

Save Your Treasures the Right Way

If you're careful, you can halt further damage

Hurricanes and floods threaten not only homes, but treasured possessions: family heirlooms, photos, and other keepsakes. Even if they are completely soaked, they can probably still be saved if they are not contaminated with sewage or chemicals. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a coalition of 41 national organizations and federal agencies including FEMA, offers these basic guidelines:

- ✓ **Safety first!** With any disaster there may be health risks. Wear plastic or rubber gloves during cleanup. If there is mold, wear protective gear—surgical mask or respirator, goggles, and coveralls.
- ✓ **Prevent mold.** Mold can form within 48 hours, so you will need to work fast. The goal is to reduce the humidity and temperature around your treasures as you proceed to clean and dry them.
- ✓ **Air-dry.** Gentle air-drying is best for all your treasured belongings—indoors, if possible. Do *not* use hair dryers, irons, ovens, and prolonged exposure to sunlight—they will do irreversible damage. Increase good indoor airflow with fans, open windows, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers.
- ✓ **Handle with care.** Use great caution in handling your heirlooms, which can be especially fragile when wet. Separate damp materials: remove the contents from drawers; take photographs out of damp albums; remove paintings and prints from frames; place white paper towels between the pages of wet books.
- ✓ **Clean gently.** Loosen dirt and debris on fragile objects gently with soft brushes and cloths. Avoid rubbing, which can grind in dirt.
- ✓ **Salvage photos.** Clean photographs by rinsing them carefully in clean water. Air-dry photos on a plastic screen or paper towel, or by hanging them by the corner with plastic clothespins. Do *not* let the image come into contact with other surfaces as it dries.
- ✓ **Prioritize.** You may not be able to save everything, so focus on what's most important to you, whether for historic, monetary, or sentimental reasons.
- ✓ **Can't do it all?** Damp objects and items that cannot be dealt with immediately should be put in open, unsealed boxes or bags. Photos, papers, books, and textiles should be frozen if you can't get them dry within 48 hours.
- ✓ **Call in a pro.** If a precious item is badly damaged, a conservator may be able to help. Be sure to collect broken pieces. Set your treasure aside in a well-ventilated room until you find professional help. To locate a conservator, contact the Guide to Conservation Services, American Institute for Conservation, (202) 452-9545, <http://aic.stanford.edu>.

These recommendations are intended as guidance only. Neither the Heritage Emergency National Task Force nor its sponsors, Heritage Preservation and FEMA, assume responsibility or liability for treatment of damaged objects.

For reliable online information and links to professional conservation resources, see www.heritageemergency.org.

