



Unprecedented Fires, Unprecedented Response

Chaffee County Wildfires

[Chaffee County, Colorado](#), is a high-risk area for wildfires due to its location in the central Rocky Mountains and its vast forest cover. Historically, the county has seen a progression from moderate fires to larger, more intense "Type 1" and "Type 2" incidents over the last decade, driven by warming and drying conditions.

Recent Major Wildfires

The county has experienced several significant fires in the last few years that have impacted residents and infrastructure:

- **Mountain View Fire (July 2025):** Burned approximately 60 acres northwest of Buena Vista. It forced mandatory evacuations and **destroyed two homes** before being fully contained.
- **La Plata Fire (August 2025):** Ignited at high elevation near Twin Lakes. It reached 132 acres and led to Stage 1 fire restrictions across the county.
- **Interlaken Fire (June 2024):** Started by an abandoned campfire south of Twin Lakes, this fire threatened historic structures and recreational access.
- **Decker Fire (2019):** One of the county's first "Type 1" fires, it covered roughly 40 square miles (over 25,000 acres) and impacted 13 buildings.
- **Hayden Pass Fire (2016):** Marked the first "Type 2" wildfire in the Upper Arkansas River headwaters region.



Unprecedented Fires

“**Unprecedented**” signals that recent fires are **outside historical experience**, not just bigger versions of old problems.

This can include:

- **Scale:** Fires are larger, burn longer, and spread faster than past fires.
- **Frequency:** Severe fire seasons are happening more often, sometimes year after year with little recovery time.
- **Intensity:** Fires burn hotter, destroying ecosystems, infrastructure, and communities that previously survived fires.
- **Geography:** Fires are occurring in places that historically didn't burn, or at times of year once considered low-risk.
- **Drivers:** Climate change, prolonged drought, extreme heat, and expanded development in fire-prone areas combine in new ways.

In short, **traditional assumptions about fire behavior no longer hold.**

Unprecedented Response

What “unprecedented response” implies

If the threat is fundamentally new, then **incremental or routine responses are insufficient.**

a. Rethinking strategy, not just scaling up

- Not only more firefighters or equipment, but **new approaches** to prevention, suppression, and recovery.
- Shifting from reactive firefighting to **proactive land and risk management.**

b. Policy and governance changes

- New building codes, land-use planning, and zoning decisions.
- Faster coordination across local, state, federal, and tribal agencies.
- Long-term funding models rather than emergency-only spending.

Unprecedented Response

c. Community and societal adaptation

- Public education on evacuation, home hardening, and defensible space.
- Accepting that some areas may require **managed retreat or redesign**, not just rebuilding as before.

d. Use of science, technology, and innovation

- Advanced fire modeling, satellite monitoring, and early detection systems.
- Prescribed burns and Indigenous fire stewardship practices applied at larger scales.
- New materials and infrastructure designed to withstand extreme fire conditions.

Fire Protection to Fire Adaptation

Shift from “fire protection” to “fire adaptation”

Historically, communities focused on stopping fires at the edge of town. Adaptation recognizes that:

- **Not all fires can be stopped**
- Some fires will reach communities despite best suppression efforts
- The goal becomes **survivability**, not total prevention

This mindset change is foundational. Communities that adapt plan for fire **before**, **during**, and **after** it happens.



Reduce exposure through smarter land use

One of the most powerful adaptations happens **before homes are built**.

Communities can:

- Limit or carefully guide development in the most fire-prone areas
- Require fire risk assessments for new subdivisions
- Preserve natural buffers and fuel breaks at the community scale
- Avoid building “one way in, one way out” neighborhoods

Land-use decisions made today determine fire outcomes decades from now.

Build and retrofit homes to survive fire

In extreme fires, **most homes ignite from embers**, not flame fronts.

Communities adapt by focusing on home ignition resistance.

Key actions include:

- Fire-resistant roofing, siding, vents, and decks
- Enclosed eaves and screened vents
- Replacing flammable fences or attachments connected to homes
- Community-wide retrofit programs, not just individual upgrades

A fire-adapted community assumes **embers will arrive** and designs accordingly.



Home Ignition Zone

Treat fuels at multiple scales

Fuel reduction must happen at **three interconnected levels**:

a. Home ignition zone (0–5 feet)

- Non-combustible materials
- No flammable vegetation or storage near structures

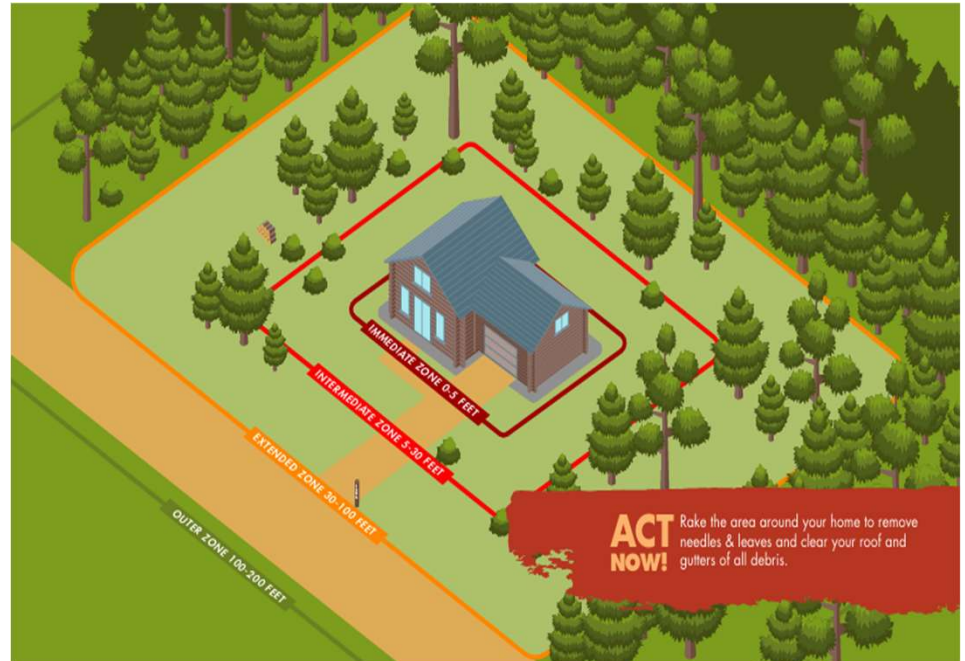
b. Defensible space (5–100 feet)

- Thinned trees, spaced shrubs, and ladder fuel reduction
- Ongoing maintenance, not one-time work

c. Landscape scale

- Strategic fuel breaks
- Prescribed fire and mechanical treatments
- Cross-boundary coordination between private landowners and public agencies

No single treatment works alone—**layers matter**.



Prepare people, not just property

A community that adapts prepares its residents to act under stress.

This includes:

- Clear evacuation planning and practiced routes
- Redundant alert and warning systems
- Public education that is honest about risk (not “feel good” messaging)
- Encouraging personal responsibility alongside agency response

People who understand risk make better decisions when time is short.

Unprecedented fires overwhelm traditional response models. Communities adapt by:

- Designing roads, signage, and water systems for fire operations
- Planning for simultaneous incidents
- Coordinating across jurisdictions before fire season
- Accepting that firefighters cannot defend every structure in extreme conditions

This is not a failure—it's reality in large fire events.

Red Flag Warning Days

During a Red Flag Warning in Colorado, be prepared for extreme wildfire risk due to high winds, low humidity, and warm temperatures, making spark ignition easy and fire spread rapid. Avoid outdoor burning/grilling, postpone using machinery that creates sparks, secure flammable outdoor items, and prepare for potential emergency evacuations.

- Situational Awareness: Monitor local fire department social media and [National Weather Service alerts](#).
- Fire Prevention: Do not have campfires or burn trash. Never throw cigarettes from vehicles.
- Equipment Use: Avoid mowing, welding, or grinding in dry grass.
- Vehicle Safety: Ensure trailer chains do not drag, which can ignite grass.
- Evacuation Preparation: Have a "go-bag" packed and know your evacuation routes.
- Home Defense: Create defensible space by removing dead vegetation and storing flammable items inside.

Wildfire Evacuation

If you are evacuated for a wildfire in [Colorado](#), your immediate priority is to **leave the area immediately** following designated evacuation routes. Do not wait for an official order if you feel unsafe

Immediate Actions During Evacuation

- **Follow the "Go!" Order:** Once a mandatory evacuation (Level 3) is issued, leave without delay. Use the pre-planned route or follow emergency personnel's directions.
- **Check-in at Centers:** Report to an established evacuation or reception center to provide your contact information, even if you plan to stay with friends or family.
- **Stay Informed:** Monitor local media, the FEMA App for open shelters, or COEmergency.com for updates.
- **Travel Safety:** Drive with headlights on, keep windows rolled up, and yield to emergency vehicles.

Wildfire Evacuation

What to Pack (The "Go-Bag")

Gather essential items for at least **72 hours**:

- **The 7 P's:** People, Pets (and supplies), Prescriptions, Personal Computers (backups), Photos (irreplaceable keepsakes), Plastic (cards/cash) and Paperwork (IDs, insurance), and Phone (chargers/power banks).
- **Survival Gear:** Three gallons of water per person, non-perishable food, flashlight, extra batteries, and a first aid kit.
- **Sanitation & Comfort:** Face masks (N95 to filter smoke), sturdy shoes, and warm blankets or sleeping bags.

Wildfire Pre-Evacuation

If You Have Time Before Leaving (Pre-Evacuation)

If you are under a "Set" or pre-evacuation warning:

- **Prepare the Vehicle:** Back your car into the driveway or garage facing the exit, with doors/windows closed and keys in the ignition.
- **Secure the Home:**
 - **Inside:** Shut all windows and doors (leave them unlocked for firefighters). Move flammable furniture to the center of rooms away from windows. Shut off gas/propane and turn off air conditioning.
 - **Outside:** Move flammable items (patio furniture, toys) into the garage or away from structures. Connect garden hoses to outside taps for firefighter use.
 - **Visibility:** Leave both interior and exterior lights on to help firefighters see your home through heavy smoke

Thank you

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**CHAFFEE COUNTY
FIRE PROTECTION
DISTRICT**

