



Safety Bulletin Number: **0000026**

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Wildfire Recovery Work

Summary

This document provides general instructions on health and safety requirements for recovery work in areas impacted by a wildfire. It outlines general information that employers and employees need to know prior commencing wildfire recovery work.

Not every fire is the same. There is a large variance in the range of vegetative combustion particles and structure fire particles left behind most of which can present hazards to human health. There also could be issues with structures and vegetation, like trees, that were compromised by fire and pose a falling hazard. Depending on the nature of the work site and the activities to be done, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation may have additional specific requirements that must be followed.

For evacuees who are permitted to go back to their home or property, the following links provides health and safety information to consider for your safety and well-being when entering your home or property:

- Returning Home after Wildfire Evacuation - home and property that have **NOT** been directly impacted by fire damage: [returning-home-after-wildfire-evacuation.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](#)
- Returning Home after Wildfire Evacuation - home and property that have been directly impacted by fire damage: [returning-home-after-wildfire-evacuation-impacted-properties.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](#)
- [Returning Home Safely from Prolonged Absences - Gas and Electric Safety](#)

Employer and employee obligations

Both employers and employees have shared responsibilities when it comes to workplace health and safety. Employers must evaluate potential hazards before restoration or demolition activities and implement necessary measures to protect employees.

Employees must comply with safety policies, report hazards, use personal protective equipment (PPE) correctly, participate in safety training, and take care of their own health



and safety. If responsible parties such as employers, or contractors don't have the required expertise to conduct thorough hazard assessments or testing, consideration should be made to contract expert third parties to do so.

In addition, employers shall:

- Conduct hazard assessments for each work area to address safety hazards such as open basements, collapsed septic tanks, etc.
- Assess and manage employee exposure to harmful substances through hazard/risk assessment and sampling of air and surfaces. Exposures must be kept within occupational exposure limits.
- Ensure any contractors engaged in the recovery work are competent. Establish safe work procedures and provide training to all employees.
- Ensure tools and equipment are in good working condition and used according to specifications.
- Select appropriate PPE that meet standards and sufficiently protects against the hazards.
- If respiratory protection is needed, respirators must be selected, used, maintained, and tested and employees must be trained in accordance with the latest edition of CSA Z94.4.
- If there is a potential for skin contamination, provide means for proper decontamination of tools, equipment, and employees before leaving the work site.
- Where not available, provide washroom facilities and portable water for drinking.

After-fire hazards

Employers must verify the structural integrity of fire-damaged buildings prior to allowing employees to enter. This includes getting advice from a qualified professional, such as a structural engineer.

In addition to structural damage, fires can create other hazards, such as:

- Contamination from substances on surfaces, such as soot, ash and residue which could contain toxic substances, such as; organic/inorganic compounds, and heavy metals.
- Exposure to hazardous building materials such as asbestos, silica, and mould.
- Tripping hazards caused by debris or damaged items.
- Limited or obstructed access to some areas of the building that might create confined spaces.



- Damaged electrical systems.
- Unstable trees if roots were damaged by the fire.
- Compromised septic tanks and open basements.

Preliminary hazard assessments must be done to establish conditions in which it is safe to work. In the absence of a comprehensive assessment it is imperative that precautionary principals apply to prevent exposure to hazardous materials and substances.

Measures used to control the risk associated with these hazards should be selected based on the hierarchy of controls. Where possible the hazard should be eliminated or substituted with a less hazardous alternative. In many cases, this will not be possible and engineering or administrative controls should be considered. Industry best practices include sufficient decontamination and remediation procedures, as well as appropriate PPE to protect workers.

Air quality

If fires are still active in the region, then workplace parties performing wildfire recovery work (indoor/outdoor) could be at risk of exposure to smoke and airborne contaminants. The health effects can range from minor irritations to serious respiratory problems, depending on factors such as duration of exposure, age, health status, and the type of smoke. The Air Quality Advisories ([Halifax, Nova Scotia - Air Quality Health Index \(AQHI\) - Environment Canada \(weather.gc.ca\)](https://weather.gc.ca/halifax-nova-scotia-air-quality-health-index-aqhi-environment-canada)) provide updated information on the relative health risks associated with air quality throughout Nova Scotia. Monitoring these resources helps in assessing air quality at work sites and determining necessary safety measures.

Please refer to the OHS Division Safety Alert: [Risks of Smoke Exposure – Wildfires](#) for guidance on protective measures. (<https://novascotia.ca/lae/healthandsafety/>)

Occupational exposure limits

By the means of assessing, testing and monitoring, employers must ensure compliance with occupational exposure limits set by section 2 of the Workplace Health and Safety Regulations, to protect employee from chemical, physical, and biological hazards during the recovery work when disturbing hazardous building materials and substances.



Employee who may be at-risk

Employers should ensure that the health of each employee has been assessed before starting wildfire recovery work. If employees have concerns about air quality, risk of exposure or other things involved in wildfire recovery work, the employees should speak with their employers.

Employee rights

Employees have the right to refuse dangerous work without facing adverse consequences if they reasonably believe that there is an unacceptable level of risk at the workplace or that a specific task poses a danger to themselves or others.

For more information on work refusals, including the responsibilities of both employers and employees, please refer to the [Occupational Health and Safety Act, section 43 – Right to Refuse Work](#).

Volunteers

Employers shall take every precaution that is reasonable in the circumstances to ensure the health and safety of persons at or near the workplace. Although not considered a workplace party under the Act volunteers could be exposed to similar hazards as other workplace parties. Consideration should be given to adopt similar mitigation measures to ensure volunteers are working safely.

Contact us

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