

SAFE USE OF PRIVATE WELLS AND SEPTIC SYSTEMS AFTER A WILDFIRE

DID YOU KNOW?

Private wells and septic systems may become damaged during a wildfire, leading to well-water contamination and malfunctioning of wastewater systems. The underground elements of a well, pumping system or septic system are typically unharmed by wildfire, but damage to the electrical or plumbing components that are exposed at the surface can affect system performance, the safety of a private water supply and the proper disposal of wastewater.

Damage to wells and septic systems may be a result of flames, smoke, ash, power outages or equipment failure due to fire damage. Heavy fire-fighting equipment and vehicles on property may damage underground septic systems.

If a well has potentially become contaminated, drinking water must be tested for bacteria by a certified laboratory. If flame retardants were used in close proximity to a well, material may migrate into well water over time, especially in the event that a well head is compromised. Nitrate concentrations should be monitored after a period of several months.

While waiting for test results, water may be used for showering and flushing toilets. Residents should avoid swallowing water from showers or baths. Water should not be used for drinking or cooking purposes unless it has been boiled or disinfected. Always use bottled water for cooking and drinking until well water has been tested and certified as safe.

Additional resources may be found at the following websites:

- www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells/natural/wildfires.pdf
- www.bouldercounty.org/doc/publichealth/firewellswastewater.pdf
- extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/fire/septicssystem.pdf



INSPECT AND TEST WATER SYSTEMS

- Complete a visual inspection for damage to electrical systems, equipment, tanks, controls, casing, plumbing and piping.
- If the well head has been damaged, temporarily cover the well head to prevent contaminants from entering.
- Examine interior home plumbing for leaks or changes in operation.
- Turn on faucets to check for positive pressure (uninterrupted flow of water).
- If water tastes or smells earthy, smoky, or burnt, water lines should be thoroughly flushed.
- If damage is suspected or if the exterior of the home or surrounding property has burned, a licensed well contractor should be contacted to inspect the system.
- **Contact the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, Division of Environmental Health Services at (800) 442-2283 for approval and guidance in making any repairs or alterations.**