

Health Department

March 15, 2021

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery
900 Court St. NE - Remote D
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 287 - Relating to wildfire

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, 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 SB 287.

Last September, in the midst of a respiratory pandemic, wildfires ignited throughout Oregon, resulting in evacuations in some parts of the state, tragic loss of life and property, more than twice the 10 year average of acres on fire¹, and unhealthy air quality in every county. 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. Wildfire smoke can worsen existing diseases like cardiovascular and respiratory disease. 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 sources². 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 the immediate discomfort like burning eyes, cough, and scratchy throats. Prolonged exposure to smoke can also contribute to fear, stress and anxiety.

During the fires of 2020, we learned how important indoor air filtration can be during smoke events. Air purifiers, fans, and filters became hard to come by. Two emergency cleaner air shelters were opened in Multnomah County, and people sought relief despite risks from the pandemic.

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

² Aguilera et al, 2021. Accessed from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-21708-0>

The September 2020 wildfire smoke event was of an intensity and duration rarely observed in populated areas. According to a report released by DEQ that same month, trends continue to show that summers with little or no wildfire smoke will be much less commonplace in the future³. We need to be better prepared and protected.

Our communities will be better prepared for poor and extreme air quality events if Oregon Health Authority establishes a program to make air filtration systems available to cleaner air shelters in local communities alongside grants for air filtration systems in various building types, prioritizing installations in lower income residences. We urge your support of SB 287 and encourage legislators to fund efforts to expand availability of indoor air filtration materials.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Andrea Hamberg
Interim Environmental Health Director
Multnomah County Health Department

³ Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, 2020. Accessed from:
<https://www.oregon.gov/deq/wildfires/Documents/WildfireSmokeTrendsReport.pdf>