New Mexico Department of Health Outline Precautions for a Safe Return Home Following a Wildfire

Estancia, NM – The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) advises residents to take precautions when returning to your home following a wildfire.

“Returning home and beginning the cleanup after a wildfire will not be easy. We want your return to be a safe one for you and your family,” said Secretary of Health Lynn Gallagher.

The Department of Health advises residents to take the following precautions when returning home after a wildfire.

First, only return to your home if the fire marshal or local fire authority says it is safe. Second, make sure the air is clear enough for you to be in the area:

- Continue using the 5-3-1 Visibility Method to decide if it is too smoky for you, your children, or loved ones to be outside or to return to the area.
  - Even if the smell of smoke is apparent, the air quality may still be good. As a rule of thumb, if visibility is over five miles, the air quality is generally good. However, no matter how far one can see, if individuals are having health effects from smoke exposure, they are advised to take extra care to stay inside or get to an area with better air quality and to also see a doctor or healthcare professional as needed.
- Avoid using your swamp cooler when the smoke levels are higher than normal and use recirculated air if you are in a vehicle. Get tips for staying cool at nmtracking.org/en/health_effects/heat-stress/.
- If there is smoke and other particles in the air and you are entering your home, you need to wear an N-95 particulate mask while sifting through debris. Do not rely on dust masks or wet handkerchiefs to protect your lungs. Get a factsheet about masks at https://nmtracking.org/fire.

Next, be prepared and cautious when returning home.

- Look out for charred trees and power poles that may be unstable including live power lines that may be on the ground; avoid spot fires and smoldering debris including live embers.
- Wear boots, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt when entering your home.
- Check for hazards before going inside your home such as the smell of gas.
- Temporarily turn off the electrical power.


Power may have been out during the wildfire. Take precaution with food stored in refrigerators or freezers.

- If the power has been out for several days then check the temperature of the freezer with an appliance thermometer or food thermometer. If the food still contains ice crystals or is at 40° F or below, then the food is safe.
- If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer then check each package of food to determine its safety. If the food still contains ice crystals, then the food is safe.
• Discard refrigerated perishable food such as meat, poultry, fish, soft cheeses, milk, eggs, leftovers and deli items after four hours without power.

Remember: when in doubt, throw food out. For more information on wildfires, visit the New Mexico Department of Health website at www.nmhealth.org.