
Disaster Recovery Films in Flooded Areas

If your films are in a flood, contact a film archive or film laboratory as quickly as possible for further advice. There are many variables that affect the stability of film materials, and each circumstance is different. The following suggestions are general advice and may not fit your particular situation.

Don't endanger people by attempting to enter a disaster area before it is safe to do so. Your films are important, but your life and health are far more important.

As soon as it is safe, locate your films. Films that have gotten wet can deteriorate quickly, much more quickly than many other types of material.

Try to minimize further damage to your films by following the steps below or the advice of a film archive or film laboratory. Keep your efforts simple and don't try to do too much. The idea is to stabilize your films, then let people with experience do the recovery and conservation work.

Prioritize as you go, working on films with high emotional value first. Home movies are irreplaceable, commercial releases are not. Use information written on labels and cans to help you choose the films that are most important to save.

Handle films gently, especially if they have gotten wet. Wet films are very fragile. Do not attempt to unroll a film to look at it. If you're not sure what the film is about, make a guess, but don't unroll it. Unrolling a film at this point will almost certainly cause further damage.

What to do with Dry Films

If a film is not wet, do not put it in water! Doing so will damage the film.

- Keep the films in a cool, clean, safe place.
- Films should only be placed in a refrigerator packed in a plastic bag to reduce any further drying out and should be sent to a lab for examination as soon as possible. Do not leave the film packed in the bag in the refrigerator without examination for more than a few weeks.
- Have the film checked by a lab as soon as possible for mold or other problems. Any film in a flooded area may have suffered damage from humidity.

What to do with Wet Films

- **If a film is wet, keep it wet.** This provides the best hope of saving the film.
- Keep your wet films wet, clean, cool, safe and undisturbed.
- Place the film in a container of water. You may place more than one film in the same container. The water level should cover all films in the container.
- Use cool, distilled water if you can. Next best: cool tap water or bottled water. If necessary, just use whatever water you have access to. Cool the water if you can.
- A plastic container with a tight fitting lid is best, such as a Tupperware container. A plastic bucket, wastebasket, or trash bag will also work. If the container does

not have a lid, cover it with a clean cloth to keep contaminants out.

- If the films can be treated within a few days then leave them in the boxes, if the films cannot be rewashed within a few days then remove the films from their enclosures and store as described below.
- **If you leave the films in their boxes or cans:** Don't open the boxes or cans if you are not going to take the films out.
 - Use an indelible marker to write a number on the film box or can. Write the same number on a piece of paper, then copy down any information written on the film box (names, dates, places, etc.) This will be the best bet in matching up the writing to the film later on. The writing on the box might be unreadable after the box has been sitting in water for a few more days. Gently rinse off the boxes and cans before submerging them in your container of water.
 - Take the films to a lab for treatment within 2 -3 days.
 - If you take the films out of their boxes or cans: First gently rinse off the can or box to avoid getting dirt or debris on the film. Then, very gently, rinse off the outside only of the film roll.
 - Do not unwind the film. Leave the film on its reel or core. Place a rubber band around the film so it forms a circle that will keep the film from unwinding. (If the film were an Oreo cookie, the rubber band would go around the filling.) Use an indelible marker to write a number on the leader of the film and the same number on the box or can the film came out of. Keep the boxes and cans to match up with the film reels later. Often there is writing on the can or box that helps identify the film. Do

not unwind films to check if they are in the right cans.

- **Keep the container of films as cool as you can.** Set it out of the direct sun, in a shady place if possible, preferably somewhere with a breeze or moving air. Put the container in a refrigerator if one is available. (Since the films are already in water, the relative humidity in the refrigerator is not a problem.) If are using a container with a cloth for a lid, keeping the cloth wet will help cool the films. For all containers, setting wet cloths around and on top of the container will help keep the films cool. Store a bucket of clean water next to the films in a cool spot so you will have cool water to add to the film container.
- **Make sure all of the films stay under water.** Add cool, clean water to the container as needed.
- Change the water daily if you can - otherwise as often as possible. Use cool, distilled water if possible. Do this as gently as you can, trying not to disturb the films. Remember, wet films are very fragile!
- Keep the films clean by using a container with a lid or placing a clean cloth on top of an open container, and by using clean water to fill the container.

What to do with Films that got Wet Then Dried out Completely

- Keep the films in a cool, clean, safe place.
- Do not try to unwind the film.
- Do not put the films in water.
- Take the films to a lab as soon as possible to see what can be salvaged.

For all Films in Flooded Areas

For all films in flooded areas: Contact a film lab as soon as possible to discuss your next steps. (Films that have not gotten wet will need to be checked for damage from humidity.) If your films have gotten wet, you will need to get them to a lab where they can be rewashed and properly dried. This process requires a professional with the necessary equipment.

For a list of film labs: <https://goo.gl/8UtrgT>

Mick Newnham, Senior Researcher Preservation and Technical Services Branch National Film and Sound Archive Australian Film Commission