

Summary

Wildfires have become regular news items in recent years. With the onset of warmer temperatures and drought conditions in several US states, wildfires will again return to our news feeds in the months ahead. Already this month wildfires in [California and Arizona](#) prompted some citizens to evacuate their homes, illustrating the direct human impact these incidents can have. [Brazil](#) also faces another bad year for wildfires following a drier than average wet season.

Patterns are not however universal and we are not just on an upward trajectory to destruction. Australia experienced a quieter wildfire season, offering some respite from the devastation witnessed in 2019-2020. By many counts, the size of areas affected by wildfires has actually [declined](#), and in the US by 01 June this year the size of land affected by wildfires was [below average](#). However, drought conditions could see the current US trend quickly worsen, and overall there has been an increase in fires near to human conurbations, known as [Wildland Urban Interface \(WUI\)](#), while the [average duration of the fire season](#) has also increased overall.

“The last seven years have been the warmest seven years on record, typifying the ongoing and dramatic warming trend. Whether one year is a record or not is not really that important – the important things are long-term trends. With these trends, and as the human impact on the climate increases, we have to expect that records will continue to be broken”. [Source: NASA](#)

The true cost of global wildfires is impossible to quantify, devastating habitat, contributing to greenhouse gases and accentuating negative cycles of drought and soil erosion that can in turn prevent vegetation regrowth and fuel future fires. The financial impact is also extensive; the 2020 U.S. wildfires [cost insurers somewhere between \\$7 - \\$13 billion alone](#) due to the extensive damage to property, livelihoods, and power, transport and communications infrastructure.

“Ten years ago, this was a non-issue for (insurance firms). Now they’re saying “This is an extraordinary increase in our risk portfolio” according to David Peterson, a forest biology professor and wildfire expert at the University of Washington”. [Source: Reuters](#)

Based on current climatic and demographic trends, human cost and rising public conscience about the environment, the issue will regularly feature in our news in the months and years ahead.

Coverage presents major safety and security implications for journalists and newsrooms. This advisory outlines some of the primary safety considerations for deployments to cover wildfires around the world.



Physical Safety Advice

“You get caught up in that exhilarating rush to cover the moment, and you’ve got everybody back at the station saying, ‘Oh my God, these are amazing pictures,’ and as a manager, that’s very dangerous”... [Columbia Journalism Review](#)

Never underestimate a wildfire's power, speed, and destructive nature. Even small fires can rapidly escalate and spread due to dry conditions, high temperatures and prevailing winds. Wildfires typically spread in the same direction as the ambient wind, and particularly up slopes and hills, so remain vigilant to the wind direction at all times, reassess and reposition accordingly.

General Considerations

- Media workers should be in general good health and fit enough to cope with a physically oppressive environment. You may need to move swiftly due to a rapidly evolving situation on the ground. Those with respiratory issues such as asthma should consider if they can work in such conditions.
- In certain locations firefighters may be volunteers with little or no training. Be cautious when following the lead of such volunteers, who may have a higher risk threshold than trained firefighters.
- Remember the scope and severity of a wildfire may differ from what is reported by the local authorities, [as highlighted by Siberian Times](#), with the potential for the situation to quickly change.
- Be aware that fire level warnings (e.g. high, severe, catastrophic etc.) and relevant safety procedures may vary at a local and national level.
- Media workers may wish to request fire safety training in advance of reporting from an affected location. If you’re likely to be covering numerous wildfires, consider attending a relevant fire safety course. One such example is [CalFire](#) offered by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.
- Understand the psychological impact that filming devastating scenes may have on you and your team, noting the risk of vicarious trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). See the Dart Centre’s [‘Working With Traumatic Imagery’](#) for further advice.

Pre-Assignment Planning

- Find out if you need accreditation or permits, noting that access to wildfire locations may be controlled by the relevant fire authorities and media access tightly regulated.
- Contact the fire authorities to get as much accurate ground information as possible. Monitor local media channels and social media sites for up-to-date information.
- Research the likely level of training, experience, and standard of equipment that the fire authorities may have, which is likely to vary greatly depending upon the location.

- If working with the fire authorities will they provide you with personal protective equipment (PPE), such as safety goggles, protective coveralls (e.g. Nomex suits), safety helmets, respirators, gloves and boots? If unavailable, consider what PPE you can source in advance.
- Working alone at a wildfire location is not recommended.
- A regular check-in schedule is advisable. Always communicate any changes to your plans so that somebody is aware of your location.
- Power cuts are possible in impacted areas, so ensure your phone, equipment and spare batteries are all fully charged before leaving. Take a portable power bank and charger with you.
- Check that your insurance policy covers you to work at a wildfire location, with an appropriate level of medical and emergency cover.
- Wildfires can lead to ground travel disruption, suspended transport links, and the closure of roads. Always have a contingency plan in place and never commit to just one route.

Safety On Location

Positioning

- Avoid getting in the way of firefighters. Maintain an appropriate and safe distance at all times.
- If feasible, report from a vantage point away from the main body of fire and upwind of the smoke.
- Avoid positioning yourself on ground above a fire, remembering that fire can travel uphill at a rapid pace due to the rising heat preheating higher ground.
- Never get between two burning fronts and identify multiple exit routes. Constantly assess your access to these escape routes to avoid getting trapped.
- Maintain a safe distance from burning buildings due to the risk of collapse. Be aware that asbestos fibres and other harmful particulates and contaminants may be circulating in the air.
- Keep a safe distance from fuel/oil storage containers, gas pipes, electrical infrastructure (e.g. masts and cables), batteries and any combustible materials etc.
- If you get caught out and trapped, try to use the terrain to your advantage. Try to find water sources, caves, or natural dips. Lie down and cover yourself using materials that may help either deflect or absorb the heat. If possible put a large rock or large tree trunk between you and the fire.

Awareness

- If working alongside firefighters, pay attention to their instructions and avoid distracting them. Observe all cordons, and never position yourself ahead of any fire crew. Be aware that fire personnel may struggle to communicate due to noise and oppressive conditions.
- Maintain constant situational awareness with regards the fire location and the wind direction. Identify natural features or key landmarks that can help orientate yourself if you become lost, remembering that fires can change direction very quickly and new fires break out as ashes, cinders and other debris circulate and spread.
- Visibility will likely be reduced due to the smoke/haze created by fires. Pay attention to hazards on the ground ahead, particularly if wearing a full face respirator to aid breathing.

- Be prepared to retreat in case the situation deteriorates. Stay together as a team and be clear about the direction or landmarks you are following. Report back when safe to do so.
- Regularly stop to drink water - it is important to keep hydrated.

Interviews

- Local people affected by wildfires will likely be upset and/or angry. Always seek permission before filming or photographing them.
- Approach affected properties with caution, checking if anybody is there before filming or photographing. If so, always ask permission and act with compassion.
- Consider your questions carefully and try to avoid filming people in distress. Remember, some people may have lost not just their homes, but also loved ones or livelihoods.
- Be cautious when talking about climate change with those affected by wildfires, some of whom may be skeptical and react in a negative way.

Clothing and Equipment

- Wear natural fire retardant fibres that cover your arms and legs, such as cotton or wool.
- Wear shoes or boots with laces and some degree of ankle support. Footwear should ideally have a [thick vibram lug sole](#) suitable for wildfire terrain.
- Consider wearing leather gloves to help protect your hands.
- It is advisable to avoid wearing contact lenses due to the oppressive conditions.
- Take plenty of drinking water and an emergency first aid kit with you (including burn gel sachets, burn dressings and eye wash solution). Also take some energy snacks, a decent torch with spare batteries, spare clothes, some cash and a blanket, should you be isolated or need to seek shelter.

Vehicles & Driving

- Always park vehicles at an appropriate distance from the main body of a wildfire, facing the direction of escape, and away from trees, bushes and long grass. Never obstruct emergency vehicles or civilian escape routes.
- Visibility is likely to be limited. Drive defensively at all times with your headlights on. Ensure you have spare bulbs onboard and the necessary tools to change them.
- Remain vigilant to flying and/or falling debris, as well as escaping domestic or wild animals who may run into the road.
- Tyres may become compromised due to road surface heat. Ensure all tyres are in good condition and sufficiently inflated. Check you have a decent spare and the necessary tools to change it if required.
- Air filters are likely to become clogged with ash in heavily affected areas. Know how to remove the filter to clean it and how to replace it. Consider carrying a spare air filter in case the existing one becomes heavily soiled or damaged.
- Ensure the windscreen reservoir is full and that the front and rear wipers are working.
- Check your vehicle has an accessible, fully charged and in-date fire extinguisher on board.

- If caught in a wildfire whilst driving, try and park in a clearing as far away from vegetation as possible, such as in a rocky area or behind a solid object like a brick building/wall. Close all vents, windows and doors. Shelter in the car below window level with a woollen blanket over you if available. Keep hydrated.

COVID-19 Considerations

- Emergency/evacuation centres for displaced people could be overcrowded. If so physical distancing safety measures may not be implemented and/or adhered to, increasing the chances of Coronavirus transmission.
- If people are coughing due to smoke inhalation, high volumes of virus droplets may circulate in the air. Relevant personal protective equipment (PPE) should be considered (e.g. FFP2 or N95 face masks, hand sanitizer etc.).
- Regularly wash your hands, avoid touching your face, and routinely clean equipment.
- Media workers who fall into the [COVID-19 vulnerable category](#) and/or who reside with vulnerable individuals should consider and discuss the associated risks before going on such assignments.

HP Risk Management

[HP Risk Management](#) (HPRM) specialises in risk advisory services, training, and crisis management for the media. We provide on-hand support to some of the world's most pre-eminent news organisations and journalist associations. We understand the realities of and dangers when operating in both natural disaster and conflict zones. We work closely with clients to reduce risks while enabling operations to thrive. Our team and associates have diverse risk management backgrounds and considerable operational experience.

RiskPal

[RiskPal](#) is an online risk assessment platform built to improve the quality and efficiency of your risk assessments, launched in May 2020. Containing up to date health, safety and security risk information, including detailed advice on wildfire safety, RiskPal is bringing the risk assessment process into the digital age. Please get in touch for more information: <https://www.riskpal.com>

Disclaimer

This document has been prepared by HP Risk Management Limited (herein "HP") and is based on information available at the time of writing. The information contained is provided as general advisor information only and any actions taken or not taken by clients or third parties is their own responsibility. HP accepts no liability for any loss (direct or indirect) or damage suffered as a result of reliance on the information provided save as may otherwise be set out in any terms of business or terms of use agreed with our clients.

While every care has been taken to ensure that the content is useful and accurate, HP gives no guarantees, undertakings or warranties in this regard, and does not accept any legal liability or responsibility for the content or the accuracy of the information so provided. Any errors or omissions brought to the attention of HP will be corrected as soon as possible.