

SMOKE & AIR SAFETY SERIES

Managing Smoke Damage After a Megafire

1. Understanding the Impact of a Megafire

Megafires affect more than just burned homes. Smoke and soot can travel miles, contaminating the air and structures even beyond the direct fire zones. This contamination presents long-term health risks and significant property damage.

2. Initial Risk Assessment

- 1 Conduct visual and smell-based inspections for soot, ash, and discoloration.
- 2 Understand the possibility of 'olfactory desensitization'—long exposure may dull your sense of smell.
- 3 Hire a Certified Industrial Hygienist to test for PM2.5, VOCs, heavy metals, asbestos, and other toxins.
- 4 Monitor air quality using reliable sources such as AirNow or AirVisual.

3. Protective Gear and Air Filtration

- 1 Outdoors: Wear N95 or better respirators. In VOC-heavy areas, use a respirator with combination cartridges.
- 2 Indoors: Use CARB-certified HEPA air purifiers.
- 3 Install MERV 13+ filters in HVAC systems.
- 4 Run HVAC systems on fan mode for 24+ hours before reoccupying the home.

4. Re-Entering Your Home Safely

- 1 Wear PPE: gloves, goggles, long sleeves, and a proper mask.
- 2 Avoid disturbing ash—no dry sweeping or blowing.
- 3 Begin cleaning with HEPA vacuuming and dry sponges.
- 4 Follow with damp cleaning using enzyme-based or non-toxic cleaners.

5. Prioritize Indoor Cleaning

- 1 Clean interiors before addressing exterior areas.
- 2 Remove shoes at entry points; wipe pets' paws.
- 3 Use dry chem sponges on delicate surfaces.
- 4 Use microfiber cloths and soft-bristle brushes for wet cleaning.
- 5 Clean from top to bottom to avoid re-contaminating cleaned areas.



Remediation, Insurance & DIY Care

6. Material Removal and Remediation

- 1 Discard and replace contaminated carpets, insulation, drywall, soft goods, and plush toys.
- 2 Replace items that fail both the smell and visual assessments.
- 3 Hire professionals if contamination is extensive or poses health risks.

7. Long-Term Monitoring and Prevention

- 1 Install indoor sensors for PM_{2.5} and VOCs.
- 2 Keep HEPA purifiers and HVAC filters well-maintained.
- 3 Retest air and surfaces regularly to confirm successful remediation.
- 4 Keep your indoor environment sealed and clean to prevent new contamination.

8. Working With Professionals and Insurance

- 1 Hire Certified Industrial Hygienists via the AIHA Directory.
- 2 Use cleanup crews certified in HAZWOPER standards.
- 3 Ensure all work includes written cleanup protocols.
- 4 Document the home thoroughly with photographs before any cleaning.
- 5 Request both pre- and post-cleaning verification reports for insurance purposes.

9. Tips for DIY Cleaners

DOS

- Wear complete PPE.
- Use HEPA vacuums and suitable cleaning products.
- Wash clothes in hot water.
- Use baking soda or activated charcoal for deodorizing.
- Clean HVAC vents and replace filters.

DON'TS

- Don't re-enter too quickly—let the area ventilate.
- Don't use general cleaning products on soot.
- Don't ignore hidden or enclosed areas.
- Don't handle electronics—leave that to professionals.
- Don't dispose of potentially salvageable items before insurance documentation.



Families, Recovery, Conclusion & Resources

10. Special Considerations for Families

- 1 Children are highly vulnerable to smoke exposure.
- 2 Avoid keeping plush toys or soft furnishings that were exposed to smoke.
- 3 Create clean, safe zones using sanitized or new items.

11. Recovery Timeline and Community Safety

- 1 Complete cleanup and recovery may take 9 months or more.
- 2 Local agencies may apply coatings to debris from total loss homes to reduce airborne particles.
- 3 Include attics, crawl spaces, and HVAC systems in your remediation plan.
- 4 Look for future assistance programs for underinsured or uninsured households.

Conclusion

Managing smoke damage requires diligence, protective measures, expert assistance, and community collaboration. Prioritize health, thoroughly document impacts, and follow a methodical recovery path.

Resources, Cleaning Products & Tools

- **Community Action Project, Los Angeles** — local wildfire recovery casework, resource navigation, and community rebuilding support: www.cap.la
- **UC Davis Wildfire Research** — university-led research on wildfire smoke, health impacts, and post-fire recovery to inform evidence-based response.
- Dry Sponges Cleaners: <https://bit.ly/4jzvF7q>
- Meleleuca Cleaning Products: <https://www.meleleuca.com/productstore/cleaning-and-laundry/cleaning>
- 7th Generation Cleaning Products: <https://www.seventhgeneration.com/cleaning-products>
- California Air Resources Board - Air Cleaner Info: <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/>
- CARB-Certified Air Cleaning Devices: <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/list-carb-certified-air-cleaning-devices>
- EPA Guide to Air Cleaners in the Home: <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-qualit...>
- What is a HEPA Filter?: <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-qualit...>
- What is a MERV Rating?: <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-qualit...>
- South Coast AQMD - Wildfire Smoke & Ash Safety Tips: <https://www.aqmd.gov/home/air-quality...>
- NIEHS Wildfire Response Training Tool: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/inde...>
- California Department of Public Health - N95 FAQs: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/EPO/Pages/Wildfire%20Pages/N95-Respirators-FAQs.aspx>
- AirNow.gov - How to Use the Site: <https://www.airnow.gov/how-to-use-thi...>
- Air Quality Index Basics: <https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/>
- EPA - Particulate Matter Basics: <https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/part...>
- Dioxins and Furans Fact Sheet: <https://archive.epa.gov/epawaste/haza...>
- American Industrial Hygiene Association — general website: <https://www.aiha.org/>
- American Industrial Hygiene Association — Consultant listing: <https://www.aiha.org/consultants-directory>

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not intended as medical, legal, or professional advice. Consult a qualified professional for guidance specific to your situation.



WASHINGTON STATE EDITION

Tenant Habitability after a Megafire

In Washington State, the implied warranty of habitability — codified in the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act (RCW 59.18.060) — requires landlords to maintain rental units in a safe, clean, and livable condition, and tenants have the right to a habitable dwelling.

Here's a breakdown of Washington State's tenant habitability laws:

What Is the Implied Warranty of Habitability?

- It's a legal principle, codified in RCW 59.18.060, that ensures rental units meet minimum standards of safety, sanitation, and livability.
- Landlords have a responsibility to ensure their properties are habitable and safe for tenants.
- This warranty cannot be waived in rental agreements or leases — a "rented as-is" clause does not remove it.

What Does "Hhabitable" Mean in Washington?

- A rental unit must be structurally sound, weathertight, and safe.
- It must comply with state and local building and health codes.

Examples of conditions that make a unit uninhabitable:

Structural issues

Unusable roof, floors, walls, chimneys, fireplaces, or foundations; broken windows or doors.

Utilities

No working plumbing, hot or cold water, or sewage disposal; faulty electrical wiring; no adequate heat.

Sanitation

Accumulation of debris, filth, rubbish, garbage, rodents, or vermin.

Safety

Lack of working smoke detectors (required under RCW 43.44.110), unsafe fire or emergency exits, lack of operable locks.

Toxins

Presence of mold, lead, or asbestos — landlords must give tenants Department of Health information on mold hazards and prevention.

Tenant Rights and Responsibilities

- **Right to a Habitable Dwelling:** Tenants have the right to a safe and livable residence.
- **Landlord's Duty to Repair:** Landlords must fix conditions affecting health or safety within statutory timelines — 24 hours to 10 days depending on severity (RCW 59.18.070).
- **Notification of Issues:** Tenants should notify their landlord in writing about any habitability issues and keep a copy of the notice and any response.

If a tenant believes their rights have been violated under Washington's Residential Landlord-Tenant Act (RCW 59.18), they have several options for seeking recourse. These include:

OPTIONS FOR RECOURSE

- **Filing a Complaint:** File in local District or Superior Court, or contact the Washington State Attorney General's Landlord-Tenant Program, if a landlord fails to make required repairs or violates habitability laws.
- **Repair and Deduct:** After proper written notice and the required waiting period, tenants may have the repair made and deduct the cost from rent, or hold rent in escrow (RCW 59.18.115).
- **Seeking Legal Assistance:** Consult an experienced tenants' rights attorney; many legal aid organizations offer free or low-cost services to low-income renters.
- **Pursuing Legal Action:** In some cases, tenants may need to file a lawsuit to enforce their rights under the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act. An attorney can help determine the best course of action.

Price Gouging & Emergency Housing

- It is common for local and state jurisdictions to enact price-gouging rules after a declared emergency — for example, capping rent increases at 10%.
- Enforcement is inconsistent: expect violations to happen far more often than they are prosecuted. Report them anyway — to your landlord in writing, and to the Washington State Attorney General's Office.
- Secure alternative housing as soon as possible. Stabilizing your living situation is as much a mental and physical health priority as a legal one — don't wait for a case outcome to move.
- If you have renters insurance, contact your insurance company and ask about Loss of Use / Additional Living Expenses (ALE) coverage, which can help pay for temporary housing.
- Contact United Policyholders (uphelp.org) for free, independent help understanding your policy and navigating an insurance claim.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not intended as medical, legal, or professional advice. Consult a qualified attorney for guidance specific to your situation.



SURVIVOR-LED GUIDANCE

Toxins in Your Home After a Megafire

After a megafire, your home may appear intact, but hidden toxins can pose serious health risks. Smoke, soot, and ash can penetrate deep into building materials and furnishings, leaving behind a complex mix of pollutants. These contaminants can linger long after the flames are extinguished, threatening air quality and long-term safety.

What to Look Out For

01 Particulate Matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀): Tiny particles from smoke that lodge deep in lungs and even enter the bloodstream.

02 Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs): Toxic gases released from burned materials, which can cling to walls, carpets, and furniture.

03 Heavy Metals: Arsenic, lead, and mercury can contaminate ash and soil, posing long-term exposure risks, especially for children and pets.

04 Mold: Water from firefighting can soak into materials, creating perfect conditions for mold growth within 24–48 hours.

05 Toxic Ash and Soot: These byproducts settle on surfaces and can release corrosive and hazardous chemicals back into the air.

WHY IT MATTERS

Testing Matters

Visual inspections are not enough. Toxins may be invisible and odorless. Testing by a Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH) can identify contaminants and inform safe remediation plans. Without proper cleanup, these pollutants can continue to affect your health, especially in enclosed indoor spaces.

TAKE ACTION

- Do not attempt dry cleanup methods like sweeping or vacuuming soot—this can release particles into the air.
- Use air purifiers with HEPA filters.
- Hire professionals trained in smoke damage remediation.
- Document and report all damage to your insurance provider with test results and photos.

This information is adapted from the 2025 After the Fire USA white paper on megafire smoke and home safety.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not intended as medical, legal, or professional advice. Consult a qualified professional for guidance specific to your situation.

AFTER THE FIRE USA

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SCAN FOR RESOURCES

Date: _____

To: _____

Subject: Request for Testing and Remediation Due to Smoke Damage

Dear _____

On [Insert Date of Event], my insured home experienced smoke damage as a direct result of its proximity to:

Name of Disaster: _____

I am committed to documenting this loss and working collaboratively with your company to ensure a fair and comprehensive settlement.

I am formally requesting that your company arrange for a thorough inspection and assessment of my home, which has sustained damage from the megafire.

Specifically, I request that the inspection and assessment be conducted by a certified industrial hygienist. I also request that the resulting documentation include a detailed scope of damage and an estimate with a line-item description of necessary work and associated costs for each affected room.

Furthermore, I request that post-remediation testing be performed to verify that remediation efforts have been properly executed and that my home has been restored to a safe and habitable pre-loss condition.

Please take note of the directive issued by California Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara in BULLETIN 2025-7 (March 7, 2025), which outlines insurers' responsibilities to investigate and settle smoke damage claims fairly and promptly.

Given these legal requirements, I appreciate your commitment to covering the necessary inspections, assessments, scoping, estimating, and remediation work to ensure my home is fully restored to its pre-loss condition.

I look forward to your prompt response regarding the next steps in this process.

Sincerely,

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Date: _____

Landlord's Name: _____

Landlord's Address: _____

Subject: Kind Request for Smoke Damage Evaluation and Remediation

Dear [Landlord's Name],

I hope this message finds you well and in good spirits. I'm writing to you with great respect and appreciation as a tenant of the property located at:

Rental Property Address: _____

In the aftermath of the recent megafires in LA County, I've observed some concerning changes within the unit that suggest possible smoke infiltration. I want to ensure the living environment remains safe and healthy, and so I kindly request your support in having the property evaluated by a Certified Industrial Hygienist.

Some of the issues I've noticed include:

Please describe any specific problems (e.g., persistent odors, soot, or respiratory issues):

If the assessment finds any health-related concerns or contamination, I respectfully ask that appropriate remediation measures be taken, such as deep cleaning, HVAC servicing, and any other necessary steps to restore the home to a healthy standard.

I deeply appreciate your attention to this matter and understand how busy things can be. At your convenience, I'd be grateful for a response by:

Preferred response date (e.g., within two weeks): _____

Thank you very much for your care and cooperation. I'm confident we can address this together and continue fostering a positive tenant-landlord relationship.

Warm regards,

Signature: _____