



Forestry Note:

Recovering From Wildfire

A Guide for Oklahoma Forest Owners

Wildfire! What Do I Do Now?

Wildfire is the disaster many forest owners fear. If you are reading this, it has probably happened to you or someone close to you. Fire may have burned all or part of your property, and you're left wondering "What should I do now?"

Soon after the fire is out, it's time to start making some decisions. Although it may appear that the worst has happened, there are things an owner can do to protect their property from further impact, to recoup some of the loss, and to restore damaged forests and woodlands to a healthy condition.

This publication discusses some issues property owners should consider following a wildfire, including:

- 📌 How to protect valuable property from erosion damage;
- 📌 Where to go for help and financial assistance;
- 📌 How to remove or salvage trees that were lost or damaged;
- 📌 How to claim a casualty loss on tax returns; and
- 📌 How to recover from wildfire damage.

Assessing Resource Damage

One of the keys to wildfire recovery is damage assessment. Actions to be taken, such as erosion control and replanting, will depend heavily on the amount of damage caused by the wildfire. Soon after the fire, it is important to determine the intensity of the fire as it burned across the property.

Wildfires can be very destructive. However, most fires actually burn at low intensity on much of the affected area, with only occasional pockets of moderate to high-intensity burn. On occasion, fires do burn at high intensity over large areas, especially under extreme conditions of high temperature, low relative humidity, dry vegetation, low soil moisture, and/or strong winds. Low-intensity fires can produce benefits to plant communities that evolved with fire as part of the natural system. These fires reduce underbrush, thin out young, closely-spaced trees, improve wildlife forage, and reduce fuel levels; thereby, lessening the chance for future high-intensity wildfires.

Low-intensity fires may damage or destroy small trees, but generally do not burn the entire forest canopy. Most leaves or needles remain on trees, even though some may be singed and the lower branches may be scorched. The ground is still partially covered by old needles, leaves, and decaying wood. In most cases, these fires are beneficial to maintaining a healthy forest.

Moderate-intensity fires burn into the forest canopy and consume the needles and leaves from many trees, but not all. They also consume a portion of the ground cover. Because moderate-intensity fires typically leave the biggest and most vigorous trees alive, some forest cover will remain.

High-intensity fires consume 50% to 100% of the forest canopy and everything on the forest floor. The resulting ash is white or gray and the soil loses its protection from rainfall and erosion. Depending on soil type, fire intensity, and vegetation burned, a water-repellent or hydrophobic layer may form near the soil surface that will decrease water absorption and increase runoff and soil erosion—especially in the first rains following the fire.