained and it's safe to return home, check your house for hazards before letting your pet inside. Smoke damage, ash-covered debris, and toxic fumes linger long after the flames are gone, creating dangerous conditions. Be sure to inspect the floors for hot spots, broken glass, or sharp objects that could injure your pet before allowing them to explore their surroundings.

You should also monitor your pet closely for delayed symptoms of smoke inhalation, such as coughing, labored breathing or fatigue. Some effects of smoke exposure may not appear immediately, so it's important to keep an eye on your pet in the hours and days after returning home. Even if they seem fine, schedule a vet check-up to rule out any hidden respiratory issues and ensure they haven't suffered internal damage.¹²

Some pets may show signs of stress or trauma after an evacuation, even if they're physically unharmed. Appetite changes, clingy behavior, or fearfulness are common responses to a stressful event like a wildfire. Give them time to adjust, stick to a familiar routine, and provide plenty of comfort and reassurance to help them feel safe again. If your pet's anxiety doesn't improve, consult a veterinarian for additional support, such as calming aids or behavioral guidance.

Having a Plan Saves Lives

Wildfires have shown time and time again how crucial preparedness is for both communities and their pets. While you cannot control when or where wildfires will strike, you can control how ready you are to protect your animal companions. Each step you take to prepare — from creating an emergency kit to establishing evacuation routes — gives your pets their best chance of survival.

Remember that your advance planning doesn't just protect your own pets — it also helps emergency responders. When pet owners evacuate quickly and efficiently, first responders can focus their resources on controlling the fire and assisting those in immediate danger. Consider sharing your emergency plan with neighbors and joining local pet owner networks to build a stronger, more resilient community that's ready to face wildfire season together.

Sources and References

¹ [Prevention Web, January 13, 2025](#)

^{2,12} [PetMD, January 14, 2025](#)

³⁻⁵ [Paw Print Oxygen, January 23, 2025](#)

⁴ [AVMA, Wildfire Smoke and Animals](#)

⁶ [WFCA, October 8, 2024](#)

⁷ [BC Pet Registry, January 15, 2025](#)

^{8,9} [AirNow.gov, Wildfire Smoke Factsheet](#)

¹⁰ [Idaho Firewise, Evacuating Pets and Large Animals](#)

¹¹ [Impact, January 19, 2025](#)
