



3/17/21

Chair Holvey, Vice-Chairs Bonham and Grayber, and Members of the House Business and Labor Committee,

My name is Ira Cuello-Martinez and I am here representing PCUN, Oregon Farmworkers Union. I am here today to testify in support of HB 2813, the outdoor workers respiration protections bill.

At PCUN, we represent Oregon's farmworkers and low wage Latinx families. Many of our community members were impacted by last year's devastating wildfire season and I want to shed some light on the realities that these workers face.

People across the state were asked to evacuate their homes, yet farm workers continued to harvest the crops. Why? Because they have no other choice. Farmworkers are one of the lowest paid workers in the country. According to the National Agriculture Workers Study report, twenty-five percent of all farm workers had a family income below the federal poverty line.<sup>1</sup> They cannot risk losing their employment if they refuse to come in to work because of the wildfires and wildfire smoke. Even if they are not at risk of losing their job, farmworkers still have to consider the loss of income from staying at home. Their economic reality forces them to continue working despite the harsh weather conditions like wildfire smoke or excessive heat.

As you have heard, there are many health complications related to working outdoors and being exposed to heavy levels of wildfire smoke. The Oregon Health Authority's 2020 Climate and Health report finds that people working on the frontlines--including in smoke and extreme heat--are at a disproportionate risk of illness and death. Our farm workers expressed the immediate health complications of breathing in the dense wildfire smoke. I remember a worker sharing her story of having difficulty breathing, coughing up ashes, and the never-ending headaches she felt those first two weeks of September. She felt frustrated when she and her coworkers had to remind the employer to provide them N95 masks on a daily basis despite the heavy smoke in the air. "No tuve que pedirlos cada día, ellos deberían de habernos dado desde que llegamos." I didn't have to ask for them everyday, they should have given them to us as soon as we arrived. Another worker shared how he vomited after eating lunch and would avoid eating for the remainder of the week until the smoke was gone. He too felt the headaches that the previous worker had felt. These are just two examples of what workers faced last year, but there are also long term health consequences of breathing in wildfire smoke.

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers, 36.

[https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/news/pdfs/NAWS\\_Research\\_Report\\_13.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/news/pdfs/NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf)

Unfortunately, many farmworkers do not have healthcare coverage and are unable to receive medical attention due to the high cost of services. In fact, forty-seven percent of farmworkers reported that they had health insurance, so more than half did not have any.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, they are unaware of health complications they may have because they have not seen a doctor in years or over a decade. The lack of access to healthcare in our farmworker communities highlights the importance of the state to take action in assuring these workers have the strongest protections afforded to them.

For these reasons, we urge the committee to vote in favor of HB 2813 to establish protections for outdoor workers who are exposed to wildfire smoke and the unhealthy air quality.

Sincerely,

Ira Cuello-Martinez  
Climate Policy Associate  
PCUN, Oregon's Farmworker Union

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<sup>2</sup> Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers, 40.  
[https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS\\_Research\\_Report\\_13.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf)