Removing smoke odors from homes following wildfires

Some families in northwest Oklahoma were fortunate not to lose their homes in the devastating wildfires in April 2018. While still standing, those homes may have suffered some smoke damage in the process. The odor is caused by microscopic particles that cling to walls, furniture, floors, clothing and other household items. Here are some tips to help remove smoke odors.

• Pressure wash, scrub or disinfect all exterior surfaces including walls, walks, drives, decks, window and deck screens, etc.
• Wash and disinfect all interior walls and hard surfaces with mild soap or other appropriate cleaning solutions or products, and rinse thoroughly. Do not forget inside cabinets, drawers and closets.
• Wash, dust or otherwise clean all household items, including knick-knacks.
• Clean and deodorize all carpets, window coverings, upholstered furniture and mattresses with steam or other appropriate equipment. Upholstery, fabric window treatments, etc., can be spray-treated with deodorizing products available at most supermarkets, but do not use odor-masking sprays.
• Set bowls of baking soda or activated charcoal throughout the home for several days to absorb odors.
• Keep closet, bedroom and bathroom doors open to help with air flow throughout the house. Also, if the weather cooperates, open windows and exterior doors.
• Add one cup of vinegar to the wash cycle when washing clothes. If the smoke smell remains, immediately wash again using the same process. Do not dry clothing if it still smells like smoke as this can set the odor in the material.
• Have heating, ventilating and air-conditioning units and all ductwork professionally cleaned to remove soot, ash and smoke residue. Change filters when you first return to the premises and at least once a month for the first year.
• If aerial fire retardant or firefighting foam residue is present on the house and/or automobiles, use a mild detergent and brushes to scrub and dilute the dried residue and flush it from the surfaces; rinse with clean water. A follow-up cleaning may be beneficial but will not replace scrubbing to remove the residue.
• Ash and soot on the ground and vegetation in the vicinity will continue to generate smoke odors and airborne particles when disturbed by air movement. Until the ash and soot are diluted and absorbed by the environment, indoor mechanical air filtration may help minimize the uncomfortable and potentially health-threatening impact of these pollutants.
• Hire a professional to use an ozone generator to destroy the smoke molecules left behind after a fire. Check with your insurance company to see if this is covered under your policy. Use of an ozone generator will require the temporary evacuation of your home.
• For more information about recovering from a wildfire, contact the nearest county Extension office at oces.okstate.edu.