

HR Insights

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Supporting Employees During Wildfires

Wildfires are a part of nature's ecosystem, but when extreme, they can be devastating to people, biodiversity and ecosystems, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. What's worse, wildfires are getting worse, starting earlier in the year and happening more often. In early 2025, devastating wildfires near Los Angeles burned around 40,000 acres and forced the evacuation of over 100,000 residents.

Notably, wildfires can directly impact the health and safety of millions. While U.S. wildfires are most common in western states, all regions should prepare for these threats, as wildfires' impact extends beyond the immediate threat to individuals and communities. For employees living in regions especially prone to these disasters, wildfire risks can lead to heightened anxiety, uncertainty and disruptions. Employers should recognize the challenges their workforce may face due to wildfires and take proactive steps to support their well-being. By prioritizing employee well-being and offering appropriate resources, employers can show workers they're valued, increase loyalty and productivity, and mitigate the impact of wildfires on their workforce.

This article explores practical strategies employers can implement to help ensure the physical and mental health of their workforce during wildfires.

Develop Emergency Preparedness Plans

As wildfires become increasingly common and severe, it's vital that employers establish well-defined emergency preparedness plans. These plans should provide clear guidance on aspects such as evacuation procedures, emergency contacts and designated

assembly points. Emergency preparedness plans commonly address the following areas:

- Resource management
- Emergency response
- Employee communications
- Business continuity
- Employee assistance
- Emergency supplies
- Employee training
- Incident management

Employers should regularly review and update these plans to account for any changes in the wildfire risk landscape. Additionally, they should ensure employees are aware of these plans and know what to do in case of an emergency. Employers should consider using checklists and other resources to make sure details of wildfire preparedness aren't overlooked.



Maintain Communication Channels

Maintaining open and regular communication is crucial during periods of wildfire risk. Employers can implement systems for real-time communication, such as an emergency notification system or a dedicated communication channel, to keep employees informed. For example, a mass notification system allows organizations to use various communication tools to distribute real-time emergency messages to large groups of people. Using these communication channels to send regular updates about current wildfires, road closures, evacuation notices and relevant safety measures can help keep employees safe and provide peace of mind.

Employers can assign an individual or group of individuals responsible for communicating critical information related to wildfires to all employees. In addition to establishing a communication chain of command, employers can encourage employees to enable push notifications to their cellphones to make sure they receive critical communications and timely updates.

Educate Employees

Ensuring all employees know what to do in an emergency can help improve workplace safety and reduce workers' anxiety. Employers can educate employees on the following wildfire safety measures:

- Evacuation plans
- Home preparedness
- Safety zones to protect property
- Mental health support resources

Practicing evacuation plans regularly can help employees feel confident that they'll be able to respond quickly and safely during an emergency.

Establish Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

Wildfires can be traumatic events, greatly impacting workers' mental and emotional well-being. Employers can use EAPs to support employees impacted by wildfires. EAPs generally provide counseling services, mental health resources and referral programs to assist

employees dealing with stress, anxiety and trauma. These can be valuable resources for employees during and after difficult events, such as wildfires.

Utilize Employee Leave and Benefits

Leave can be critical to an employee's well-being during wildfires. Providing employees with leave can allow them to prioritize their and their families' safety and address any emergencies or disruptions that may arise, such as finding child care arrangements. Additionally, wildfires can result in poor air quality due to smoke, which can adversely affect employees' health. Employees may need time off to minimize their exposure to these hazardous conditions.

Workers impacted by wildfires may be entitled to leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act and other laws due to health conditions related to wildfires. Employers should make their employees aware of their federal, state and local leave rights during wildfires.

For workers who have exhausted their leave, employers can use leave donation programs to allow these employees to take time off during an emergency. Some organizations also implement employee assistance funds during crises that offer grants to aid employees experiencing financial difficulties due to natural disasters.

Institute Workplace Safety Measures

Employers with offices or facilities in areas prone to wildfires should take proactive steps to ensure employee safety. These may include implementing fire-resistant building materials, conducting regular fire drills and equipping workplaces with firefighting equipment. Organizations should also have safety procedures in place for employees to follow in case of a wildfire, including designating fire wardens and establishing evacuation routes. Regularly inspecting and maintaining fire safety equipment can help confirm its effectiveness.

Implement Flexible Work Arrangements

Wildfires can disrupt employees' lives and create unexpected challenges. Implementing flexible work arrangements can help accommodate employees' needs during wildfires. Remote work arrangements, flexible schedules and adjusted hours may alleviate workers'

stress of commuting, minimize exposure to poor air quality and provide flexibility to attend to personal matters.

Direct Employees to Resources

While employers play a critical role in supporting employees during wildfires, government and nonprofit resources can also support those impacted by wildfires.

Employers can direct employees to the following resources:

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

1-800-621-FEMA (1-800-621-3362) | [fema.gov](https://www.fema.gov)

FEMA coordinates federal disaster response and recovery efforts, providing financial assistance for temporary housing, home repairs and other disaster-related expenses.

Disaster Distress Helpline

1-800-985-5990 (call or text) | [samhsa.gov/ddh](https://www.samhsa.gov/ddh)

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides a 24/7 toll-free, multilingual crisis support service for U.S. residents experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Residents can call or text the phone number.

American Red Cross

1-800-RED-CROSS (1-800-733-2767) | [redcross.org](https://www.redcross.org)

The American Red Cross provides emergency shelter, food and relief supplies to those affected by wildfires. They also offer health and mental health services to support disaster victims.

Additional Resources

Other notable nonprofits providing wildfire relief include The Salvation Army and United Way. Resources for pets and animals include the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (or ASPCA) and the Humane Society of the United States.

Employers may also check with state and local government agencies to learn more about ongoing support.

Takeaway

Prioritizing employee well-being and safety is critical during wildfires. Supporting employees impacted by wildfires by developing policies and emergency preparedness plans, establishing communication channels and providing training is an investment in their well-being. Employers can take proactive measures now to help protect employees' health and well-being during wildfires and, in turn, foster a sense of security, trust and loyalty.

Employers can explore these government resources for more information:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [website](#) on wildfires
- The U.S. Department of Labor's evacuation plans and procedures [e-tool](#)
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Ready Business [website](#)
- The FEMA Wildfire Actions [webpage](#)

Contact Atlas Insurance Agency, Inc. today for additional wildfire resources.