

Monday, May 18, 2020

Governor Kate Brown  
House Speaker Tina Kotek  
Senate President Peter Courtney  
Members of the Oregon Senate  
Members of the Oregon House of Representatives

**RE: Public Health, Wildfire Smoke, and Community Resilience**

Dear Governor Brown, Senators, and Representatives,

We are writing to you today as medical professionals concerned about the effect that an active wildfire season will have on the health of Oregonians, particularly those suffering from COVID-19 and other lung impairments.

In the face of our current public health crisis, we believe the State of Oregon should proactively prepare for the 2020 wildfire season by advancing common sense, low-cost measures that are proven to mitigate the adverse public health impacts of smoke. We encourage you to include funding for smoke education and preparedness, as well as home hardening and defensible space resources for rural communities in any COVID-19 legislation you consider in a special legislative session.

There is mounting scientific evidence that exposure to fine particulate matter, such as that found in wood smoke and other air pollution, can significantly increase the risk of mortality among those afflicted with COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Such exposure can come from both human-made and natural sources. The negative health effects of fine particulate matter have been well documented, and are a significant reason for clean air rules designed to reduce such pollution from diesel engine exhaust, smokestacks, construction sites, factories, and wood burning stoves.

However, fine particulate matter pollution can also come from naturally-occurring sources, such as smoke from forest and grassland fires. The air Oregonians breathe can be negatively affected by smoke originating hundreds of miles away in other states, or even in Canada, making this problem particularly difficult to address. Scientists predict that climate change will only continue to increase smoke levels each summer, which is why we must proactively invest in air filtration and smoke shelters. To reduce smoke and risk of human-caused wildfire, we recommend limiting any non-essential burning during the COVID-19 crisis, including campfires, slash and debris burning, and field burning.

Last year, Governor Brown's Wildfire Response Council (WRC) examined smoke and related issues. We believe some of the WRC's recommendations are a good starting point for action needed to address the negative health effects of smoke and fine particulate matter. We strongly

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<sup>1</sup> Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States. Wu et al. 2020.  
<https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.05.20054502>

encourage you to consider how these measures could be included in any COVID-19 response legislation.

Specifically, we recommend the following:

**1. Expand public education to reduce health impacts from smoke.**

Oregonians know from first-hand experience that wildfire smoke can irritate the lungs and make it difficult to breathe, but less well known are the serious health effects of fine particulate pollution from smoke and the availability of smoke filtration and air purifier systems.

**2. Provide financial assistance for advanced air filtration systems.**

Financial assistance for low income homeowners and renters to purchase and install such devices is urgently needed. This is especially important because low-income Oregonians already experience a disproportionately high level of exposure to fine particulate matter from diesel pollution and industrial sources. Funds should also be made available to install air filtration systems in senior care facilities and medical service providers.

**3. Establish smoke shelters in communities across the state.**

Smoke can be pervasive during fire season, and low income and houseless Oregonians often have few options to avoid or mitigate its negative health effects. Providing resources to install smoke filtration systems in existing public buildings, such as libraries, schools, and community centers, would provide Oregonians with spaces to avoid exposure to fine particulate matter during the worst smoke periods.

**4. Provide financial assistance and technical resources to help at-risk communities harden their homes and maintain defensible space.**

Extensive research has found that installing fire-resistant roofing, rain gutter guards, and ember-proof vents, combined with maintaining “defensible space” within 60-100 ft of homes, are the most effective ways to protect homes from wildfire. By working from the home-out (rather than from the backcountry-in), homeowners can dramatically increase the likelihood that their homes survive fire. With most Oregonians staying home as the result of Oregon’s Stay at Home Order, the time has never been better to educate and engage Oregonians in preparing their property to reduce the risks from fire.

The pandemic has created a situation where smoke and fine particulate matter could greatly increase the risk of serious illness and death in our state. Relatively small investments now could help reduce those impacts and better prepare Oregonians to weather future fire and smoke seasons. Protecting public health from smoke exposure will also help reduce strain on Oregon hospitals caring for the most extreme cases of COVID-19. The recent state funding provided to the Ashland SmokeWise program through an Oregon Department of Environmental

Quality (DEQ) grant demonstrates one mechanism by which such investments could be distributed.

As with the COVID-19 pandemic itself, it is essential that we proactively prepare for the public health and safety risks posed by the impending wildfire season. We urge you to take such action by including fire and smoke preparedness in any COVID-19 legislation you consider in a special legislative session.

Sincerely,

First Name	Last Name	Health Credentials	City
Carol	Blenning	MD	Portland
Phyllis	Brown	MD	Portland
Sonia	Buist	MD	Portland
Sylvia	Chatroux	MD	Ashland
Sue	Colasurdo	MD	Eugene
Mary Ellen	Coulter	MD	Bend
Nancy	Crumpacker	MD	Portland
Lynn	Edwards	MD	Portland
Karen	Erde	MD	Portland
Virginia	Feldman	MD	Portland
Martha	Gerrity	MD	Portland
John	Gillette	MD	Portland
Andy	Harris	MD	Portland
Susan	Katz	MD	McMinnville
Elizabeth	Lazaroff	MD	Corvallis
James	Leggett	MD	Portland
Roger	Leverette	MD	Beaverton
Marie	Long	MD	Albany
Elis	Madrigal	MD	Portland
Barbara	Manildi	MD	Lake Oswego
Stanley	Nudelman	MD	Corvallis
Patrick	O'Herron	MD	Portland
John	Pearson	MD	Portland

Melanie	Plaut	MD	Portland
David	Pollack	MD	West Linn
James	Powell	MD	Portland
Bonnie	Reagan	MD	Portland
Renee	Stringham	MD	Portland
Catherine	Thomasson	MD	Portland
Hans U	Tschersich	MD	Gladstone
Ann	Turner	MD	Portland
Thomas	Ward	MD	Portland
Lisa	Williams	MD	Portland
Philip	Wu	MD	Portland
Jim	Biemer	MD Internal Medicine	Portland
James	Gaudino	MD MS MPH FACPM	Portland
Paul	Droukas	MD Retired pediatric cardiologist	Lake Oswego
George	Feldman	MD, F.A.C.P.	Portland
Marshall	Goldberg	MD, MPH	Portland
Patricia	Kullberg	MD, MPH	Portland
Kelly	O'Hanley	MD, MPH	Portland
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Inge	Hindel	MD, PhD	Portland
Adriana	Voss-Andreae	MD, PhD	Portland
Annie	McCuen	Mental Health Specialist	Salem
Carol	Nieh	MPH	Lake Oswego
Michael	Heumann	MPH, MA	Portland
Anne	Goldfeld	MPH, MSW	Beaverton
Tomm	Pickles	MPH/DMD	Portland
Mike	Zotter	MS	Portland
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Alice	Shapiro	MS, RD	Portland

Marilee	Dea	MSRN CPNP retired	Portland
Danielle	Droppers	MSW	Portland
Nancy	Hedrick	MSW	Portland
Shirley	Mason	MSW	Portland
Dave	King	MSW retired	Portland
Margaret	Philhower	ND	Cave Junction
Mary	Scott	ND, LAc	Portland
Janet	Wrege	ND, LAc	Portland
Peggy	McSorley	NP	Portland
Matthew	Stahl	OTR	Waldport
Catherine	Bax	PA	Portland
Regna	Merritt	PA	Portland
Sheri	Ambrose	Pharmacist	Lincoln City
Joseph	Breazeale	PhD	Ashland
Antonia	Forster	PhD	Portland
Diana	Rempe	PhD	Portland
Charla	Van Koten Nudelman	PhD Psychologist	Corvallis
Emily	Herbert, PhD	PhD Retired Psychologist	Portland
Susan	Bennett	PhD, Clinical Psychology	Portland
Brian	Gibbs	PhD, MBA	Tigard
Theodora	Tsongas	PhD, MS	Portland
Nancy	Mauter	Physical therapist (retired)	Lebanon
Marianne	Mauldin	PT	Portland
Alice	Shapiro	RD Registered Dietitian (retired)	Portland
Lori	Bennett	Retired EMT Firefighter	Portland
Anne	Marsh	Retired public health researcher	Portland
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Kathleen	Boylan	RN	Portland
Ruth	Dallas	RN	Gaston
Cynthia	Enlow	RN	Albany

Maxine	Fookson	RN	Portland
Margaret	Halloran	RN	McMinnville
Judy	Kerr	RN	Ashland
Ivon	Moreno	RN	Portland
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Sherry	Archer	RN MSN	Portland
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Renata	Hahn-Francini	DVM	Portland
Rachel	Dummigan	FNP	Portland
Kim	Davis	LCSW	Salem
Yara	Tethys	LPC	Eugene
Harry	Kershner	LVN	Portland