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Natural disasters are making a profound impact in Utah, on the people, the land, the animals, the environment and the economy. We watch as one element of nature has an effect on another. The dry winter has now brought a hazardous situation as the grasses become dry and very flammable.

Natural disasters impact thousands of lives each year bringing lasting effects. Wildfires, the most common natural disaster, are very frightening. Wildfires scare adults and children because they most often hit without warning. This type of disaster scares children more than adults because children lack the life skills and experience of adults. They don't understand what is happening. You can help children cope by providing opportunities for them to talk to friends and relatives about their fears. Talking with people who listen to their fears will help children feel safe and secure. Some things you can do to help children cope include:

1. Help children select and fill a bag with some of their treasures to be stored in a safe place.
2. Encourage children to write poems or stories and submit them to FEMA Disaster Connection Kids to Kids. It may help them to read what other children have experienced.
3. Reduce the fear factor by preparedness. Have family information and preparedness supplies in a designated place and accessible to family members.

**What about food that has been in a fire?** Several factors can affect food that has been exposed to fire; heat, toxic fumes, smoke, and chemicals used to control the fire.

Excessive heat produced by fires can influence the safety of stored food. If the heat of the fire doesn't cause the jar to break, high temperature can cause some bacteria to spoil commercial or home canned food. These bacteria could make the food inedible. High temperatures can cause jar lids of home-canned food to come unsealed allowing bacterial to get into the food. The jar lid may "seal" again when the temperature drops causing an unsafe jar to appear safe. It is recommended that any home canned food that has been exposed to the heat of fire be discarded. The jars can be reused but the food inside should be thrown away.

Toxic fumes can be released from burning materials and contaminate food. Throw away food stored in permeable packaging such as cardboard and plastic wrap. Also, home-canned food and food in screw top jars may have been adversely affected by heat and toxic fumes and need to be thrown away. Next, discard any raw foods that were stored outside the refrigerator. Finally, if the power was lost, discard any refrigerated food if the refrigerator temperature reached 40 degrees F or higher.

**Smoke damage** can be extensive in all areas of the home. Smoke will damage textiles and other surfaces. Follow cleaning instructions recommended by manufacturers. Washable textiles may benefit from adding 1-2 cups of vinegar to each wash load. Some materials may require 3-4 washings. Remember that water damage can cause mildew and off odors following the fire which may require additional enzyme cleaners. Your computer and other electrical appliances could also be affected by smoke, heat, or water. Check the owner's manual before operating.

**Should I be concerned about the fire retardant that is being used?** Fire retardants are effective tools that firefighters use in controlling fires. The retardants are usually ammonium phosphate with a color dye. Ammonium phosphate is basically a concentrated agricultural fertilizer that binds oxygen, retarding the fire growth. The dye helps pilots and ground crew to see the areas that have been treated. Following the fire, remove this retardant with water and detergent as quickly as possible. If you are working in an area where the retardant is being used, you may wish to use a particle respirator (a filter face mask) to prevent irritation to your airway system.

### **What about soot, ash, and smoke?**

Soot, ash and smoke can be health concerns for residents, especially children and individuals with respiratory illness. Encourage individuals to stay indoors and avoid breathing harmful air.

### **How to begin the outside cleanup process?**

Returning to your home that has survived a wildfire may be discouraging. Begin cleaning your home by sweeping the ash off of the roof. It is important to also clean the chimney, if it is very dirty, you may wish to call a professional chimney sweep. Next clean the house gutters by using a shop vacuum or sweeping out by hand. After this you will need to sweep off the house exterior walls and windows, especially the ledges where soot could have built up. Following this house sweeping and the soot and ash removal you move on to clean the entire exterior of your home. Wash the house by using the garden hose or even a power wash system. Finish by cleaning your windows with a window cleaner and you will find that the outside of your home looks very good.

Remember to sweep or vacuum the walkways and driveways to remove ash and soot. If you are unable to remove the soot and ash from the lawn, water it lightly with the garden hose for a week and the soot and ash will recede into the ground.

**Fire prevention** is always a top priority. You can help with prevention by checking your home situation and fire proofing it. Fire will only burn if fuel is present. Fuel can be your landscaping, woodpiles, decks, etc. To create your survivable space, take the following steps within 30 feet of your home, 50 feet if you live in a heavily treed area or 100 feet if your home is on a hillside

- Introduce more native vegetation.
- Space trees at least 10 feet apart
- Remove dead or dying trees and shrubs.

- Keep trees and shrubs pruned. Branches should be a minimum of 6 feet from the ground and shrubs under trees should be no more than 18 inches high.
- Mow your lawn regularly and dispose promptly of cuttings and debris.
- Maintain your irrigation system.
- Clear your roof, gutters and eaves of debris.
- Trim branches so they do not extend over roof or near the chimney.
- Move firewood and storage tanks 50 feet away from home and clear areas at least 10 feet around them.
- Store flammable liquids properly.
- Do not connect wooden fencing directly to your home

**Preparedness** is a critical element in our lives. Plan ahead by preparing, or purchasing, a 72 hour emergency kit, containing, water, food, clothing and other special items your family may need. This will help to alleviate fear and provide you with life sustaining items. Keep the kit in an easily accessible location, where all family members are familiar with. Remember to keep cell phones charged and automobiles fueled if the time arises for you to leave an area.

Natural disasters can affect our lives, yet being prepared, will be best way to reduce fear and avoid stress.