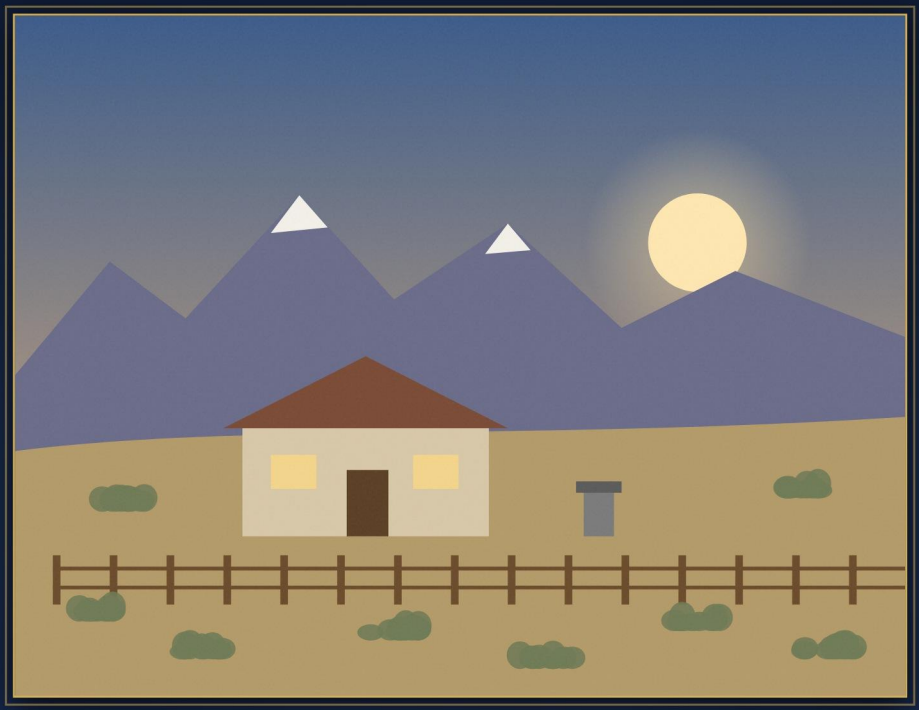
A PLAIN-ENGLISH PRACTICAL GUIDE

High Desert Living

Fire, Heat, Wind, Snow, Wells, Septic and Wildlife



A Northern Nevada Home Guide

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

High Desert Living

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Before You Begin

Living in the high desert of Northern Nevada is a good life, but it asks more of a homeowner than city living does. Summers bring heat and wildfire smoke. Spring and fall bring wind that can rip a fence panel loose or send a trash can down the road. Winter can drop snow on a valley floor that was 60 degrees the week before. Many of us get our water from a well and send it back to the ground through a septic system. And we share the land with coyotes, rattlesnakes, black bears in the foothills, and the occasional mountain lion.

I live in Dayton, in Lyon County, and this is the guide I wish someone had handed me when I moved here. It covers the basics in plain words, with the Nevada sources to go deeper.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter covers one part of high desert living and ends with a short checklist. The appendix has a month-by-month home calendar and the main contacts. Phone numbers and rules were checked as of November 18, 2026. Rules for burning, wells and septic systems vary by county and fire district, so confirm with your local office before you act.

What This Book Is and Is Not

This is general information for homeowners. It is not a substitute for advice from your fire district, a licensed well or septic contractor, or a doctor. In an emergency, call 911.

Chapter 1: Wildfire and Defensible Space

Wildfire is the biggest risk most high desert homes face. University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) Extension's Living With Fire program says 60 to 90 percent of homes that burn are ignited by embers: burning bits carried ahead of the fire on the wind. That is good news in one way. Most of what makes a home catch from embers is in the first few feet around it, and that is something you can control.

The Three Zones

Living With Fire's defensible space guide divides the area around your home into three zones.

Zone	Distance from the house	Goal
Zone 0, ember-resistant	0 to 5 feet	Nothing that can catch an ember and carry fire to the house
Zone 1, lean, clean and green	5 to 30 feet	Keep plants low, green and spaced so fire cannot climb or spread
Zone 2, reduced fuel	30 to 100 feet or more	Thin and space plants so a fire slows down and stays on the ground

Zone 0: The First 5 Feet

- Remove woodpiles, wood mulch, junipers, sagebrush, dead leaves, pine needles and weeds.
- Use hardscape: gravel, decomposed granite, rock, concrete, brick or pavers.
- If you keep plants, choose low ones (under 18 inches) that are watered, green and not resinous.

- Do not plant woody shrubs under windows, in front of vents, or in corners where embers pile up.
- Zone 0 includes the area under and around an attached deck. Keep that space clear.

UNR Extension's firescaping guide adds that organic mulch does not belong in Zone 0. Potted plants are fine if you can move them on red flag days.

Zone 1: 5 to 30 Feet

- Remove all ornamental junipers within 30 feet of the house.
- Trim tree branches so they are at least 10 feet from the house, chimney, deck and roof, and 10 feet from other trees.
- Keep firewood at least 30 feet from any building.
- Clear weeds and flammable plants within 10 feet of a propane tank.
- Keep wood mulch to small islands no more than 1 inch deep.
- In sagebrush country, clear all cheatgrass within 30 feet.
- Space shrubs at least twice their height apart. A 2-foot sagebrush needs 4 feet of open space around it.

Zone 2: 30 to 100 Feet and Beyond

- Keep outbuildings at least 30 feet from the house, with a clear zone around them.
- Remove ladder fuels: low branches and shrubs under trees that let fire climb into the crowns.
- Do not remove more than one-third of a tree's branches at one time.
- Keep about 10 feet between tree canopies.
- Fire spreads faster uphill. If your home sits on or above a slope, make Zone 2 larger on the downhill side.

Placement over plant choice UNR Extension's firescaping guide makes a point worth remembering: with few exceptions, such as junipers, poor plant placement, not the kind of plant, is the main concern. A well-watered, well-spaced yard is far safer than one packed tight against the house.

Burning Yard Waste

Most fire districts in Northern Nevada allow open burning only during an open burn season and only with a permit. Check with your local fire district before you burn, every time, because burn days can be cancelled for wind or air quality.

When a Fire Is Coming

Sign up for your county's emergency alerts, keep a go-bag by the door, and know two ways out of your neighborhood. The Household Survival Planner and the Family Emergency Planner cover evacuation planning in detail. If you are told to leave, leave.

Checklist

- ☐ Zone 0 cleared to hardscape or low, green plants
- ☐ Junipers gone within 30 feet
- ☐ Branches trimmed 10 feet from the roof and chimney
- ☐ Firewood 30 feet from the house
- ☐ Cheatgrass cleared within 30 feet
- ☐ Signed up for county emergency alerts

Chapter 2: Heat

Our summers are dry, and dry heat can fool you. Sweat dries so fast you may not notice how much water you are losing. Heat illness can come on during yard work, a hike, or a day with the air conditioning out.

Know the Signs

These come from the National Weather Service (NWS).

	Heat exhaustion	**Heat stroke**
Signs	Heavy sweating; weakness or tiredness; cool, pale, clammy skin; fast, weak pulse; muscle cramps; dizziness; nausea or vomiting; headache; fainting	Throbbing headache; confusion; slurred speech; nausea; dizziness; body temperature above 103 degrees F; hot, red skin, dry or damp; rapid, strong pulse; fainting or loss of consciousness
What to do	Move to a cooler place, ideally air-conditioned. Loosen clothing. Put cool, wet cloths on the body. Give sips of water.	Call 911 right away. Move the person somewhere cooler and cool them with cool cloths or a cool bath. Do not give fluids.
Get help if	They vomit, symptoms get worse, or symptoms last more than 1 hour	Always: heat stroke is an emergency

The NWS also lists heat cramps as an early warning sign. Cramps that last more than an hour need medical attention.

Staying Cool

- Do outdoor work early in the morning or in the evening.
- Drink water before you are thirsty, and keep a bottle with you outside.
- Wear light, loose clothing and a wide hat.
- Check on older neighbors and anyone living alone.

- Never leave children or pets in a parked car, even for a minute.
- The NWS warns that a fan can make you hotter once it is very hot. A fan alone is not enough in a heat wave.

The House in Summer

- Have the air conditioner or evaporative cooler serviced in spring, before the first hot week.
- Close blinds and curtains on the sunny side of the house during the day.
- Know where you would go if the power fails in a heat wave: a library, store, or the home of a friend with power.
- Give pets shade and plenty of water, and keep walks to cooler hours. Pavement and sand can burn paws.

Checklist

☐ Cooling system serviced in spring

☐ Water bottle and hat by the door

☐ A cool place to go if the power fails

☐ A neighbor or two you check on in hot weather

Chapter 3: Wind and Dust

Anyone who has lived in the valleys east of the Sierra knows the wind. It can blow hard enough to topple a fence, carry off a trampoline, or turn a small grass fire into a big one. The fixes are mostly simple, and most of them are done before the wind arrives.

Around the Yard

- **Tie down or store loose items.** Patio furniture, umbrellas, trampolines, kiddie pools, empty trash cans and sheets of plywood all go flying. Bring them in or anchor them when strong wind is forecast.
- **Weight or latch trash and recycling cans.** A bungee cord over the lid keeps trash from scattering across the neighborhood.
- **Check fences and gates.** Replace rotted posts and loose boards before windy season. A solid fence catches more wind than an open one.
- **Trim trees.** Remove dead or cracked limbs, especially any that hang over the roof, the driveway or power lines. Leave work near power lines to the utility or a licensed tree service.
- **Secure the roof.** After a big wind, look for lifted or missing shingles and loose flashing from the ground, and have them fixed before the next storm.

Wind and Fire

Wind is the reason many fire districts cancel burn days. Never burn yard waste, use a fire pit, or run equipment that can throw sparks on a windy or red flag day. A spark from a mower blade hitting a rock in dry cheatgrass can start a fire.

Dust

- Keep a few spare furnace and cooler filters on hand. Dust storms clog them fast.
- On smoky or dusty days, keep windows and doors closed and run your system on recirculate if it has that setting.
- Check air quality before outdoor exercise when it is smoky. AirNow.gov shows current readings by ZIP code.
- Drivers: if blowing dust drops visibility to near zero, pull off the road as far as you safely can.

Checklist

☐ Loose yard items have a place to go

☐ Trash can lids secured

☐ Fence posts and gates checked this year

☐ Spare furnace and cooler filters on hand

Chapter 4: Snow, Cold and Winter Storms

High desert winters are usually short on snow and long on cold nights. Then a storm comes over the Sierra, the power goes out, and the roads close. The households that get through it easily are the ones that got ready in October.

Before Winter

- **Service the heating system.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends having it serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- **Install battery-operated carbon monoxide (CO) detectors,** and test them along with your smoke alarms.
- **Protect pipes.** Disconnect and drain garden hoses, shut off and drain outdoor spigots if they are not frost-free, and insulate pipes in crawl spaces, garages and outside walls.
- **Clean the chimney** if you burn wood, and stack firewood at least 30 feet from the house (see Chapter 1).
- **Stock up.** Food, water, medicine, batteries, flashlights, blankets and pet supplies for several days without power or a trip to the store.
- **Get the car ready.** Keep the tank at least half full and carry a winter kit with a blanket, water, snacks, a scraper, a small shovel and a phone charger.

When It Freezes

The CDC advises:

- Let faucets drip slightly during hard freezes to help keep pipes from freezing.

- Open cabinet doors under sinks so warm air reaches the pipes.
- If a pipe does freeze, thaw it with warm air from a hair dryer. Never use a torch or open flame.

Heating Safely

- Keep space heaters at least 3 feet from drapes, furniture, bedding and anything else that can burn.
- Use space heaters with automatic shut-off and non-glowing elements, and plug them straight into the wall, not into an extension cord.
- Never use the kitchen stove or oven to heat the house. The CDC says plainly that it is not safe.
- Do not burn paper in a fireplace.

Generators and Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide is an invisible, odorless gas that can kill. The risk goes up during winter power outages, when people turn to generators and other fuel-burning equipment.

> **Generator rule** The CDC says generators should be at least 20 feet from any window, door or vent, in a spot where rain and snow cannot reach them. Never run a generator, grill or camp stove inside the home, in a basement, in a garage, or near windows, even with the doors open.

Snow

- Shovel early and often. Light snow is easier to move than packed snow.
- Pace yourself. Shoveling is hard work, especially for anyone with heart trouble. Take breaks, and get help if you need it.
- Keep a bag of ice melt or sand by the door for steps and walks.

- Clear snow away from the furnace and dryer vents, the gas meter and the generator.
- Check on neighbors who are older or live alone.

Checklist

☐ Heating system serviced this year

☐ CO detectors installed and tested

☐ Hoses disconnected and outdoor spigots drained

☐ Several days of supplies on hand

☐ Car winter kit packed

☐ Generator spot picked, at least 20 feet from the house

Chapter 5: Living With a Well

If your water comes from your own well, you are your own water company. Nobody tests it for you. In Washoe County, for example, Northern Nevada Public Health says its well program oversees drilling and plugging wells but does not oversee or regulate domestic well water quality. That job belongs to the owner.

Why Testing Matters Here

Nevada's rocks naturally contain some things you do not want in drinking water. A University of Nevada Cooperative Extension fact sheet on common Nevada well problems lists these among the main ones:

Contaminant	Drinking water limit	Why it matters
Arsenic	0.010 milligrams per liter	Occurs naturally in rock; long-term exposure linked to skin damage, circulation problems and cancer
Uranium	30 micrograms per liter	Occurs naturally; linked to kidney damage and cancer risk
Nitrate	10 milligrams per liter (as nitrogen)	From fertilizer, septic systems and animal waste; dangerous to infants under 6 months
Fluoride	4 milligrams per liter	Occurs naturally in some areas
Hardness, iron, manganese, sulfate	Taste and nuisance limits	Scale, staining, bad taste and odor

You cannot see, smell or taste arsenic, uranium or nitrate. Only a lab test tells you.

How Often to Test

The Extension well testing guide recommends:

- **Every year:** total coliform bacteria, nitrate, pH and total dissolved solids.
- **Every 5 to 10 years:** a broad analysis that includes arsenic, uranium and the other standards.
- **Right away** if the water changes color, smell or taste; after flooding near the well; after any work on the well or plumbing; or if someone gets sick and water might be the cause.
- **Also test** when you buy a home, when a new well is drilled, when someone in the home is pregnant or there is a baby under 6 months, or if a septic field is within 100 feet of the well.

Taking a Sample

Get bottles and directions from a certified lab and follow them exactly. The Extension guide suggests running outdoor irrigation for 2 to 4 hours first to flush the well casing, then running the kitchen tap 5 to 6 minutes before sampling. The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection (NDEP) keeps a list of certified labs.

Taking Care of the Well

- Keep the well cap tight and the area around the wellhead clear.
- Keep fuel, fertilizer, pesticides and animal pens well away from the well.
- Keep records of drilling, pump work and every water test.
- Use a licensed driller for any well work. In Nevada, drillers are licensed by the Nevada Division of Water Resources, and a permit is needed to drill, deepen or plug a well.

- If a test shows a problem, choose a treatment system for that specific contaminant, and test again after it is installed to confirm it works.

Checklist

- ☐ Water tested for bacteria and nitrate this year
- ☐ Broad test done in the last 5 to 10 years
- ☐ Test results and well records in one folder
- ☐ Wellhead capped and clear of chemicals

Chapter 6: Living With a Septic System

A septic system is a small sewage plant buried in your yard. Treated well, it lasts for decades. Neglected, it can back up into the house or fail in the yard, and replacing a drainfield is expensive.

How It Works

Wastewater flows from the house into a buried tank. Solids settle to the bottom as sludge, grease floats to the top as scum, and the liquid in the middle flows out to a drainfield, where the soil filters it. The tank has to be pumped before the solids build up enough to wash out into the drainfield and clog it.

Pumping

The NDEP septic fact sheet says a properly designed 1,000-gallon tank used by a family of four should be pumped about every 3 years. Pump more often if you have a larger household, use a garbage disposal, or send a lot of grease down the drain. Pumping should be done by a professional. Keep the receipt and a sketch of where the tank lid is.

What Goes Down the Drain

- Use products labeled safe for septic systems. Go easy on bleach, disinfectants, drain openers and harsh cleaners. They kill the bacteria that make the system work.
- Do not flush cigarette butts, sanitary products, wipes or anything that is not toilet paper.
- Never pour cooking grease down the drain.
- Limit use of the garbage disposal.

- Spread laundry loads out over the week instead of doing them all in one day.
- Where it is allowed, send water softener discharge somewhere other than the septic system.

Warning Signs

The NDEP lists these signs that a system may be failing:

☐ Slow drains

☐ Sewage backing up into the house

☐ Gurgling pipes

☐ Sewage odors outdoors

☐ Soggy ground or unusually green grass over the tank or drainfield

If you see any of these, call a septic contractor. Tree roots in the lines are another common problem.

Protecting the Drainfield

- Do not drive or park on the tank or drainfield.
- Do not build over it or cover it with pavement.
- Keep trees and large shrubs away from it.
- Send roof runoff away from it.

Checklist

☐ Tank location marked on a sketch

☐ Last pumping date: _____

☐ Next pumping due: _____

☐ Septic-safe cleaners under the sink

Chapter 7: Sharing the Land With Wildlife

Part of the charm of high desert living is the wildlife: quail in the yard, wild horses on the hills, hawks overhead. A few of our neighbors need more respect. The Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) handles most wildlife problems. County animal services usually do not.

> **Who to call** NDOW dispatch: (775) 688-1331, 7 days a week, 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. NDOW Reno office: (775) 688-1500. Website: ndow.org. If a person is in danger, call 911.

The Golden Rule: Do Not Feed Wildlife

Almost every wildlife problem starts with food. NDOW's guidance for bears, coyotes and mountain lions says the same thing: remove what draws them in.

- Pet food and water bowls left outside
- Bird seed and bird feeders (NDOW notes that feeding any wildlife, birds included, can attract bears)
- Trash, compost and barbecue grills
- Fallen fruit
- Woodpiles and dense shrubs that give cover
- Deer, which draw mountain lions

Coyotes

Coyotes live in nearly every Northern Nevada neighborhood. NDOW's Living with Coyotes sheet advises:

- Never run from a coyote. Stand your ground, make yourself big and loud, wave your arms and yell, and keep it up until it leaves. This is called hazing.
- Never corner a coyote. Give it a way out.
- Supervise dogs at dawn and dusk. Use a fully enclosed run with a roof if dogs are outside unattended.
- Keep dogs on a 6-foot leash, not an extendable one.
- Keep cats indoors or in a secure enclosure.
- A fence over 6 feet helps, and rollers on top help more, but NDOW notes coyotes can jump a 7-foot fence, so a fence alone will not do it.

Black Bears

Bears live in the Sierra and Carson Range and sometimes wander into foothill neighborhoods looking for food. NDOW's Bear Aware guidance:

- Use bear-resistant trash cans where bears are active, and put trash out the morning of pickup, not the night before.
- Feed pets indoors. Keep grills clean.
- Use electric fencing to protect orchards, chickens and beehives.
- If you meet a bear, do not run; you cannot outrun one. Face it, raise your arms, talk firmly, and back away slowly while keeping it in sight. Pick up small children.
- If a black bear attacks, fight back.

Mountain Lions

NDOW says conflicts between people and mountain lions are extremely rare. Its fact sheet advises:

- Remove things that draw lions and their prey, and do not feed deer.
- Use motion-activated lights or sprinklers.

- Keep small livestock in roofed, enclosed pens from dusk to dawn, and supervise pets.
- In an encounter, never run and never turn your back. Make noise, back away slowly, and if the animal becomes aggressive, fight back.

Rattlesnakes

The Carson Valley Trails Association notes that Nevada has five venomous rattlesnakes, but only one, the Great Basin rattlesnake, lives in our part of the state. It is found on rocky hillsides, sagebrush flats, grassland and farm areas, and on most local trails. It is most active at dusk and at night, and often rests in shade beside a trail during the day. The harmless gopher snake looks similar; a rattlesnake has a wider, spade-shaped head and slit pupils.

- Wear boots and loose long pants on the trail, not sandals.
- Stay on the trail and out of heavy brush and tall grass.
- Do not put your hands or feet where you cannot see. Check logs, stumps and rocks before you sit.
- Never corner or try to handle a rattlesnake. Back away and give it room.
- Keep the yard clear of debris piles and woodpiles near the house.

If someone is bitten The trails association lists this first aid from NDOW. Get emergency medical care right away; do not wait for symptoms. Keep the person calm and still, with the bite below heart level. Remove rings, watches and other jewelry before swelling starts. Do not use a tourniquet, cut and suck the wound, use electric shock, or put ice on it. If the person must walk, walk slowly and rest often. Call 911.

Checklist

- ☐ NDOW dispatch number saved in your phone
- ☐ No pet food, seed or trash left out
- ☐ Dogs supervised at dawn and dusk
- ☐ Woodpiles and debris away from the house

Chapter 8: Radon

Radon is a radioactive gas that comes up naturally from soil and rock. It has no smell or color, and it can build up inside homes, especially in winter when the house is closed up. Long-term exposure raises the risk of lung cancer. Radon is common in Northern Nevada, and the only way to know your home's level is to test.

How Common Is It Here?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends taking action to reduce radon at 4.0 picocuries per liter (pCi/L) or higher, and the EPA and U.S. Surgeon General recommend that all homes be tested. A UNR Extension summary of Nevada tests from 1989 through March 2019 found:

Area	Homes tested	At or above 4 pCi/L
Nevada statewide	24,271	26.0 percent
Lyon County	1,220	27.1 percent (highest reading 135 pCi/L)
Carson City	not stated here	39.8 percent
Douglas County	not stated here	40.7 percent
Washoe County	10,700	21.9 percent

In other words, about one Lyon County home in four that was tested came in at or above the EPA action level. Your neighbor's result does not tell you yours. Radon levels can differ a lot between houses on the same street.

Getting a Test Kit

UNR Extension runs the Nevada Radon Education Program. According to its test kit page:

- You can pick up a test kit at your county Extension office or a partner location, or order one online through the lab the program lists.
- Partner locations have free kits only during January and February, which is National Radon Action Month.
- County Extension offices also lend digital radon monitors for up to two weeks, with no fee or deposit.
- In Lyon County, kits are available from the Lyon County Extension office in Yerington, (775) 463-6541. The Dayton Valley Library, 321 Dayton Valley Road, (775) 246-6212, is a partner location with free kits in January and February.
- The program's website is RadonNV.com. The program office in Reno can be reached at (775) 336-0254, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Testing

Follow the kit directions exactly, including where to place it, how long to leave it, and how to mail it to the lab. UNR Extension's page says that if your result is 2.7 pCi/L or higher, test your home again. If repeated tests are at or above 4.0 pCi/L, the EPA level for action, plan to fix it.

If the Level Is High

A radon mitigation system, usually a pipe and fan that pull gas from under the house and vent it above the roof, can lower levels a great deal. Use a certified mitigation contractor, and test again after the system is installed. The Radon Education Program can point you to resources.

Checklist

☐ Home tested for radon (date: _____)

☐ Retested if 2.7 pCi/L or higher

☐ Test again after any major remodel or a new heating system

A Year-Round Home Calendar

Month	What to do
January	Pick up a free radon test kit (January and February at partner locations); test the house. Check for ice dams and frozen pipes after cold snaps.
February	Finish radon testing. Plan spring yard work and defensible space projects.
March	Check fences, gates and the roof after winter wind. Clean up winter debris.
April	Start defensible space work: clear Zone 0, pull cheatgrass while it is green, trim branches. Have the cooler or air conditioner serviced.
May	Finish defensible space before fire season. Test well water for bacteria and nitrate. Put away snow gear.
June	Check hoses and irrigation. Keep weeds cut. Review your evacuation plan and go-bag.
July	Water trees deeply. Watch for heat illness during yard work. No burning, sparks or fireworks in dry grass.
August	Clear dry weeds again. Check that firewood is 30 feet from the house.
September	Septic check: is pumping due this year? Clean gutters and roof of debris.
October	Service the furnace. Test smoke and CO detectors. Disconnect hoses and drain outdoor spigots. Check the car's winter kit. Watch for your fire district's burn season if you burn yard waste.
November	Stock winter supplies. Insulate exposed pipes. Check generator and fuel.
December	Keep vents and gas meter clear of snow. Check on neighbors during storms.

Contacts

Who	How to reach them
Emergency	911
Nevada Department of Wildlife dispatch	(775) 688-1331, 7 days, 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.
Nevada Department of Wildlife, Reno office	(775) 688-1500; ndow.org
UNR Extension, Lyon County office (Yerington)	(775) 463-6541
Nevada Radon Education Program	(775) 336-0254; RadonNV.com
Dayton Valley Library (radon kits January and February)	(775) 246-6212
Air quality	AirNow.gov
Your fire district (burn permits)	_____
Your well contractor	_____
Your septic pumper	_____

Acronyms

CDC. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CO. Carbon monoxide

EPA. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

NDEP. Nevada Division of Environmental Protection

NDOW. Nevada Department of Wildlife

NWS. National Weather Service

pCi/L. Picocuries per liter, a measure of radon in air

UNR. University of Nevada, Reno

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About This Book

High Desert Living: A Northern Nevada Home Guide is part of a set of free plain-language guides from Trinfinity Enterprises. Facts and phone numbers were checked against the sources listed as of November 18, 2026. Rules for burning, wells and septic systems vary by county and fire district, so confirm with your local office. This book is general information, not professional advice. If you find something that has changed or needs correcting, please write to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.