

## Cemetery Fire Preparation Guidelines

**Odds:** The odds are long that a fire will every sweep through your historic cemetery in Oregon. In September 2020, there were 2,357 structures burned in Jackson County but only one cemetery. However, preparing for a potential fire does overlap with other disasters that are more likely to occur in your cemetery, such as wind, flood, earthquake, and vandalism. Preparation is always a good thing to do as it gets you thinking about your cemetery as a whole and in the long term.



**Recordation:** The first step to prepare for disaster is inventory. You must know what you have before you are hit. There is complacency about doing an inventory when there are so many other things that need to be done *right now* in a cemetery. But an inventory can prove valuable in many ways.

An inventory of your grave markers helps with matching historic cemetery records to what is actually above ground, especially if you are still an active cemetery selling lots. And don't stop at documenting monuments, consider recording your landscape, too. Historic trees, roses, bushes, fountains, furniture – all these items should be documented in case of disaster. An inventory is the first step in creating a disaster plan for your cemetery. There is grant funding available to help you create a disaster plan, but the plan is only as good as its implementation. For example, how many have read the plan and know their role within it?



**Fire Load:** We hear all the time with houses in fire-prone areas: make sure you have a defensible perimeter around your property. Spaced trees within a cemetery are of less concern than the forest surrounding your cemetery. Work on your boundaries. Make sure your trees are maintained and pruned, which is an expense many cemeteries neglect. The fire load is going to be reduced greatly if you trim your trees ten feet up off the ground. Make sure your debris piles are picked up. Make sure that the forest edge is trimmed and thinned to create a 30-foot-deep boundary. Make sure you have at least a fire extinguisher on hand for small fires. Make sure you know all your water sources and that they are working. When grasses are dry and the fire danger ramps up in the summer, make sure your grass is short.

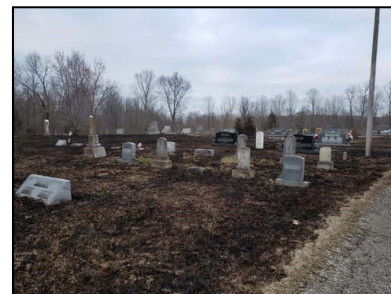


**Fire Fighting:** Having a fire hydrant nearby is very helpful but you can't exactly install a fire suppression system in your cemetery. However, you can cover your important monuments within your cemetery with an aluminum heat shield. A typical "fire blanket" product will protect an object for around 10 minutes at 1100-degree heat, keeping the temp under the blanket to under 250 degrees, far below combustion for even wood. Consider creating covers for your more important, older, fragile marble monuments, especially intricate markers and thin tablets.



## Cemetery Fire Recovery Guidelines

**Post-Fire:** All your years of planning will be put to the test as a fire sweeps through your historic cemetery in a matter of minutes. After you receive the all-clear from authorities, the first thing you should examine are your trees, the stones can wait. Burned trees are going to be your greatest danger. Weakened root systems, root systems that might still be burning underground, snags, widow makers – the trees are what is going to get you. So be careful and be aware of your surroundings at all times. Use caution tape to flag those dangerous areas.



Most of your damage in the cemetery is likely going to be to your buildings. You are going to need to be very careful around them, as most on-site buildings store landscape maintenance equipment. And with that equipment comes gasoline, oil, fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides, etc.

**Inform:** Post a sign at all the entrances to your cemetery saying that you are closed until further notice and give a contact number for further information. And change your answering machine, website, and social media to reflect the new situation.

**Trees:** If a tree has fallen and is still partially rooted, that can be a danger. Clear your downed limbs but leave the tree clearing to the professionals. Today, most trees are removed by rigging so that they are taken down in pieces not felled at the base. Tree cutters should be insured and have experience disassembling a tree, especially in a crowded cemetery. You might have overzealous volunteers who vow to save money by doing it themselves, but put them on branch clearing first and let that activity tire them out. Keep volunteers grounded.



A good project for volunteers is to document damage. Lots of photographs should be taken and keyed to a map, for insurance, fundraising, and to get estimates from contractors. Someone from the cemetery should always be present when tree crews are working in the cemetery. They may try to drive equipment into a soft area, they may accidentally drop limbs on stones, or they might not see flat markers.

If trees have been uprooted, the roots should be checked for any below-ground remains that may have come to the surface. If remains are exposed, then you should contact the county coroner. It is also best to leave stumps in place rather than ground down to eliminate possible projectiles from the grinder and the possibility of lifting remains.

**Recovery:** Once the hazards are cleared, you can turn your attention to your stones. First, cordon off any stones that are obvious hazards, such as leaning obelisks. Then start evaluating your stones. Resist the desire to start cleaning stones! Better to do it right, than to do it right away. Cemeteries are in it for the long haul.

Your flat markers are going to be okay, at least those that have not been hit by a tree fall. Granite markers are very durable. Bronze markers can take 1750 degrees before they melt. It is the older, upright markers that will be where the damage is – both from heat and any tree falls.

You have your inventory of stones that you made *before* the fire. Take that list, that you saved off-site, and go through your cemetery systematically evaluating your stones as to their “new” condition. Does the marker need resetting? Does it need repair? Does it need only cleaning?

Armed with that information, you can decide how much work you and your volunteers can do on their own to restore your cemetery. You can decide how much needs to be contracted out to professionals. And you can rank that work from highest priority to lowest priority.