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Craven County Great Lake Wildfire Response and Wildfire Smoke Safety Tips

CRAVEN COUNTY, N.C. – Craven County Government is working in partnership with the United States Forest Service, the North Carolina Forest Service and other fire and rescue agencies to contain and extinguish the Great Lake wildfire burning in the Croatan National Forest.

Firefighters from the US Forest Service, North Carolina Forest Service, and Craven County fire departments will be working along highways and roadways. Citizens are urged to avoid traveling near the area of the wildfire and through areas of dense smoke. Drivers should proceed with extra caution where firefighters are operating, especially along US Highways 17 and 70. The operation of drones near the wildfire area is prohibited.

The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality air quality forecast released this morning shows Purple, or Very Unhealthy, air quality levels today for all of Craven County and Yellow, or Moderately Unhealthy, air quality levels for Sunday, April 23 and Monday, April 24. Air quality levels can change based upon conditions and updates can be found on the NC Department of Environmental Quality Air Division website at www.ncair.org.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is divided into six categories. Each category corresponds to a different level of health concern and has a specific color. The Purple, or Very Unhealthy, air quality forecast today for Craven County includes a health alert where the risk of health effects is increased for everyone and not just those sensitive to air pollution.

Residents should avoid physical activity outdoors when air quality is listed as Very Unhealthy. In other forecast levels, sensitive groups should avoid or reduce prolonged or heavy exertion outdoors. Sensitive groups include older adults, children, pregnant women, people who work or exercise outdoors, and those with heart conditions and respiratory ailments such as asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema. For more information on AQI, visit <https://airquality.climate.ncsu.edu/education/>.

Craven County wants all residents to be aware of potential adverse health effects wildfire smoke may cause. Wildfire smoke is a mix of gases and fine particles from burning vegetation, building materials, and other materials. It is a respiratory irritant and can make anyone sick. Even someone who is healthy can get sick if there is enough smoke in the air. Breathing in smoke can have immediate health effects, including coughing, difficulty breathing normally, stinging eyes, scratchy throat, runny nose, irritated sinuses, wheezing and shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, triggering an asthma attack, fatigue, and a fast heartbeat.

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Citizens can take steps to protect themselves from potential wildfire smoke related adverse health effects.

It is important to monitor local weather and air quality reports. Weather changes can rapidly increase smoke levels. If it looks smoky outside, stay indoors and run the air conditioner, if available. Keep the fresh air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent bringing additional smoke inside. Note: If air conditioning is not available, staying inside with the windows closed may be dangerous in extremely hot weather. In these cases, seek alternative shelter.

Limit outdoor exposure when smoke is in the air to reduce how much smoke is inhaled. Avoid outdoor exercise when it is smoky or choose lower-intensity activities. Smoke levels can change during the day, so wait until air quality is better before being active outdoors. If outdoor activities cannot be avoided limit them to essential tasks and take frequent breaks indoors. It is also recommended to wear an N95 respirator mask. Cloth masks will not protect you from wildfire smoke.

People with asthma, heart disease or other respiratory diseases should follow their healthcare provider's advice about taking medicines and following an asthma management plan. They should also talk to their healthcare provider about what to do if symptoms worsen or when they should leave the area.

Create a cleaner air room or clean room. A clean room is a room set up to keep levels of smoke and other particles as low as possible during wildfire smoke events. A clean room should be free from activities that create particles such as cooking or smoking, and the doors and windows should be kept closed to prevent smoke from getting in. A clean room can also contain a portable air cleaner that makes the air in the room cleaner than the rest of the home. For more information on how to create a clean room visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/how-to-create-a-clean-room-at-home.pdf>.

If you have central air, run your HVAC system to filter the air. Use high-efficiency filters (rated MERV-13 or higher) and replace the filters frequently. Learn about your system and use the appropriate settings ("Recirculate" and "On" rather than "Auto"). If your system has a fresh air option, close the intake.

Avoid indoor activities that create more air pollution, such as frying foods, sweeping, vacuuming, and using gas, propane, or wood-burning stoves and furnaces.

Pets and livestock can be affected by wildfire smoke, too. Watch pets and livestock closely for symptoms and take steps to reduce their exposure. For more information on how to keep your pets safe from wildfire smoke visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/protect-your-pets-from-wildfire-smoke.pdf>.

Craven County Government will share Great Lake wildfire information updates on the Craven County website at www.cravencountync.gov, on the Craven County Facebook page [@cravencounty](https://www.facebook.com/cravencounty) and the Craven County Twitter account [@cravencountync](https://twitter.com/cravencountync). Visit the Craven County website to register to receive emergency notifications via text, email and phone calls through the CodeRed Emergency Notification System.

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