



County of Santa Cruz

Health Services Agency ♦ Environmental Health Division

701 Ocean Street, Room 312, Santa Cruz, CA 95060
(831) 454-2022 Fax: (831) 454-3128 TDD/TTY - Call 711 www.sccehd.com

Debris Removal in Fire Damaged Properties



The CZU Lightning Complex Fire created substantial destruction and devastation. For this reason, the County of Santa Cruz is taking action to respond to the consequences of this disaster, including the need to address an extraordinary amount of ash, waste, and debris. To ensure public health and safety, the County is working collaboratively with state agencies to address debris removal and other recovery efforts in a safe manner. The following general guidance is provided to persons whose property has been affected.

An evaluation of the property must occur before it can be reoccupied after a wildfire. Under circumstances where destruction of structures is significant, debris removal will need to occur before the property can be reconstructed. Debris removal will occur in two phases:

Phase I

If present, household hazardous waste and the materials will be removed by **the US EPA in partnership with the Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Division (SCCEHD)**. Household hazardous wastes include batteries, propane tanks, paints, cleaners, pesticides, and other things that can be caustic, ignite, explode or cause immediate and significant health hazards. Property owners should not attempt to remove or evaluate household hazardous waste. Contact with these materials can be toxic, result in long term health effects and/ or cancer.

Phase II

General debris, ash and contaminated soil will be removed, and the property must receive an Environmental Health Clearance before reconstruction can occur. The property owner may choose to have this occur under a **Consolidated Debris Removal Program** using emergency public funds or have work conducted at their own expense.

Property Owners Who Elect to Participate in the Consolidated Debris Removal Program

Property owners with structure(s) destroyed by a wildfire are being offered a clean-up and debris removal service conducted by specialized work crews which are contracted and managed by County and Federal waste specialists. This program is being paid for with public funds. Property owners with debris removal benefits in their insurance coverage must use those funds towards the removal process. The property owner must provide the amount of coverage to the County during application. A property owner may participate in the program even if the property is not insured. Property owners must sign up for the debris removal program by completing a **Right-of-Entry Form** allowing access to their property to complete the removal work.

Property Owners Who Elect Not to Participate in the Consolidated Debris Removal Program

Property owners electing **not** to participate in the Consolidated Debris Removal Program, must still have the burn debris removed in accordance with the County's Debris Removal Plan. These property owners **will not be reimbursed** with public funds for the debris removal. The property owners may complete the remediation and debris removal through a qualified contractor, after having a **Debris Removal Application** approved by SCCEHD. The work must be completed in a manner that ensures the protection of public health and safety even if not participating in the publicly funded program.

Debris and Hazardous Waste

Fire damage can create significant health and safety hazards that may be present at individual properties. Due to these hazards, the SCCEHD requires that site cleanup be conducted by appropriately licensed professional contractors. **Note: No fire related debris shall be removed without prior inspection by Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Division, Phase I hazardous waste removal by the U.S. EPA or SCCEHD, and an approved debris removal plan.**

Appropriate safety and environmental precautions must be followed by all debris removal contractors, including but not limited to:

- Specific contractor licensing and training requirements
- Dust control
- Traffic control
- Worker health and safety, including personal protective equipment
- Proper disposal requirements

Collecting Valuables Before Debris Removal Work and Visiting the Property

You can choose to enter the property to collect valuables or observe debris removal. The SCCEHD warns property owners who wish to return to their property, that significant health hazards may be present when handling ash and debris. Experience from similar fires in California has shown that asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), heavy metal residues, and other hazardous substances may be present in burn ash and debris. **Disturbance of toxic materials by unauthorized personnel can result in additional need for clean-up, jeopardize public aid options and result in issues getting coverage from your insurance.**

Other dangers may be present. **The fire debris may be hot.** Trip hazards, sharp objects, open trenches, live power lines, large equipment and pressurized cylinders may be present and pose an immediate risk to your safety. Significant care and awareness should be exercised as some areas impacted by the fire may lack water, utilities, phone reception and immediate medical assistance.

Appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) should be utilized to reduce exposure to hazardous wastes. **SCCEHD is providing kits containing some basic PPE to property owners impacted by the fire.** Quantities are limited, but these can be found at some fire stations within the burn areas. The following list should aid in the selection of appropriate PPE:

- **Respiratory protection:** A NIOSH approved N95 particulate respirator can provide protection against dust and ash. If asbestos may be present a “HEPA” respirator (N100) will provide a greater level of protection. Note that respirators are only effective if they fit correctly to provide an effective seal around the face. If your house was built prior to 1978, it may contain asbestos and lead.
- **Gloves:** Nitrile or equivalent inner gloves may be worn under work gloves to provide protection if paints or solvents must be handled.
- **Disposable coveralls:** “Tyvek” or other equivalent disposable coveralls may be worn and disposed of prior to entering vehicles or structures to reduce the potential to contaminate these areas or expose others.
- **Footwear:** Steel toed rubber boots, or steel toed work boots with disposable booties are appropriate. Potentially contaminated footwear should not be worn into residences or other structures unless rinsed off first.
- **Hardhat & goggles or protective glasses:** Hardhats are recommended when working with debris or other materials overhead. Protective goggles that seal against the face offer the most protection from splashing chemicals or thick dust. Protective glasses with shatterproof lenses (ANSI approved) are recommended on all construction or clean-up sites.

Property owners and other site workers should take precautions to avoid heat stress, which can be significantly increased when wearing PPE. Individuals should bring and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.

If water is available, ash should be wetted (not soaked) to prevent airborne emissions, especially during handling operations. Ash **should not** be saturated to the point of runoff.

Property owners should also keep children, pets, and livestock out of areas with ash and debris from burned structures, to protect their health and reduce tracking of ash and debris into vehicles and structures.

Water Safety

Water available from your tap should be considered unsafe until proper water testing can be completed. If your well has been damaged it may have been exposed to contamination and can impact surrounding groundwater if not repaired properly. Fire can damage the well casing, electrical conduits, and piping. DO NOT use the water for consumption which includes drinking, cooking, dishwashing, oral hygiene, hand washing, bathing, and pets. The well must be repaired by a qualified professional, properly disinfected as per SCCEHD requirements, and then tested to determine the water is safe for consumption.

Qualified professionals include licensed well drillers to fix wells, pump contractors to fix the well pumps and a certified distribution operator to ensure the water system is functioning properly and disinfected. For a list of certified operators visit the website, <http://scceh.com/Home/CZULightningComplexFire.aspx>.

Once the water system is properly disinfected, your drinking water should be tested for bacteria by a certified lab prior to drinking the water. Please contact the laboratory for proper sampling procedures.

Septic Systems

Fire can damage your on-site wastewater system (or septic system) and may need to be repaired. Fire damage is most likely to be between the system and the house. Locate your septic system including both tank and leach field. Mark the location of the system.

Avoid over excavation and operating heavy equipment over the system. Over digging can result in encountering unfavorable soils, eliminate possible expansion areas and reduce the ability of soil to filter wastewater before it returns to the groundwater basin. The tank and leach lines can also be damaged by bulldozers and other heavy equipment.

The system must be repaired under permit by a qualified professional as per SCCEHD's requirements.



Please refer to our website for forms and additional information at:

www.scceh.com

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By Appointment Only