Assessing damage outside and inside of homes after a wildfire

Oklahomans affected by a wildfire may be wondering what to look for inside and outside when assessing the damage to their homes. There could be structural damage, as well as damage to utilities and electrical, plumbing and heating systems.

- Generally, hazards homeowners may find include unstable charred trees and power poles, live power lines on the ground, spot fires, smoldering debris, live embers and ash pits.
- Fire departments and other emergency management personnel will check outside the structure for hazards such as loose or down power lines and broken or damaged gas lines. Missing support beams could indicate major issues inside the home.
- Ask the fire department to check utilities for safety or to make sure they are disconnected.
- If your home uses natural gas, there should be no odor of gas or hissing sounds. If there are, leave the area immediately and contact the fire department.
- If there are sparks, broken or frayed wires or the odor of hot insulation, the fire department will turn off the electricity at the main fuse box.
- Only enter the house after fire or emergency management personnel have given the all clear and declared the structure safe to enter.
- Dress for hazards you may face by wearing boots, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt and gloves. For additional protection, bring a mask and safety glasses.
- Upon entering the house, proceed with caution. Do not cut or remove any tape placed by the fire department or building inspector marking damaged areas.
- Watch for sharp objects such as broken glass.
- Fire hoses and rain can make roofing sheetrock and plywood extremely heavy and dangerous if it falls.
- Move cautiously around other possibly damaged areas of the house and avoid shifting or leaning against damaged furniture that could be unstable.
- Call a qualified electrician to check for any electrical problems or issues with appliances. If there is suspected damage to water pipes, turn off the water and contact a plumber.
- Contact your insurance company and take pictures or video the damage before moving anything. The photos and videos will be helpful for insurance and tax purposes.
- For more information about recovering from a wildfire, contact the nearest county Extension office at oces.okstate.edu or visit www.ready.gov and www.redcross.org.

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