

Burned Area

TRAVELING AND RECREATING



MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The Forest Service's Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program has been in place for over 40 years with the goal to reduce the risk of post-fire events like flooding, debris flows, and invasive species. BAER teams assess conditions during the fire and prescribe actions to mitigate the impact on ecosystems, protect infrastructure, and reduce risk to public safety. Post-fire actions include hazard warning signs, gates and barriers for public safety closures, road and trail stabilization, invasive species control, cultural site protection, hazard tree falling, and threatened and endangered species protection. The program plays a critical role in the recovery of wildfires, helping to restore the environment and safeguard forest visitors from post-fire hazards.



For more information about Burned Area Emergency Response, please see visit [USDA Forest Service Burned Area Emergency Response](https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/post-disaster-recovery):
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/post-disaster-recovery>



HAZARD TREES

A hazard tree is a tree that has a structural defect that makes it likely to fail in whole or in part. Trees can be defective from age, fire or disease.

Hazard trees will exist throughout the burned area. It is often hard to assess the long-term survival of scorched trees, some may die while others might recover. Assume that a dead or damaged tree could fall and affect an area up to two times its height. Even green trees surrounded by heavily burned areas are at high risk of breaking and uprooting. Give yourself extra room and consider where the trees or branches could fall when choosing your travel route and where you decide to rest or camp. Be particularly cautious of hazard trees after rain events or during high winds.



DISPLACED WILDLIFE

Some fires can dramatically alter wildlife habitat. Many animals migrate and may not be in the area during the fire. When they return, they may respond to the changes in their habitat later, or they might choose not to come back to that specific area at all. As many plants will respond favorably to fire, there may be a fresh flush of desired forage plants that will attract animals to new and different places.

If you have questions about hunting seasons or zones affected by fire, contact the department responsible for fish and wildlife management in your state.

BURNED STUMP HOLES AND ROOT CHAMBERS

Burned stumps may create obvious large holes, but these holes may be bigger than you think! In many cases, the fire may have burned through the root chambers and consumed the woody root material leaving empty tunnels where solid wood used to be. Overtime, these root chambers will collapse. Your body or vehicle weight on the root chambers may cause them to collapse and open holes under your feet. Large trees have particularly big and deep root chambers. Be especially wary after rain, as moisture can travel through the root chambers and make them more likely to collapse.



A burned landscape creates many safety hazards that either did not exist before the fire or have worsened because of it. Sometimes these hazardous conditions can last for years after the fire, which is why it is important to be aware of your surroundings when traveling and recreating in a burned area. In addition to heightened awareness, remember to follow warning signs, area closures and directions from agency personnel. Pay attention to these potential safety hazards.

UNSTABLE TERRAIN

Shrubs and grasses will resprout after a fire which will typically hold the soil in place. However, in some burned areas, plants will not regrow and the roots of burned plants will decompose over the following months or even years. As these damaged roots decompose, they will cease to bind the soil which will allow the ground and rock to shift and move under foot. Storm-triggered landslides and rockfall may make trails and roads impassable. In some cases, the existing trail prism and trail markers may also be obliterated making route finding difficult. Soil erosion also increases after a fire because there is less ground cover.



FLASH FLOODS AND DEBRIS FLOWS

Burned landscapes have fewer plants to intercept rain, so more water hits the ground with force. With fewer plants actively growing, evapotranspiration rates are also much lower, causing the soil to become saturated much faster than before the fire. This creates a risk of flash floods and debris flows, both of which produce deep rumbling noises and ground vibrations. Here are some safety tips for flash floods and debris flows when you're recreating in a burned area:

- Stay alert to weather forecasts before heading outdoors.
- Avoid traveling in channels if rain is likely.
- If you get caught off guard, climb to higher ground immediately.
- Don't enter floodwaters—they may be stronger than you think, and the ground beneath could be unstable.
- Look, listen, and react quickly! Debris flows can block trails and roads.