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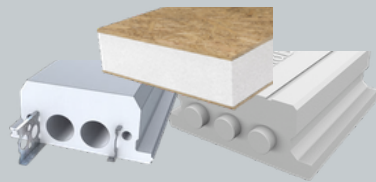
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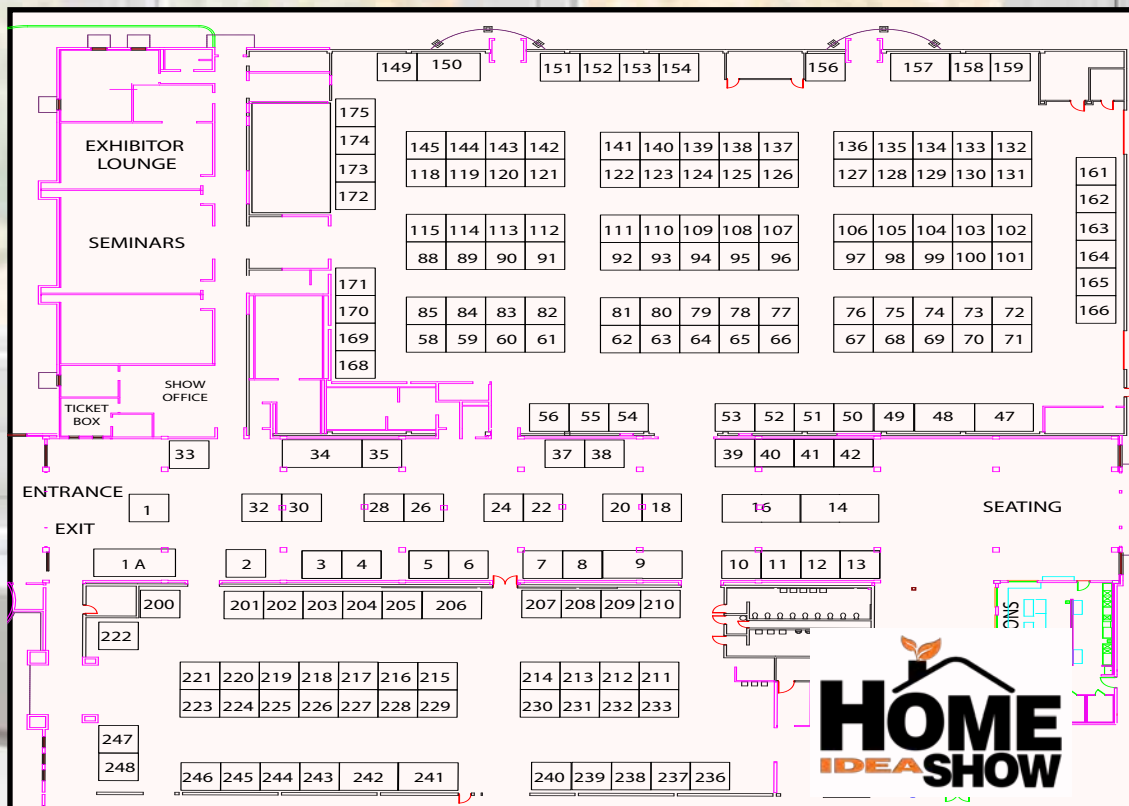


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Wildfire Season Is Here To Stay. Is Your Home Ready, And Is Your Insurance? *By Pat McHale*



On August 1, we didn't get a warning. There was no "get ready" and no "get set." Our phones went straight to "go now." We grabbed our pets and important paperwork, and that was all the time we had. Driving away, we told ourselves we were safe and everything else could be replaced.

Our home was spared. Nearly 700 homes in the Old Trails fire were not, and roughly 65,000 people were evacuated. Watching it unfold, I kept asking myself, what's covered? Would we be reimbursed? Did I even know what we owned?

Here in the Inland Northwest, wildfire is now our most likely disaster, and the insurance industry has noticed. Statewide, the number of homeowners whose policies were canceled or not renewed has doubled since 2021, to more than 24,000. Some carriers have stopped writing policies in entire Spokane zip codes.

After the fires, Washington State Insurance Commissioner Patty Kuderer ordered insurers to hold off on cancellations in affected zip codes and give 120 days' notice before any nonrenewal. That order expired September 30, and as of this writing it has not been extended. If you get a nonrenewal notice this winter, don't panic. Shop with an independent agent, and know that Washington has a backstop, the Washington FAIR Plan, for homeowners who can't find coverage elsewhere.

The better plan is to never get that letter. That comes down to two things.

LOWER YOUR RISK SCORE

Insurers rate your home by its wildfire risk, and more of them now want proof you've reduced it. When I walked my own property the way an insurer would, I didn't love what I saw: pine trees everywhere and a wood fence running right up to the house that would act as a fuse. Fire follows it straight to your siding.

Most homes don't burn from a wall of flame. They burn from embers landing in dry needles, gutters, vents and woodpiles, sometimes long after the fire front passes. The first five feet around your house matter most.

Do this fall:

- Clean pine needles out of gutters and off the roof, and keep doing it until the trees are done dropping.
- Stack winter firewood at least 30 feet from the house.
- Clear needles and debris from under decks and from the five feet around your foundation.

- Rake bark mulch away from the house. Gravel or bare soil in that zone is better.
- Book a free home wildfire assessment with the Spokane Conservation District.

Plan now for spring:

- Replace the last five feet of any wood fence that attaches to the house with metal or masonry.
- Install ember-resistant vents, or cover existing vents with 1/8-inch metal mesh.
- Limb up trees 6 to 10 feet off the ground and cut back branches that hang over the roof.

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- Replace junipers and other flammable shrubs near the house with fire-resistant plants.
- When your roof is due, choose a Class A fire-rated material.

Contractors book up fast after a fire season like this one. Get bids this winter. And photograph the work when it's done. Ask your agent what changes would help your rating and send them the proof. A risk score is only as current as what your insurer knows.

UNDERSTAND YOUR COVERAGE BEFORE YOU NEED IT

Years ago our home was broken into, and we learned the hard way that my wife's jewelry wasn't covered the way we assumed. Most policies have limits, called sub-limits, on categories like jewelry, firearms, collectibles and business property. Know them now, not after a loss.

Questions to ask your agent this fall:

1. Is my dwelling coverage enough to rebuild today? After a disaster, labor and materials get more expensive, fast. Ask about extended replacement cost coverage.
2. Am I paid replacement cost or actual cash value? Actual cash value subtracts depreciation. A ten-year-old couch pays out like a ten-year-old couch.
3. How long will insurance pay for us to live somewhere else? Rebuilding can take well over a year.
4. What are my limits on special items? In my case that means shop tools in the garage and a vinyl record collection. Tools used for a side business may have much lower limits than hobby tools. A valuable record collection may need to be scheduled separately, with an appraisal or documentation.

PROVE WHAT YOU OWNED

Nobody keeps every receipt, and the ones you kept would burn with the house anyway. The answer is a video walkthrough. Go room by room. Open closets, drawers and cabinets. Narrate brands, models and roughly when you bought things. Don't skip the garage, the shop, the attic or the shed. Photograph serial numbers and anything valuable up close.

Then store it somewhere other than your house: a cloud account, or a copy with a family member out of town. A video on a phone you forgot in the evacuation helps no one. Redo it once a year. Fall is a good time.

Your bank and credit card statements and email receipts can also help back up a claim. Download them before you need them.

THE BOTTOM LINE

We got lucky. Many of our neighbors didn't, and our hearts are with them as they rebuild. For the rest of us, wildfire season comes back every summer now. Use this fall and winter to make your home harder to burn, and to know exactly what your policy will do if it does. When the "go now" alert comes, you should only have to worry about grabbing your pets. ♦

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5 Hidden Ways to Save on Home Insurance Costs



When you're planning home improvements, you're often thinking about improving the comfort, safety, aesthetic or value of your home. Many changes and renovations have the added bonus of unlocking insurance discounts, but these savings opportunities can easily fly under the radar when you aren't actively on the lookout for them.

"Homeowners tend to think about their insurance when they buy the house or when they have a claim, but a lot can change in between," said Larry Anderson, director of underwriting operations at Mercury Insurance. "Something as simple as reviewing your policy with your agent once a year can help make sure your coverage still reflects your home today and identify improvements or other factors that may qualify you for additional savings."

The experts at Mercury Insurance, a multiple-line insurance carrier emphasizing competitive rates and excellent customer service, encourage homeowners to consider these five ways to save on home insurance costs.

Updating Older Parts of the Home

As a home ages, it's wise to look at what parts and systems may be deteriorating and need upgrades for modernity or safety reasons. Replacing older electrical, plumbing or other major systems can protect your home from emergencies and loss risks. Depending on the state you live in, your specific policy and the improvements you made, it can also qualify your property for an updated-home insurance discount.

Keep records of major improvements - including receipts, work permits and information about when the work was completed - and plan to discuss the upgrades during your next insurance review.

Adding Protective Technology

Beyond replacing the batteries in your smoke detectors, you can outfit your home with a variety of protective devices that make a difference to insurers. Consider options like monitored burglar and fire alarms, smart water sensors and automatic water shutoff systems designed to detect problems before they become major losses. Remember, while security upgrades can make your home less risky to insure, they won't save you money if your insurer doesn't know you've installed them.

Improving Resilience to Damage

If you live in an area prone to extreme weather or other hazards, resilience upgrades could both safeguard your

home and access insurance savings. Depending on your location, qualifying improvements could include a stronger roof, wildfire mitigation measures or flood defense options. Local insurance agents can provide more specific guidance on ways to make your home less vulnerable to damage - or whether you're eligible for discounts because of work you've already completed.

Qualifying for Community Programs

Even if you haven't personally made renovations to your home, certain changes in your community could help you save on insurance. That could include local wildfire mitigation measures, membership in a qualifying homeowners association or other neighborhood characteristics that affect coverage options, but specific programs vary by location.

Reviewing Insurance Products and Discounts

Whether something significant has changed in your home or community or not, it's always valuable to review your insurance coverage on a regular basis. For instance, there may be new products or discounts that simply didn't exist when you originally purchased your policy. Beyond savings considerations alone, ask your agent questions to make sure your coverage still reflects your circumstances and goals.

"Finding savings is always welcome, but the bigger goal of a policy review is making sure your insurance keeps pace with your life and your home," Anderson said. "A house isn't static. We improve it, maintain it and protect it in new ways over time. Your insurance should keep up with those changes."

Questions to Consider During Your Annual Insurance Checkup

An annual insurance review is an opportunity to look for savings and update coverage. Use these questions as a jumping-off point for discussions with your agent:

1. What has changed about my home?
2. What has changed about my property or community?
3. Have my circumstances changed?
4. Are discounts available today that weren't when I purchased my policy?

Does my coverage still reflect what it would cost to repair or rebuild my home today? ♦

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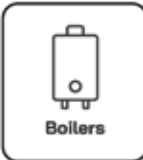
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Tips to Winterize Your Home as Cold Weather Approaches



It's not uncommon to spend a lot of time out of the house when the weather outside is warm. The popularity of outdoor living spaces has made it easier than ever to enjoy nature without leaving home, which can generally be done from late spring to mid-fall each year in many regions. But as fall creeps toward winter and temperatures drop, it's time to head back indoors.

As millions prepare to go back inside with winter approaching, it can be beneficial to winterize a home so interior spaces are more comfortable and exterior spaces are better able to withstand potentially harsh winter weather.

Check Your Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Fall is a great season to open the windows in many regions that feature prototypical autumn air. But the crisp air of fall will eventually give way to much colder air, at which time the windows will be closed and likely remain shut for months to come. The Minnesota Department of Health notes that carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that cannot be detected by the senses. When windows remain closed for long periods of time, such as in winter, the buildup of CO, which can come from sources like water heaters, gas stoves, fireplaces, and clothes dryers, can poison residents over time. CO detectors are a safety net against such a fate, but they must be operating at peak capacity in order to be effective. As fall winds down, check all CO detectors to make sure they're working properly and replace any that are not.

Check for Drafts

Check around windows and doors throughout the home to see if there are any gaps that are allowing air from outside to enter the home. If daytime temperatures are mild well into the fall, then it can be difficult to see if there are any drafts before the sun goes down. Conduct this check in the evenings when temperatures are a little more chilly and leaks are easier to detect. If drafts are detected, apply weather stripping around doors and windows that do not require replacement. If there's drafts around aging windows and doors, consider replacing them.

Call a Chimney Sweeping Service

Cozying up beside a fire can make anyone forget the cold weather outside. But fireplaces should be subjected to a thorough cleaning by a skilled professional before each winter. Animals might have nested in the chimney since the fireplace was last used, and you will want any nests cleared prior to lighting your first fire of the season. In addition, the tar-like substance creosote, which forms when wood is burned in a fireplace, can build up and harden over time. That's a dangerous prospect, as creosote is highly flammable, which can lead to chimney fires. Creosote also can block the flow of air through a

chimney, and that can trap gasses, including CO, in a home.

Reverse Your Fans

It's a simple step but one people may not even realize they can make. In homes with ceiling fans, residents can reverse the fans so the blades spin clockwise. This simple step pushes trapped warm air hovering around the ceiling into the living space below. This can make home interiors warmer without requiring residents to turn up the thermostat and increase their energy bill.

Replace your HVAC air filter

Replacing the air filter on your HVAC prior to winter can make the unit operate more efficiently, which can help reduce your wintertime energy bill. Replacing the filter prior to winter also improves indoor air quality, which is a notable benefit during a time of year when the windows typically remain closed for months.

Winterizing a home is not a significant undertaking, but it can be very effective at making homes healthier and more comfortable once windows are closed for the season. ♦

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