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## SFRS 10: A Brief Introduction to Disaster Preparedness



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By Lee Navy

With all of the horrors of the past year, the devastation wreaked by environmental disasters like hurricanes and wildfires have faded from the broader cultural consciousness. We ignore these threats at our own peril. As the climate crisis grows more dire, severe flooding, calamitous storms, and vast fires will become an inescapable fact of life, like mosquitoes coming out in summertime. Nearly half of all Americans [<https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-climate-migration-will-reshape-america-1>] will be exposed to some environmental hazards over the next thirty years. At their mildest, these events will disrupt utilities (especially power and water), delay emergency services, and interrupt supply chains for several days; at their most severe, they can force you from your home, lay waste to the built environment, and render life, as you have lived it, unrecognizable. The time to prepare is now; when you feel the heat of a wildfire on the back of your neck or hear the first raindrops of the oncoming storm, it is too late.

## Before Impact: Fortify

Before preparing for an emergency that you cannot prevent, take steps to reduce your vulnerability to those you can. Install at least one **smoke detector** outside each bedroom in your residence, and test that they are functioning every six months. Keep at least one **ABC fire extinguisher** (approved for solid fuel, liquid fuel, and electrical fires) on every level of your residence, and consider a **K extinguisher** (for cooking fires) in your kitchen. Check the pressure gauges on all extinguishers every year. If you live in an earthquake-prone region, ensure that all heavy furniture and electronics are secured.

If you are fortunate enough to own your own home, harden it against break-ins and burglaries. You don't need to get an expensive camera system that collaborates [<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/29/ring-amazon-police-partnership-social-media-neighbor>] with the local police, but you can make yourself safer by implementing a few common-sense security measures. Upgrading the **striker plates** in exterior door frames is quick and inexpensive; putting bars over windows, less so, and might interfere with a quick evacuation. If you have the time and resources, 3M window film is a decent compromise. Regardless, make sure all windows have functioning **locks**. If you can, install solar-powered motion-activated **lights** around the exterior of your residence.

Hurricane Maria in 2017 and the 2021 winter storm in Texas put into sharp relief the weaknesses of the modern power grid, and millions of people found themselves without heat or power. Until you organize your neighborhood and install a community microgrid, you need to make plans to endure extended power-outages. **Generators** are expensive, sometimes loud, and cannot be used indoors, but if you or someone in your household requires a ventilator or dialysis machine, they are essential. Generators also can provide a valuable community resource to charge phones and run other equipment such as power tools. Inverter generators can be very quiet and portable. If you have a gasoline-powered generator, store gasoline in metal, self-venting cans, add a sufficient amount of fuel stabilizer, and rotate the supplies on a regular schedule—perhaps when you check your fire extinguishers. Never store gas cans inside your residence. If you do not require power for medical devices, an indoor-safe propane-powered **space heater** and a propane **stove** can provide heat and hot meals without the expense and noise of a generator. Whatever you decide, never run any gas-powered device in any poorly-ventilated area.

Don't neglect digital preparedness. One day, we will submit our phones to local recycling centers so their lithium can be reclaimed and put to a more socially-beneficial use. But until then, we can take steps to make ourselves safer and less vulnerable. **Encrypt** [<https://riseup.net/en/security/device-security/device-encryption>] your data, learn [<https://ssd.eff.org/en/module/creating-strong-passwords>] how to create **strong passwords**, and familiarize [<https://ssd.eff.org/en/module/problem-mobile-phones>] yourself with the way your phone can be used to spy on you, whether by using cell towers or GPS information to track the phone's movements or by infecting the phone with malware that can read private data.

Once you have reduced your vulnerabilities, make a disaster plan and share it with every member of your household. Your plan should be simple and easy to remember. The plan should include:

- **Threat assessment.** Discuss the most likely emergencies, which will differ based on your region. Check FEMA's Flood Zone Maps [<https://www.floodsmart.gov/flood-map-zone>] if you are unsure if you are at risk of flooding. Make sure to take into account unique local hazards that might be affected in the event of a natural disaster, like chemical leakage from a local refining facility.
- **Rally points.** Designate a windowless interior room to be your shelter point for tornadoes and hurricanes, and a location outside your residence to regroup if you are forced to evacuate due to a house fire or gas leak. Make sure that there are no obstacles in your halls or doorways that can interfere with a quick escape. If you live on an upper floor, make sure you can access emergency fire escapes. Make sure the evacuation routes are accessible to all members of your household, taking into account mobility restrictions, vision and hearing impairments, and age.
- The location of **utilities** (water, power, and natural gas) and **how to shut them off**. Natural disasters can damage pipes and wires, leading to water contamination, electrical hazards, or gas leaks (and resulting explosions). You might need a special tool to shut off your water and gas; if this is the case, keep the tool close to the respective shutoff valve by taping or "dummy cording" it to the meter.
- **Practice.** Periodically test the disaster plan with your housemates. Make sure everyone knows where to go, and time how long it takes for everyone to turn off the utilities, grab their gear, and get to the rally point.

After making your plan, assemble your kit. Every member of your household should gather the following supplies:

- Prescription **medications** and **eyeglasses**, as well as copies of the prescriptions. If you require hearing aids, you should have extra batteries.
- **Important documents.** Make scans of your Social Security card, passport, birth certificate, driver's license, concealed carry permit, insurance information,

vaccination records, and any other forms or documents that are difficult to replace and necessary for establishing your identity in the aftermath of a disaster. Save the scans in both PDF and PNG (or JPG) to ensure they can be read on most platforms, encrypt the files, and store them on a **USB drive** and an **SD card**. Keep both in a waterproof storage bag.

- A powerful **flashlight, headlamp**, or both. AAA and AA batteries are ubiquitous, but for extra power, invest in a light that accepts CR123 batteries or rechargeable 18650s. Whatever you select, make sure everyone in your household uses the same batteries. SelfBuilt's reviews [<http://flashlightreviews.ca/reviews.htm>], posted on the CandlePower forums, are considered the gold standard for anyone looking for flashlight recommendations. Check the charge of your batteries when you check your smoke detectors.
- Personal protective equipment, like **work gloves**, a **high-visibility vest**, **safety glasses**, and **ear plugs**. Natural disasters, especially wildfires, put a great deal of hazardous particles into the atmosphere, so invest in a respirator or pack of N95 masks. Not all masks are created equal; this article [<https://theprepared.com/gear/reviews/best-gas-mask-respirator-survival/>] is a comprehensive resource. Also useful are items to protect against the elements: a **rain coat** or **poncho** and some **sunscreen**.
- **Water**. Get at least one, but ideally two, **32-ounce (or 1-liter) water bottles**, like the common Nalgene or a USGI canteen. Keep them full, rotating and cleaning frequently (do not use these bottles for everyday hydration; doing so risks having these bottles on a drying rack or in a gym bag when they are most needed). 32-ounce bottles are preferable because most water purification tablets have a dose rate of 1 tablet for 1 quart (see this article [<https://iaf-fai.org/2021/01/19/basic-wilderness-fieldcraft/>] for an introduction to the various techniques used to make water safe to drink). Steel, single wall 32 ounce bottles will also allow for water purification through boiling.
- **A first-aid kit**. Prioritize trauma medicine [<http://c-tecc.org/>]. *Riot Medicine* [<https://riotmedicine.net/>] by Håkan Geijer is a free, comprehensive guide to emergency medicine of all types, and should be considered mandatory reading for all free people. Don't ignore OTC analgesics (aspirin, paracetamol,

naproxen), digestive medicine, and adhesive bandages.

Pack the items listed above in a sturdy bag and store it where it is out of the way while remaining easily accessible. Place a pair of sturdy, comfortable shoes next to the bag. It must be noted that sheltering in place is preferable in all cases to evacuation. You have more resources in your residence, and your supplies are not limited to what you can carry on your back or stuff into the trunk of a car. That said, wildfires, hurricanes, and floods have the potential to force you from your home, in which case you need to be prepared to slip on the shoes, grab your bag, and head out the door.

In addition to the items already listed, the following items should be kept in waterproof, portable containers, for use while sheltering in place:

- **Food.** The most common baseline is a three-day supply of food, but this should be considered the minimum. Build a stockpile of **shelf-stable foods** by buying one or two cans of soup or jars of peanut butter every time you go shopping. Prioritize foods that require neither water nor heat for preparation: cans of soup, vegetables, and fruit, peanut butter, dried meat, cookies, crackers, etc. Make sure you have a manual can opener; a USGI **P-38 can opener** is painfully slow, but cheap and takes up no space.
- **Water.** Store extra water in food-safe containers. It is recommended to store one gallon of water per household member; you should have a minimum of **three gallons per household member** on hand. Keep away from sunlight and extreme temperatures. Rotate water ever six months. In addition, make sure you have some way to treat water. If you do not have water purification tablets, **regular-strength unscented bleach** can be used to disinfect water; 2 drops per quart (8 drops, or 1/8 teaspoon, per gallon) will disinfect clear water in 30 minutes; a double dose will disinfect cloudy water.
- Sanitation supplies. Heavy-duty contractor **trash bags**, in addition to the **bleach** mentioned above, can be used to dispose of human waste if water service is interrupted. **Hand sanitizer, moist towelettes, or camp soap** that requires no water can be used to maintain personal hygiene.
- Extra **flashlights**. In addition to each household member's flashlight, have at least one quality flashlight in an easily accessible location and make sure every member of the household knows where it is. Keep a store of

extra **batteries** for the flashlight.

- Some basic **tools**, both to harden your home in advance of extreme weather, like a hurricane, and to rebuild after the impact. **Duct tape** has infinite uses, and 4mm nylon “550” or “**paracord**” has even more, if you take the time to learn a handful of useful knots [<https://www.itstactical.com/skillcom/knots/5-knots-you-need-to-know-how-to-tie-at-all-times/>]. There are few tasks that cannot be accomplished with a pair of quality tongue-and-groove **pliers**, a **claw hammer**, and **ratcheting driver** a good assortment of **sockets** and **bits**. A **shovel**, **hand saw**, and **crowbar** are useful for clearing debris. **Tarps** or **plastic sheeting** are handy for covering up broken windows and holes in roofs.
- **Comfort items**, especially for children. Books, toys, puzzles, decks of cards, and board games can help pass the time and maintain morale.

Take special care to accommodate those members of your household with unique needs. Ready.gov, FEMA's collection of emergency preparation resources, is an excellent resource for the extra considerations that the elderly [<https://www.ready.gov/seniors>], the disabled [<https://www.ready.gov/disability>], and pets [<https://www.ready.gov/pets>] all require.

Finally, disaster preparedness is a ripe opportunity for planting the seeds of community solidarity and mutual aid, which might one day sprout into the kind of dual power [<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wesley-morgan-building-dual-power>] and interdependence necessary to challenge the supremacy of the State. Get to know your neighbors, if you have not already. Share your plans with them, and encourage them to make their own preparations. Form the foundation of a network of support that can come together after a calamity to share supplies, search for survivors, and rebuild. The spontaneous “disaster communism” [<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3461-disaster-communism>] that emerges in the wake of crises can be the beginning of a real movement. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief [<https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/>] is a priceless resource for anyone seeking more information on how to form networks and what you can do to help.

## **After Impact: Rebirth**

Preparedness is not, contrary to popularly invoked images, the province of the tin-

foil-hatted survivalist. It is a rational, and in fact, the only rational, response to a precarious world. Between Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, and Maria, the Camp and Paradise fires, and once-unthinkable catastrophes like the Iowa derecho, there have never been more reasons to take action to ensure that you will be safe after a disaster. That said, preparedness without purpose serves only to perpetuate the individualism that infects modern society. Make a plan so that you may not only survive, but thrive, in so thriving, bring forth a new world

[<https://hurricaneparty0.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/storming-the-breach.pdf>], as the Wobblies said, from the shell of the old.

## Further Reading

[The views expressed in the following links are those of their respective authors only.]

Ready.gov [<http://www.ready.gov/>]

The Complete Guide to What to do Before, During, and After a Disaster

[<https://lifehacker.com/the-complete-guide-to-what-to-do-before-during-and-after-5976362>]

72Hours.org

[<https://web.archive.org/web/20120103160454/http://72hours.org/pdf/72Hours.pdf>]  
(Archived from the original, accessed on 7th February, 2021)

Disaster Planning for Less Crazy Folk [<https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/how-climate-migration-will-reshape-america-1%5D>]

Prepping on \$40 a Week [<http://www.teotwawki-blog.com/2012/11/prepping-on-40-week-last-week-index.html>]

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