

Times Standard

Not My Fault: Fire evacuation basics

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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Red Flag Warning <https://www.weather.gov/eka/> **EUREKA CA**
NOAA NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
Issued July 13, 2024 5:47 AM

Valid: 2 AM to 9 PM Sunday July 14

Critical Fire Weather Conditions

WHAT?

- Chance of dry lightning
- Erratic outflow winds
- Low relative humidity

WHERE?

N Lake, E Mendocino, and Trinity counties.

IMPACTS

Dry lightning can start new fires

weather.gov/eka

What do wildfires and tsunamis have in common? The need to get out of harm's way QUICKLY! Alas it is fire season in California and a reminder that when your life may be on the line, there is no time for hesitation.

CalFire (<https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents>) lists 3,630 fires in California's 2024 fire season. As of July 13, just under 230,000 acres have burned and 148 structures damaged. California's first 2024 fire death occurred in Mendocino's Mina fire last Monday. Of the 17 currently active incidents listed by CalFire, 15 started in the last week. A strong slow-moving area of high-pressure heat dome remains stuck in place over the Western U.S. The Preparedness Level issued by the National Interagency Fire Center was increased to four on July 10 (on a scale of 1-5), due to the increase in fire activity in the West.

Humboldt County, usually not as fire prone as the rest of the State, issued evacuations for areas near Alderpoint Road east of Garberville when the Point Fire broke out last Wednesday morning. Residents have now been allowed to return home as the fire is now 25% contained and forward progress has halted but remain on high alert in case the fire expands again.

A number of factors may be coalescing to make 2024 one of the most flammable for Coastal Northern California. The unprecedented heat wave of the last two weeks has set all time temperature records for much of the West. Bishop at an elevation of over 4120 feet experienced five consecutive days of 110+ heat, exceeding their 70-year record by three days. Death Valley's 130° recording at Furnace Creek, if verified, will equal only the third time in modern recorded history the planet has ever been this hot.

Coastal Humboldt County hasn't escaped the heat wave. Friday's 75° high at the NWS Forecast Office on Woodley Island exceeded the previous high for the date by 5 degrees. Temperatures were far higher inland with Willow Creek, Garberville, and Hoopa all tallying peaks near 110° and making it into the five top lists.

Like many residents of the County's coastal fog belt, we welcomed bright sunny mornings last week. Our early morning beach dog walks were delightfully clear, with no need for jackets. But a few walks into the forest behind our house suggested a downside to the unusual weather. The ground, usually damp from daily fog drip, was bone dry.

I tend to think of fire as not a problem where I live. Our home is lush with vegetation growing nearby. It's hard to imagine fires sweeping through the greenery. But coastal Humboldt is not immune to fire. In 1908, much of Humboldt County was ablaze, The Humboldt Times reported "From Trinidad to Fieldbrook terrible and destructive forest fires are raging unrestrained." An October 1945 edition of the Times describes, "cinders falling like confetti in Eureka," from a wildfire raging on both sides of 101. If you stop at the Rest Area on northbound 101 just north of Trinidad you can still see a grim reminder of the 1945 conflagration, a burnt old growth redwood snag.

Redwood forests are remarkably resilient to fire. Walk through any old growth forest and you will see the scars of past fires successfully overcome. But the inexorable changes associated with a warming planet will take a toll even on these grand survivors. The Canoe fire in 2003 began in an old growth grove in Humboldt Redwoods State Park and burned nearly 14,000 acres. The low moisture and high temperatures that contributed to the fire could be a sign of more fires to come in a warmer future environment.

Fires are a fact of life in California. The trend of the last two decades is larger fires and a longer fire season. We all need to know how to find out if a fire is coming our way and how to respond. Rapid notification is **step one** - sign up for Humboldt emergency notifications at <https://humboldt.gov/2014/Emergency-Notifications>.

County notification systems make phone calls and send out text and email messages keyed to specific geographic areas that are at risk. On Wednesday when the Point Fire broke out, targeted alerts were sent to people who had registered contact information in the three zones where evacuation warnings were issued.

A past problem with county notifications like Humboldt's Everbridge system is that people must sign up in advance to opt into the system. The Humboldt County Office of Emergency Services has recently purchased an add-on service called "Resident Connection" which is the reverse and includes all known residences in the region and requiring people who don't

want to be notified to opt out of the program. But don't assume the system will know where you are and what your correct contact information is. It's best to check with the county notifications site to make sure your information is up to date.

For those of you living off the grid, figuring out how to get alert information is essential. There are emergency communications systems including two-way devices with on-grid neighbors, two-way radios, and satellite systems. Check them out.

Step two is being aware of fire conditions. People who have lived on the North Coast for many years have a pretty good sense of the weather, but newer residents do not, and changing climate can confuse even us old timers. Make it a habit, especially during fire season, to check for Red Flag weather alerts (<https://www.weather.gov/eka/>), meaning high temperatures, low humidities, and stronger winds increase the risk of fire danger. If you live, work, or are traveling through Red Flag zones, be extra alert.

Step three is being ready to respond. That means getting out of hazardous areas when evacuations are ordered. Fire terminology is a bit different than what is used for weather or tsunamis. A Fire Evacuation WARNING means there is a potential fire threat. A Fire Evacuation ORDER means get out NOW. The time between a warning and an order may be minutes to hours. I like to play it conservatively and an evacuation warning would definitely have me heading out the door.

Once an evacuation order is in place, you don't have time to figure out what to take and what to leave. **Step four** requires advance planning. No matter where you live, put together a Grab and Go Bag long before you might need it. Customize it for each family member include essential medicines, emergency supplies, and of course a copy of your family emergency plan. Illustrations and details in our Living on Shaky Ground magazine <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/prepare/shaky-ground>.

Step five – figure out your exit strategy. What routes take you out of the hazard zone? If you live in a remote area, you should know the access routes. Vacationers are less likely to know of alternate ways to get out of a fire zone. If you are in an area where only one road leads out, don't wait for the evacuation order to be issued - give yourself plenty of time to leave.

Note: Fire safety resources at <https://humboldt.gov/2468/Fire-Safety-Resources> including the downloadable "Living with Wildfire in Northwestern California," and check out KMUD's fire resources links <https://kmud.org/fire-resources/>.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times-Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/5> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column or to request copies of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground." Digital copies of the magazine at