

# WILDFIRE & Insurance

Wildfire is a growing threat in the Rocky Mountain Region, where the population is booming in the mountains and foothills. People often don't realize the dangers of living in the Red Zone (dangerous wildfire area). They're drawn here by the breathtaking views, but they don't always see the potential for losing their homes to wildfire. To help protect themselves and their property, homeowners need to be aware of the importance of mitigating wildfire hazards AND be aware of the insurance impact of living in high-risk areas.



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The Manzano Mountain Retreat is looking forward to a bumper apple crop this year and Randy Simmons no longer takes that for granted. Less than a year ago, the facility manager watched as the 35-year old retreat—where he works and lives—nearly went up in flames. New Mexico’s wind-driven Trigo Fire

swept through the 130-acre property last April, destroying this season’s apple crop, but sparing the apple trees themselves and some 20 buildings. This miraculous outcome wasn’t just due to luck and firefighting efforts. Three years earlier Simmons acted on the recommendations of the New Mexico State Forestry Division to thin some of the thousands of trees that surround the mountain retreat. “If we hadn’t done all the things we did, we wouldn’t be here today. 100 percent guaranteed,” Simmons comments.

When the fire moved down the mountain, it spread so quickly that Simmons and his wife could only watch as hot shot teams fought the fire that raged within 50 feet of his house and burned through the camp, “You could feel the heat and thick black ash was flying through the air.”

Fire crews told Simmons they stayed to fight the fire at the Manzano Mountain Retreat because they felt they could save it due to the mitigation efforts. Simmons says before the fire they felt a false sense of security that it “couldn’t happen here” and if it did there was no proof that it would help. But, now Simmons has his proof and is a believer. He says the forest service worked with them to thin thousands of trees, but they kept enough to preserve the feeling of a mountain getaway. In fact, Simmons says after they cleared away excess trees and cleaned debris away from buildings, it looked more attractive. Now he feels a responsibility and offers this lesson learned, “If you are willing to live in this kind of environment you need to do everything you can to make it safer.” And, of course, this teacher’s reward is an apple—a whole crop of them.

Homeowners insurance typically covers property losses caused by wildfire. Insurance continues to be readily available and affordable in most wildfire prone areas,\* however, with increasing risk for a devastating wildfire, residents should be aware of some important factors:

- Many homeowners insurance companies are responding to the wildfire threat by asking customers to share the risk by taking precautions to protect their property and maintain affordable insurance.
- Increasingly, insurance companies are conducting on-site inspections and notifying policyholders of what they need to do to mitigate wildfire hazards to help save their homes and keep them insurable.
- In New Mexico, insurance companies generally ask homeowners to mitigate fire hazards on their property in accordance with Firewise guidelines ([www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)), as well as local fire codes. Those recommendations will vary depending on the risk for individual properties and requirements for different insurance companies.\*
- Insurance companies have different requirements for individual properties they are willing to insure. Proper mitigation may help reduce the risk, but insurance companies also consider other factors, such as:
  - ✓ The type of construction, materials and features on your home, including the roofing.
  - ✓ Distance to a fire hydrant and a fire station, whether your neighborhood is protected by professional or volunteer firefighters, and any factors that affect the time it would take to extinguish a fire in your area.

## Bottom Line

Contact your insurance company or agent to learn what you can do to mitigate fire hazards on your property and reduce wildfire risk. State and local fire officials can also provide tips and resources to assist you with a mitigation plan.

\*Individual risk factors affect insurance premiums and availability, so cost and ability to obtain insurance will vary based on company policies.

## How can I defend my home from wildfire?

- ☐ **Defensible Space:** To create a defensible space around your home, remove or reduce flammable vegetation and replace it with less flammable plants. Depending on slope and vegetation, defensible space should be between 30 and 200 feet. Defensible space guidelines are available at [http://www.nmfireinfo.com/docs/60589\\_jes.pdf](http://www.nmfireinfo.com/docs/60589_jes.pdf)
- ☐ **Trees:** Reduce the number of trees in heavily wooded areas and prune within the defensible space to 10 feet above the ground. Remove branches that overhang the roof or come within 15 feet of the chimney.
- ☐ **Fine, Flashy Fuels:** Reduce or remove grasses and brush away from buildings, propane tanks and fences. Clean all dead leaves and needles from the roof, gutters and yard.
- ☐ **Flammables:** Locate woodpiles and liquid propane gas tanks at least 30 feet from all structures and clear away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of woodpiles and propane tanks.
- ☐ **Roof:** Install a roof with a fire classification of "Class A." Cover the chimney outlet and stovepipe with nonflammable screening no larger than half-inch mesh.
- ☐ **Windows:** Install dual-or triple-pane windows, and limit the size and number of windows that face large areas of vegetation.

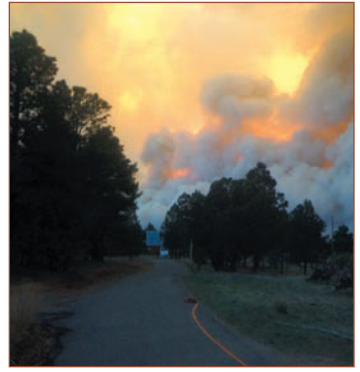
## How can I help firefighters protect my home?

- ☐ **Make it easy for firefighters to get to your home.** Roads must be wide enough to accommodate fire trucks and provide a place for them to turn around. Driveways and bridges must be strong enough to carry heavy emergency vehicles. Identify at least two exit routes from your house and make sure they're well marked. All access routes to your home should be free of low-hanging tree branches and cleared of flammable vegetation at least 10 feet from roads and five feet from driveways.
- ☐ **Proximity to a quality fire department** with well-trained firefighters is one of the greatest considerations that your insurance carrier will use to determine your homeowners insurance premium.
- ☐ **Maintain an emergency water supply** that meets fire department standards, such as a community water hydrant system, a cooperative emergency storage tank you share with neighbors or a minimum storage supply of 2,500 gallons on your property. If your water comes from a well, consider an emergency generator to operate the pump during a power failure. Clearly mark all water sources, and create easy access to your closest emergency water source.

# Insurance Checklist

## ☐ **Do an Annual Insurance Check-up**

Understanding what is and isn't covered in your homeowners insurance policy can affect your ability to rebuild your home and replace your personal belongings. Conduct an annual insurance policy "check up" to make sure you keep up with local building costs and adjust your coverage to include home remodeling and additions. If you don't have replacement coverage consider spending a few extra dollars for coverage that pays for the cost of replacing the damaged property without deduction for depreciation.



## ☐ **Create a Home Inventory**

Would you be able to remember all the possessions you've accumulated over the years if they were destroyed in a fire? Make a home inventory that includes lists, pictures or a videotape of the contents of your home. An up-to-date home inventory will help get your insurance claim settled faster, verify losses for your income tax return and help you purchase the correct amount of insurance. To help with the inventory process, download "Know Your Stuff"<sup>TM</sup> free software available at [www.rmii.org](http://www.rmii.org).

## ☐ **Know What Is and Is Not Covered**

The typical homeowners insurance policy covers damage resulting from fire, windstorm, hail, water damage (excluding flooding), riots and explosion. It also covers other causes of loss, such as theft and the extra cost of living in a temporary residence while your home is being repaired or rebuilt.

Your policy also covers your legal liability (up to policy limits) if you, members of your family or even your pets hurt other people or their property, not just in your house, but away from it, as well. If you have significant assets to protect, you may want to consider an umbrella policy that offers increased protection against lawsuits.

The standard policy does not cover flooding, so you may want to look into flood insurance coverage if you're concerned that you're at risk from rising floodwaters.

## Did you know?

For each dollar spent on disaster mitigation, society saves an average of four dollars. A FEMA-commissioned study found that mitigation is a smart financial investment for individuals, states and communities because it helps reduce disaster relief costs and tax losses.

Following Firewise mitigation guidelines can help homeowners and communities minimize the risk of home ignition by thinning trees and brush, and using fire-resistive plants around structures; selecting ignition-resistant building materials; positioning structures away from slopes; and working with firefighters and other fire management organizations to develop mitigation plans.

## Partners & Resources



[www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)



[www.nmprc.state.nm.us/id.htm](http://www.nmprc.state.nm.us/id.htm)



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