



Health Department

February 5, 2020

Senate Committee on Wildfire Reduction and Recover
900 Court St. NE - HR
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 1536 - Requires electric company to operate in compliance with risk-based wildfire protection plan acknowledge by Public Utility Commission

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Baertschiger, and members of the Committee, my name is Sarah Lochner and I am the Deputy Director of Government Relations for Multnomah County Health Department. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 1536.

Wildfire seasons in Oregon are increasing in frequency and intensity, as are bad air days from wildfire smoke in Multnomah County. Until 2015, Portland had not had a single day with air quality that was unhealthy for sensitive groups or worse from wildfire smoke since air quality monitoring began in the 1980s¹.

When wildfires burn, winds can push smoke into populated areas and rapidly degrade air quality. Wildfire smoke contains a variety of pollutants in particulate matter. Gas, and vapor form that can irritate the eyes, nose and throat, cause shortness of breath, and worsen existing respiratory and cardiovascular disease. Prolonged exposure to smoke can also contribute to fear, stress and anxiety.

Children, older adults and those with existing conditions are more sensitive to smoke than others. In addition, compared to mid- to high-income primarily white communities, disproportionate impacts from air pollution occur to minority and low-income populations in the Portland region (Oregon DEQ, 2012). While everyone is affected by wildfire smoke and air pollution in our region, some communities are disproportionately burdened.

During wildfire smoke events, the Multnomah County Health Department encourages people to use high quality/HEPA air filters for their forced-air furnaces, and/or use an in-room filter. Because these systems can be cost-prohibitive, we are in support of SB 1536, which will help our communities be better prepared, and would provide funds to implement in-home protections.

The 2017 Eagle Creek fire blew smoke and ash into the far into the County for days on end and forced our local school districts to choose between two dangers; keep windows open to alleviate

¹ <https://www.oregon.gov/deq/FilterDocs/smoketrends.pdf>

the extreme heat in classrooms, or keep them closed to protect students and teachers from hazardous levels of air pollution. With both wildfire season and warm weather extending further into the school year, many schools lack the tools to protect students from both harms.

Multnomah County Health Department surveyed school districts within Multnomah County and determined that between 60-70% of schools in Multnomah County have no air conditioning, and many have no air filtration at all. Schools with modern HVAC systems can provide good protection from wildfire smoke. However, many older schools rely on open windows or fans for cooling and have no filtration of any kind. Smoky days leave them making the choice between exposing kids to heat or exposing them to smoke. For a relatively small investment in room-sized filters, cleaner air rooms can be established in schools, offering a safe place for students with underlying conditions like asthma.

This can be accomplished by striking the word “residential” from Section 15(1) and adding language to Section 15(3) as follows: “The Authority may issue grants for the installation of smoke filtration systems in residential buildings and other buildings likely to be occupied by vulnerable populations in areas susceptible to wildfire smoke.”

The bill would also be improved by adding provisions to Section 3 to mitigate utility rate increases for low-income rate payers.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Sarah Lochner
Deputy Director of Government Relations
Multnomah County