

# Wildfire Risk Management

## Tips For CMC Trip Leaders

Wildland fires are becoming more frequent, more intense, and faster moving due to prolonged draught and more intense weather. Since CMC operates 3,000 trips a year, many for multiple days, the risks of a CMC trip encountering a wildfire is rising. The purpose of this paper is to offer best practices to trip planners and leaders for managing the risks of wildfires in the Colorado wilderness.

### PLANNING

1. Know Your Jurisdictions and Use Them. Add the appropriate county sheriff and land managers' contact information to trips posted on CMC.org for ready use by anyone interested. If the trail crosses multiple jurisdictions, use the county and land manager at the trailhead.

Land managers include the US Forest Service, FS District Office, BLM Office, State Parks, and local jurisdictions. All this info can be found on good paper maps, such as National Geographic Trails Illustrated (TI) numbered maps.

Land Managers' websites often offer phone numbers with recorded closures, restrictions, or trail conditions. Websites for Federal agencies post their current fire conditions at the top right corner of their home pages.

Call your District Office or Visitor Center a day or two before leaving home to make sure nothing has changed since you planned the trip.

2. Check forecast fire weather outlook at [https://www.spc.noaa.gov/products/fire\\_wx/fwdy1.html](https://www.spc.noaa.gov/products/fire_wx/fwdy1.html)

3. Check Current Colorado Wildfires. Make sure your trip is not threatened by an ongoing wildfire, at:

- [Inciweb.nwcg.gov](https://inciweb.nwcg.gov) offers info on current wildfires, including drill-down websites with additional details on any given wildfire.
- [www.fireweatheravalanche.org/fire/](https://www.fireweatheravalanche.org/fire/) offers related info on current wildfires
- [weather.gov/fire](https://weather.gov/fire) gives considerable info on current and forecast wildfire conditions. One nice feature is the drill-down site, "Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook" for the current month.

4. Know Your Prevailing Winds. Wildfires can follow prevailing winds at near the speed of those winds. You can't outrun a wildfire downwind. Know the forecast prevailing winds and speeds during your entire trip. Even during a day hike, prevailing winds can change 180 degrees.

Prevailing winds can be found by entering your trailhead or nearest town in the location block at the beginning of this web page:

<https://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?lat=39.77978275602291&lon=-105.2871322631836&site=bou&smap=1&unit=0&lg=en&FcstType=text#.YpJhWnbMLEb>.

Then click on the "Hourly Weather Forecast," found in the lower right corner of that page

5. Check Distant Wildfires. The smoke from distant wildfires can be concerning if you are unaware of the source, yet pose no immediate threat. Know that the sources of smoke plumes from distant wildfires that can appear suddenly with shifts in prevailing winds.

See <https://fire.airnow.gov/> or other sources

6. Plan Escape routes. Plan emergency escape routes along the trail and from each campsite. Use a map with coverage wide enough to show the nearest alternative roads and trails out of the area. Know where those roads or trails go and how far it is to possible help.

Recommend COTREX for planning, at <https://trails.colorado.gov/>. Then carry TI maps for field use

7. Have a Plan B. It is possible to arrive at a trailhead to find the parking lot full or the trail closed. Trip leaders might want to prepare a Plan B.

## COMMUNICATIONS

8. Carry a Satellite Communicator. Experienced wilderness trekkers are increasingly carrying satellite communicators. While one-way communicators are less expensive and simpler to use, two-way communicators offer the ability to explain your needs and receive instructions from the Sheriff's dispatcher or SAR.

9. Communicating with SAR. The local sheriff's dispatcher is responsible for overseeing your rescue. Have their number ready on your trip. Trip Leaders do **not** initiate communication with SAR or a Wildfire Team, even if you have their contact info. The only permissible time to communicate with SAR is if they contact you first, after you have sent an SOS, the local sheriff's dispatcher launches SAR, and gives them your satellite contact info.

10. When and How to Report a Wildfire. Use a satellite communicator's SOS to report a wildfire only if you or your party are seeking rescue. To report a fire without needing rescue,

contact the local sheriff's dispatcher through non-SOS transmissions to 911 via cell phone or the local sheriff's non-emergency number via satellite, which planners list on every posted CMC trip.

## ON THE TRAIL

11. Identify Safe Spots along the Trail. As you travel along your trail, identify "safe spots" that could be used if being overrun by a wildfire. A Safe Spot is an open meadow, a talus slope, rockslide, or boulder area with no trees or shrubs at least twice in diameter of the height of surrounding trees. You might even mark safe spots on your map or GPS. A reminder, however, that wildfire gasses can be more lethal than flames or heat. A Safe Spot lower down a slope may be safer from deadly gasses than a similar spot higher up the slope

12. What if You Smell or See Smoke? The smell or sight of smoke is of no great concern unless you see fire or a column of smoke. But with direct evidence of a nearby wildfire, make haste to leave the area, back to the trailhead, to a planned alternative escape route, or in the worst case, drop your backpack and head as fast as possible to a known safe spot.

13. Which Way to Escape a Wildfire. A decision to flee and which way to go is wholly situational. Proximity and location of the fire, prevailing winds, planned escape routes, known safe spots, communications, group experience, and individual fitness all figure into which way to go. With strong winds, you cannot outrun wildfires downwind. Fires also go uphill faster than downhill, while humans travel faster downhill.

14. If Overrun by Wildfire. Drop your pack, take a water bottle and head as fast as possible to a known safe spot. Try to keep your group together to communicate any change in the situation or to share instructions from rescue or dispatch.

15. When with a dog. If a wildfire is threatening, it is recommended that you remove the leash and let the dog fend for itself. Trying to protect your dog by keeping it with you may slow both you and the dog, endangering both.