



DO FREIGHT TRAINS RUN DURING WILDFIRES?

Key Facts

- Freight railroads prepare for wildfires year-round by managing vegetation, inspecting infrastructure and equipment, monitoring conditions, and coordinating with emergency responders.
- As wildfire risk increases, railroads may increase inspections, adjust maintenance activities, slow or stop trains, and temporarily close routes to protect employees, communities, and the rail network.
- After a wildfire, railroads inspect track, bridges, signals, communications systems, and surrounding terrain before restoring service and delivering the supplies communities need to recover.

Freight trains can and do operate during wildfires. But when conditions threaten employees, communities, or the rail network, railroads may slow, stop, reroute, or temporarily suspend service. Preparation starts long before a fire begins. Throughout the year, freight railroads manage vegetation, inspect infrastructure and equipment, monitor changing conditions, and coordinate with emergency responders. These proactive steps help railroads reduce wildfire risks and restore service as quickly and safely as possible when wildfires do happen.

How do wildfires affect freight train operations?

Wildfires can threaten much more than the track itself. Extreme heat, smoke, and flames can damage bridges, signals, communications equipment, utility lines, grade crossings, tunnels, and other railroad infrastructure. Smoke can also make it harder for firefighters to access the railroad and for rail crews to inspect damaged infrastructure before trains can safely pass. Depending on the conditions, railroads may slow trains, temporarily suspend operations, or close sections of track until it is safe to resume service.

What do railroads do to prevent wildfires?

Railroads reduce wildfire risk through routine, year-round work along the track and across their equipment. That work focuses on limiting fuel for fires, catching mechanical issues early, and adding extra precautions when conditions are especially dry.

Clearing vegetation along the right-of-way

Managing vegetation along the right-of-way is one of the most important ways railroads reduce wildfire risk. Crews mow grass, trim trees, remove brush, clear dead trees, and remove debris around track, bridges, signals, and access roads. Removing dry vegetation reduces the fuel available for fires, improves visibility, and helps employees and firefighters reach affected areas more quickly. Railroads balance those efforts with environmental requirements. They also protect slopes, drainage, and the ground that supports the track.

Inspecting equipment for sparks and heat

Railroads also work to prevent sparks or excessive heat from trains and maintenance activities. Crews inspect locomotives and railcars throughout the year, with additional attention during periods of elevated fire danger. Employees look for dragging equipment, sticking brakes, overheated wheels, debris near exhaust systems, and other mechanical issues that could create sparks. Wayside detectors and digital train inspection portals also identify overheated bearings, wheel defects, and other problems as trains move across the network.

Adding safeguards during dry conditions

During dry conditions, railroads add safeguards for maintenance activities such as welding, cutting, and grinding. Crews may clear nearby vegetation, wet the work area, use spark shields, keep firefighting equipment nearby, or postpone certain work during periods of extreme fire danger.

Do railroads have fire trains?

In some remote areas, freight railroads might send out specialized fire trains. Think of them as part fire truck, part train. Instead of pulling standard freight cars, a locomotive pulls railcars carrying large tanks of water, pumps, hoses, nozzles, generators, and other equipment crews can use along the right-of-way. Some fire trains also have water cannons that can spray from the train. Ground crews can use hoses to reach hot spots near tracks, bridges, tunnels, signals, and other critical infrastructure.

Fire trains are especially useful where roads are limited or unsafe. A fire truck needs a drivable road and a place to turn around. A fire train can move along the railroad itself, carry far more water than a single truck, and bring that water directly to hard-to-reach places. Crews can wet down wooden ties, bridges, and nearby vegetation. They can also cool hot spots after a fire passes, support local firefighters, and apply thermogel—a water-based coating that helps shield critical structures from heat and flames.

A fire engine generally carries between 500 and 1,000 gallons of water. Some freight rail fire trains can carry up to 30,000 gallons of water.

What do railroads do when a wildfire happens?

When a wildfire starts, railroads shift from prevention to response. The goal is to protect people, keep emergency crews safe, and maintain service where conditions allow.

Coordinating before and during a fire

Railroads work closely with local fire departments, emergency managers, forestry agencies, and other public responders before and during wildfires. They continuously monitor wildfire conditions using information from weather agencies, forestry departments, emergency managers, and fire danger rating systems. They also use their own cameras, drones, satellites, and weather stations.

Spotting hazards in remote areas

Train crews, inspectors, and maintenance employees also help monitor conditions, often reporting smoke, flames, fallen trees, damaged power lines, and other hazards in remote areas.

Scaling up the response as risk rises

As wildfire risk increases, railroads expand their response. They may increase inspections, patrol higher-risk routes, stage firefighting equipment, limit maintenance activities that could create sparks, or position employees near critical infrastructure. Under severe conditions, they may slow or stop trains. They may also hold trains outside higher-risk areas or temporarily close sections of track until conditions improve.

Managing train movements and reroutes

When a wildfire threatens the railroad, dispatchers coordinate train movements across the affected area. They can stop trains, warn employees, notify emergency responders, and keep routes clear for firefighting operations. If necessary, railroads may hold, reroute, or transfer trains to another railroad. They also reposition locomotives and crews to keep freight moving where possible. Rerouting freight is far more complex than taking a different highway because alternate routes require available capacity, qualified crews, compatible equipment, and terminal space.

When do railroads start operating again after a wildfire?

Railroads don't resume operations simply because the flames are out. Heat can damage track, bridges, signals, communications systems, and the ground beneath the railroad in ways that are not immediately visible.

Inspecting before trains return

Before service resumes, crews inspect the affected area, including track, bridges, crossings, utility systems, and surrounding slopes. Crews must repair or protect any damaged infrastructure before trains return. Service typically resumes in stages. Inspectors and maintenance vehicles go first, followed by trains operating at reduced speeds while employees continue monitoring conditions.

Keeping watch during recovery

Recovery continues long after crews contain the fire. Railroads inspect burned slopes, clear drainage systems, and monitor for rockslides, mudslides, flash flooding, and debris flows. They also keep temporary speed restrictions in place where needed. Across the network, railroads restore operations, reposition crews and equipment, move delayed freight, and deliver the lumber, aggregates, fuel, utility equipment, food, and other materials communities need to rebuild.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Freight trains can operate during wildfires, but safety always comes first. Railroads prepare year-round to reduce wildfire risks, monitor changing conditions, protect critical infrastructure, coordinate with emergency responders, and restore service only after the railroad is safe to operate.