

# Health Department

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March 17, 2021

House Committee on Business and Labor  
900 Court St. NE - Remote  
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: HB 2813 - Relating to protections against exposure to unhealthy air quality from wildfire smoke.

Chair Holvey, Vice-Chairs Bonham and Grayber, and members of the Committee, my name is Andrea Hamberg and I am the Interim Environmental Health Director for Multnomah County Health Department. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB2813.

Last September, Multnomah County experienced a wildfire smoke event that was of an intensity and duration rarely observed in populated areas, while in the midst of a respiratory pandemic. Counties across the state faced evacuations, tragic loss of life and property, more than twice the 10 year average of acres on fire<sup>1</sup>, and unhealthy air quality. State agencies urged, but did not order, employers to stop or delay outdoor work activity<sup>2</sup>.

Health impacts were immediately evident. In the Portland area, Emergency department visits for asthma-like symptoms roughly doubled on the days with the worst smoke, amounting to hundreds of excess visits for respiratory symptoms. In a study published this month, exposure to particulate matter from wildfire smoke was noted to be harder on respiratory health than other particulate pollution sources<sup>3</sup>. Wildfire smoke can worsen existing diseases like cardiovascular and respiratory disease. Other major health effects include premature death, heart attacks and stroke, low birth weight, and increased cancer risk. These health effects are in addition to immediate discomfort from symptoms like burning eyes, cough, and scratchy throats. Prolonged exposure to smoke can also contribute to fear, stress and anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Oregon Office of Emergency Management. Accessed from:  
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6e1e42989d1b4beb809223d5430a3750>

<sup>2</sup> <https://osha.oregon.gov/news/2020/Pages/nr2020-34.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Aguilera et al, 2021. Accessed from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-21708-0>

While some outdoor sites closed, many farm laborers, postal workers, utility crews, and others – stayed on the job while the Oregon National Guard distributed air filtering masks to some<sup>4</sup>. Data and trends continue to show that summers with little or no wildfire smoke will be much less commonplace in the future<sup>5</sup>. We need to be better prepared and protected.

Outdoor workers, especially those engaged in farming harvests, construction and those in which outdoor activities require heavy and prolonged exertion, would benefit from this bill's call for increased situational awareness of outdoor air quality readings and forecasts, required communications of worker protections options in multiple languages, and required access to air filtering respirators. While some outdoor workers, like firefighters and Emergency Medical Services providers already have several kinds of PPE available for air quality issues and practices for using each type, many others do not. We urge your support of HB2813.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Andrea Hamberg  
Interim Environmental Health Director  
Multnomah County Health Department

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<https://www.oregonlive.com/business/2020/09/oregon-wildfire-smoke-shuts-down-outdoor-work-for-many-but-there-are-some-people-who-may-not-have-a-choice.html>

<sup>5</sup> Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, 2020. Accessed from:  
<https://www.oregon.gov/deq/wildfires/Documents/WildfireSmokeTrendsReport.pdf>