

Caring for Important Papers

STEPS TO TAKE BEFORE AND AFTER A FLOOD

Valuable papers and records should be given maximum protection from any disaster. Water- and fire-resistant file cabinets are available for storing some records at home. A commercial storage area, such as a safe-deposit box, will assure protection from theft and physical damage.

Consider making copies of your valuable papers for selected professionals, family members or friends, to assure their prompt availability when needed. Lists of all such documents and the location of each should be stored in more than one place.

If important documents or books have been damaged by floodwater, follow the instructions outlined here for drying. However, it is a good idea to photocopy any important papers as a precautionary measure. Even if papers appear to have dried successfully, they may disintegrate rapidly because of substances in the floodwater.

KEEP AN UP-TO-DATE HOUSEHOLD INVENTORY

An inventory of household items and other property is especially valuable in case of a disaster. When making the inventory, do not overlook items kept in cabinets, closets, the freezer, garage and yard. Consider making a video of your inventory and property; at minimum, take some photographs. An accurate inventory will help determine if you have enough insurance to cover the contents of your home. Whenever possible, record the date of purchase and purchase price of items. Keep the inventory current.

PAPERS TO BE STORED IN THE HOME

Keep the following papers stored at home in a water-proof, fire-proof, locked box:

- Family advisors' names and addresses

- Educational, employment and health records

- Copies of birth and marriage certificates, insurance policies

- Driver license numbers, income tax returns, current bank balances, loan payment books

- Guarantees and warranties, appliance manuals, rental property records

- Household inventory, safe-deposit records, one copy of a list of valuable papers and their locations

PAPERS TO BE STORED IN A SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX

Keep the following papers stored in a safe-deposit box, especially during a disaster:

- Property records, deeds, titles and/or leases

- Copies of wills (his and hers); birth, death and marriage certificates; divorce decrees; adoption or custody papers; citizenship papers; passports; military service records

- Stocks records, bond certificates, contracts (including promissory notes), supporting documents of years of large transactions, unusual losses or deductions

- List of insurance policies, automobile bills of sale and titles, social security cards

- ◆ Government savings bonds, religious records, retirement papers, copyrights and patents
- ◆ Household inventory, one copy of a list of valuable papers and their locations

DRYING PAPERS AND BOOKS

Dry papers and books slowly for best results. Photocopy valuable papers as a precautionary measure because flood-damage may cause rapid deterioration. If you don't have the time to clean and dry them immediately, consider putting them in the freezer to prevent mildewing. Place wax paper between layers of paper bundles or books so they can be separated easily when removed.

- ◆ Wipe book covers with a solution of one part rubbing or denatured alcohol and one part water.
- ◆ Place books on end with leaves separated. When partially dry, pile and press books to keep pages from crumpling. Alternate drying and pressing until books are thoroughly dry. This helps prevent mildew. Use a fan to hasten drying.
- ◆ If papers and books are very damp, sprinkle pages with corn starch or talcum powder to absorb moisture. Leave powder for several hours, then brush it off.
- ◆ For valuable books that are nearly dry, consider pressing the pages with an electric iron set on low. This is a tedious process, but may be worth the effort. Separate the pages to prevent musty odors.
- ◆ Some chemicals help stop mold growth. Contact your county Extension office for recommendations on use.
- ◆ When books are thoroughly dry, close them and use C-clamps to help them retain their shape. Wipe vinyl and leather book covers with a light coating of petroleum jelly or leather or vinyl dressing.

Additional resources:

Your county family living agent

Related publications:

"Repairing Your Flooded Home," the
American Red Cross/Federal
Emergency Management Agency, 1992.