



## Returning to Home:

*Information for ensuring a safe and healthy return to homes in neighbourhoods that have been directly affected by the forest fire*

Once you have received official word from the Provincial Emergency Program officials that it is safe to return to your home, here are some helpful tips to ensure the health and safety. These are important items to consider that may vary according to your circumstances. Please refer to the tips that meet your needs. If you have any questions, please contact our Public Health Inspections staff at (250) 979-7665.

### **Before You Head Back To Your Homes**

In some cases water and power may not be fully restored when you return, or you may experience interruptions in service. Here's some tips to help you be prepared.

#### **Make sure...**

- You have a full tank of gas
- You have enough food for at least 24 to 48 hours
- You have enough bottled drinking water for the same period
- You have any medications you require for the next week
- You have a bottle of bleach for water purification and general clean up
- You have other supplies like a flashlight, batteries, portable radio, diapers and soap
- You have a first aid kit and a charged cell phone

### **Water Safety**

Forest fires may result in the possible loss of disinfection and/or the contamination of water supplies including surface and shallow groundwater sources. Deep groundwater supplies are generally safe but water may be unavailable due to the loss of power. Community water systems are being inspected and sampled by Public Health Inspectors. Private individual water supplies that have been affected by fire should be sampled before being used for drinking. Water sample bottles will be available to homeowners at their local health unit once the fire situation has stabilized.

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### ***If you are on a boil water advisory...***

- Boil your water for 2 minutes prior to consumption
- Consumption refers to water used for:
  - Drinking
  - Making juice
  - Washing ready to eat fruits and vegetables
  - Brushing your teeth
  - Making ice cubes
- If the water is clear, adding one to two drops of bleach per litre of water, stirring, and letting stand for 30 minutes, is an alternative, although not as thorough as boiling. If your immune system is compromised, stick to boiling.
- Or you may wish to use bottled water.

### **Food Safety**

The following precautions should be observed when the power has been off or the food is damaged by water, smoke or heat.

#### ***If in doubt, throw it out...***

- Discard all perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products, if electricity was lost for more than two hours. Refrigerated products must be kept below 4°C (40°F). If in doubt, you may wish to be on the safe side and throw it out.
- Frozen foods should be discarded if the electricity has been off and foods have been exposed to temperatures above 4°C (40°F) for more than two hours. These foods are not safe to re-freeze.
- In case of fire or heat exposure, canned goods should be destroyed if the seal is damaged, the can is bloated, or where the contents show signs of damage.
- Bottled food or drink products should be thrown out if the containers or contents show signs of damage.
- All foods, unless they are packaged in waterproof, sealed, and easily cleanable containers should be thrown away.

#### ***If you want to keep the food...***

- It is very difficult to adequately sanitize food packages that have been directly exposed to fire suppression water, smoke or fire fighting chemicals for the food to be safe to eat. However, if you want to keep the food, here are some tips.

- Food in waterproof, sealed containers that has been contaminated by smoke or water can be washed with a soap solution and disinfected with a bleach solution made by mixing 1/2 ounce (1 tablespoon) of household bleach into 1 gallon or 4 litres of water. Note: These foods will have to be thoroughly cooked.
- Never eat or drink food or beverages that have been exposed to fire without cooking them first even after you have washed and sanitized them. *Continued...*

### ***If you want to keep the food...(continued)***

- Normal cooking temperatures will destroy most disease causing bacteria and viruses that may have contaminated the food during the fire. Products must be heated to an internal temperature of 74°C or 165°F.
- For cans in good condition, wash in hot soapy water. Rinse and sanitize in a chlorine solution for two minutes (mix 1 ounce (two tablespoons) of household bleach in a gallon of water).
- All contaminated utensils, dishes and food contact surfaces, such as cutting boards and counter tops, should be washed with hot soapy water, rinsed, and sanitized with a chlorine solution for two minutes and allowed to air dry.

### ***And don't forget...***

- Wash your hands thoroughly and often - especially before eating and after fire cleanup.
- If in doubt, throw it out.

## **Refrigerators and Freezers**

Even if your refrigeration and freezer units appear to be working fine, remember they may have been without power for an extended period and the food may not be fit to eat.

- Refrigeration and freezer units subject to food spoilage can be cleaned with warm soapy water, rinsed with clean water, and disinfected with bleach if required (1 ounce per gallon or 4 litres of water). An open box of baking soda in a unit may also help with odour problems.
- Odour is often difficult to remove from refrigerator units that have held spoiled meats or food. If a refrigerator or freezer is to be discarded, remove or destroy the latch assembly before leaving it unattended.
- Once the latch has been disabled, units should be taken to the landfill or applicable transfer station. Refrigerant can then be captured and the units crushed for recycling.

***Tip: Contact your insurance company prior to discarding your refrigerator or freezer or its contents.***

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## **Septic Tanks and Disposal Fields**

In most instances, fire will not affect septic tanks or sewage-disposal fields. In extreme cases the piping network may be damaged by heat. Operation of the system should be observed by the homeowner to ensure it is properly functioning. Check with your local health inspector if you have doubts about the operation of your system.

## **General Cleanup**

Just a reminder that your neighbourhood may still have a number of hazards such as weakened structures. Be sure to be careful while cleaning up - wear protective footwear and clothing and bring along other safety equipment including a first aid kit. Clean up any materials that might attract flies, rodents or wildlife, such as bears. Once this has been achieved, any remaining areas that may pose a danger must be addressed. Any unstable trees or structures must be repaired or removed and holes in the ground must be filled.

## **For more information contact:**

**Public Health Inspections at (250) 979-7665**

## **Other Helpful Information:**

Interior Health web site [www.interiorhealth.ca](http://www.interiorhealth.ca)

Provincial Emergency Program web site [www.pep.bc.ca](http://www.pep.bc.ca)

BC Health Guide Nurseline (24 hour info on health)

Toll Free: 1 866 215 4700

For deaf and hearing impaired: 1 866 TTY 4700