

## **Guidelines for Returning Residents**

### **Ruidoso, NM**

### **June 2012**

#### Private Domestic Water Wells

Perform a visual inspection of your well and all other pipes and appurtenances which work together to bring water into your household. The things you should look for include:

- Damage to electrical wires and connectors which supply power to your well.
- Damage to above ground PVC pipes used with the well to bring water to your home.
- Damage to well houses and equipment such as chlorinators, filters and electronic controls.
- Damage to pressure tanks which could have been caused by exposure to excessive heat.
- Damage to storage tanks, vents and overflow pipes.

If any damage is found, you should contact the appropriate licensed contractor or trade worker to repair the damage.

You should check to see if your well and piping system maintained positive pressure during the fire. This can be done by turning on a faucet in the household to see if water comes out. You should not hear any air being released from the faucet. The flow of water should be steady and uninterrupted. If you do hear air escaping from the faucet with water intermittently spurting out when it is turned on, that is an indication that your well and household plumbing had a loss of pressure.

If your visual inspection shows that there was a loss of pressure, it is likely that your water may have become contaminated. You should test for the presence of bacteria or disinfect the system, or both, before it is used for drinking or cooking. To obtain instructions for testing the water contact a local environmental testing laboratory. For instructions on disinfecting the system go to the New Mexico Environment Department Drinking Water Bureau website.

If you notice that your water tastes or smells earthy, smoky, or burnt, you should flush your water system for five minutes or until the water appears acceptable, whichever is longer. If flushing does not resolve the issue, conduct another visual inspection of the system and test the water for bacteriological contamination.

To protect against possible post-fire flooding, the wellhead should have a water-tight cap firmly attached to the top of the casing.

#### Public Water Systems

When wildfire burns through an area that contains a public or regulated drinking water system, NMED will assist the system operator in determining if water is safe to drink. NMED and local authorities will work to identify damaged facilities which may impact the quality or quantity of

drinking water. If the system has been damaged, bacteriological sampling will be conducted to determine if the drinking water has been contaminated. If contamination has occurred NMED will issue a "boil water advisory" in the local papers and on its website. If your water system is listed on an NMED boil water advisory, you should follow the instructions included in the advisory and seek an alternate source of drinking water, such as bottled water, or boil the water for five minutes before drinking, cooking, and dishwashing. If your public water system is not listed in an advisory, the water is considered safe to drink.

If you are on a public or regulated system and your property has been affected by the fire you may wish perform a visual inspection of any above ground pipes and appurtenances on your property which bring water into your household. If any damage is found, you should contact the appropriate licensed contractor or trade worker to repair the damage.

You should check to see if your piping maintained positive pressure during the fire. This can be done by turning on a faucet in the household to see if water comes out. You should not hear any air being released from the faucet. The flow of water should be steady and uninterrupted. If you do hear air escaping from the faucet with water intermittently spurting out when it is turned on, that is an indication that plumbing on your property had a loss of pressure. If it appears a loss of pressure has occurred you should run your water for 5 minutes prior to using for cooking or drinking. If the pressure is not restored or remains low you should contact your local authority and seek an alternate source of drinking water, such as bottled water, or boil the water for five minutes before drinking, cooking, or dishwashing.

If you notice that your water tastes or smells earthy, smoky, or burnt, you should flush your faucet for five minutes or until the water appears acceptable, whichever is longer, prior to using for cooking or drinking. If the issue is not resolved you should contact your local authority and seek an alternate source of drinking water, such as bottled water, or boil the water for five minutes before drinking, cooking, and dishwashing.

Please remember to conserve water if your public or regulated drinking water system has been affected by the fires because there may be a limited supply of drinking water until repairs can occur.

#### Septic or other Liquid Waste System

If the property was not burned, the onsite wastewater system should be OK. The system might have been damaged, however, if a firefighting truck, bulldozer, or other heavy equipment was driven over the tank or drain field. Look for tire tracks or other such evidence and have a qualified person inspect the system if it may have been damaged. To protect against possible post-fire flooding, septic tanks and other treatment units should have watertight risers or lids to prevent sewage from escaping from the tank and comingling with floodwater.

If the property was burned, the septic tank or other treatment unit may pose a hazard of entrapment, asphyxiation and drowning, especially if the tank and/or risers are constructed of plastic. Extreme caution should be exercised when walking near the tank. Plastic risers may

have melted or burned creating an open hole into the tank. Also the roof of the tank may have been compromised by the heat, even if made of concrete, and could pose a danger of collapse if a person walks on it. If there is any possibility of damage, the tank should be inspected by a qualified person.

### Hazardous Materials

Burned structures may contain asbestos, which does not burn, in the ash and debris. Older buildings may have been constructed with asbestos in the furnace and water heater closets, around pipes and exhaust vents, and in the ceiling or among the joists under the floor. Asbestos also may have been in tar based floor tiles or linoleum or roofing material where the tar was burned away leaving behind asbestos. Individuals should not enter the debris area of burned structures where asbestos may exist until the presence or absence of asbestos has been determined.

Fire debris may off-gas hazardous vapors, such as from burned or partially burned plastic, even after the flames have been extinguished. When in doubt, stay away.

Other hazardous materials that may exist in the debris of a burned structure include unexploded ammunition, gas cylinders, pesticides, pool chemicals, lubricants, and residues of other solid or liquid household hazardous materials.

### Spoiled Food

If the power to a home was turned off for several days, all food that was in refrigerators and freezers should be thrown away to avoid possible food poisoning.

### Burned Forest Areas

Burned trees pose a hazard of falling onto people, particularly when it is windy. Posting of signs in areas with numerous dead trees standing is recommended. Additionally, tree roots can burn underground leaving voids that can collapse when stepped on. Having one or both feet suddenly fall into one of these voids can cause injuries to the leg, ankle, knee, hip, and back. In high intensity burn areas, there may be nothing left on the surface of the trees that once stood there, but there may be numerous unstable voids ready to collapse when stepped on.

### Prepare for Flooding

Ruidoso residents are no strangers to severe flooding. When the monsoons arrive, runoff from burned areas will likely create severe flooding, possibly surpassing any historical maximum flow record. In addition to floodwater, highly destructive and dangerous debris flows may occur, especially after the first several intense rainfall events after the fire. Debris flows can include ash, soot, denuded soil and rock from the burn area, burned or dislodged trees and vegetation, and debris from structures either burned by the fire or destroyed by the debris flow itself.

The hazards of flooding and debris flows also may occur at downstream locations miles away from burned areas. It is recommended that Anne Tillery with USGS in ABQ, or another expert who she recommends, be contacted to identify watersheds and watercourses that may be at risk from flash flooding and debris flows in the Ruidoso area.

People who live near rivers, creeks and normally dry washes that are downstream from burned areas need to anticipate possible inundation with floodwaters possibly reaching higher elevations than in previous floods. Larger watercourses, with larger drainage of burned areas, have higher risks of debris flows. Flash flooding should be expected, and will pose a danger to people, pets and livestock who are in or near watercourses. Motor vehicles and other moveable property should be taken to higher ground when monsoonal storms are in the area. Posting of signs in areas at risk of flash flooding is recommended.

If water wells are inundated, after the floodwaters recede, they should be disinfected as described in the attached procedures and tested for bacteria.

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### **NMED Contacts For Questions or Additional Information**

#### NMED Ruidoso Field Office

Jack King, 575-258-3272 (office), 575-937-8388 (cell), [jack.king@state.nm.us](mailto:jack.king@state.nm.us)

#### Private Water Wells, Onsite Septic Systems

Dennis McQuillan, 575-476-3236 (office), 505-660-1592 (cell), [dennis.mcquillan@state.nm.us](mailto:dennis.mcquillan@state.nm.us)

#### Public Drinking Water Systems

Andy Edmondson, 505-476-8631 (office), 505-670-2352 (cell), [andy.edmondson@state.nm.us](mailto:andy.edmondson@state.nm.us)

#### Solid Waste

Auralie Ashley-Marx, 505-827-2775 (office), 505-699-2136 (cell), [auralie.ashley-marx@state.nm.us](mailto:auralie.ashley-marx@state.nm.us)

#### Hazardous Waste

John Kieling, 505-476-6035 (office), 505-629-6494 (cell), [john.kieling@state.nm.us](mailto:john.kieling@state.nm.us)