



November 17, 2021

TO: District Superintendents
District Business Officials
District Maintenance Directors

FROM: Safety & Loss Control Department

SUBJECT: Wildfire Risk Mitigation

High summer temperatures, in conjunction with reoccurring droughts, creates a significant concern for wildfires in California. Wildfires present a serious safety risk to school districts and their buildings.

The risk of fire to structures occurs not only by direct fire contact to structures; but also from burning embers carried in the wind contacting with landscape vegetation; and radiant heat that preheats materials creating a higher risk of fire from direct heat.

Some basic measures school districts can take to reduce the potential of structure loss to fire are:

- Clear natural debris and dry brush to create a defensible space. This could vary by local law or ordinance. In mountainous, forest, brush and grass covered lands, state law extended the defensible space in January 2005, from 30 feet to 100 feet around structures and homes, but not beyond the property line. Public Resources Chapter 3, section 4291 includes more intense fuel reductions between 5 and 30 feet. This may include dead vegetation near roofs and decks, as well as gutters. A broad defensible space not only reduces the risk of structure fire, but also allows for increased safety to evacuate the structure and access for firefighters to fight the fire.
- Close off vents in attics and crawl spaces or shield them with mesh screen. This will reduce the potential of burning embers blowing into your structures.
- Protect propane tanks and other external fuel sources.
- Do not park commercial vehicles on dry vegetation.
- Clean up any spilled gas or motor oil.

We encourage districts to review the resources available through California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES), including School Emergency Planning & Safety, which includes a Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) resource at [Cal OES Internet Home For Schools & Educator](#)

When wildfires occur, the risks extend beyond fire, to damages caused by smoke and ash. For example, during the southern California Holy Fire in 2018-19, one SISC member district had losses of \$7.2 million in total clean-up costs due to soot and ash alone. To mitigate the risks of soot and ash damage to district property, a resource guide from ASHRAE shared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) may be helpful. The guide “Planning Framework for Protecting Commercial Building Occupants from Smoke During Wildfire Events” includes a Smoke Readiness Plan, checklist for HVAC System, and cautions to consider when upgrading air filters. This document is available at <https://www.epa.gov/sciencematters/guidance-available-prepare-schools-commercial-and-public-buildings-wildfire-smoke>

According to CalFire the ten high hazard counties for wildfire risk include:

- Amador
- Calaveras
- El Dorado
- Fresno
- Kern
- Madera
- Mariposa
- Placer
- Tulare
- Tuolumne

SISC has districts in seven of the ten counties. If your district is located in a high risk for wildfire area, you may want to consult with your local fire officials, including city, county, state or Bureau of Land Management. The annual inspection by fire officials is a good time to ask for any additional recommendations they may have to protect district property from fire risks.