



# WILDFIRE

## And the Coachella Valley

By Ann Floden



The local news has been reporting on a possible El Nino coming and with it a stronger, longer fire season. In general there is an atmospheric global heating trend across the planet, making weather events more frequent and more extreme. Many heat predictions in our state are based on long-term, tropical Pacific Ocean temperature trends. In addition to global patterns, local “urban heat islands” are keeping nighttime temperatures above normal. The expansion in our valley of buildings and infrastructure, which retain heat, lead to nights that are less cool. The possibility of more wildfires here are a concern. In just three days, from May 16 to 19, 2026, CAL FIRE reported 9 wild fires in Southern California. So here are some basics.

**THE FLAMES.** It’s best to retreat quickly in the opposite direction from a wildfire and report the fire to authorities. In moments, wind and various terrains can alter the direction the fire seems to be going in. Fires will travel faster uphill and can move up to 15 mph in heavy winds. The safety of people is the primary concern as their possessions can be replaced.

**THE SMOKE.** Heavy smoke can kill you quickly. And it can change quickly, becoming thicker as wind shifts or grows a fire. Burning embers are often flying with the smoke. Exposure to this smoke can irritate lungs, cause inflammation, alter immune function and increase susceptibility to respiratory infections. Perhaps the most dangerous thing about wildfire smoke and our valley is how it pollutes the air quality by blowing our way. The photo at the right shows wildfires outside of the Coachella Valley with smoke blowing into it.



**PREVENT WILDFIRES.** We are surrounded by beautiful mountains which have many hiking opportunities. Check out websites for fire and weather conditions if you’re planning a hike. Make a Plan B should you encounter a wildfire. The **Pacific Coast Trail** website has good suggestions, like backcountry basics, trail closures, etc. Even if you’re just on a day outing, your vehicle should be in good repair, have a shovel,

bucket and fire extinguisher on board and don’t park on dry grass. Sparks can ignite the grass. Don’t let fires you’ve started get out of control. Don’t ever get in the way of those fighting wildfires.

**HOW TO STAY SAFE.** Pay attention to local weather forecasts and to air quality at [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov). Another source is the **South Coast Air Quality Management District’s** website. Always follow instructions by your local emergency management officials and stay inside if they tell you to do so. Protect yourself from smoke. Keep your indoor air clean, including using high efficiency filters like HEPA or MERV 13 or higher in the air conditioner. If the smoke is intense, you should shut off the A/C so it doesn’t bring the smoke into your home. Persons sensitive to air pollution need to consider staying in a room closed off from the outside air, with a portable air cleaner or filter. If you have to be outside, wear a NIOSH respirator. Avoid vigorous physical activity. Also remember to care for your pets when there are air quality alerts.

We all hope we will never be part of a disaster. If it should happen near your home and if you are required to evacuate, have your Grab-N Go bag ready. **Be prepared. Be safe.**