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Contact:
Damon Motz-Storey, Healthy Climate Program Director, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility 303.913.5634 damon@oregonpsr.org

Catherine Thomasson, MD, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility 503.819.1170 Thomassonct@gmail.com

Oregon Health Professionals Call on Governor Kate Brown and State Lawmakers to Protect Lung Health From Wildfire Smoke to Reduce Summer COVID-19 Deaths

[Salem, OR] — Today, nearly 100 medical and public health professionals from across the state of Oregon urged Governor Kate Brown and Oregon lawmakers to include fire and smoke preparedness measures in any special-session legislation called to address the impacts of COVID-19.

The state revenue forecast expected later this week will likely prompt calls for major reductions in agency budgets; however, health professionals have made clear that investments in smoke resilience and wildfire preparedness are crucial to avoid exacerbating the global pandemic – especially in the face of extreme and severe drought conditions throughout the state.

The letter [link] points out the 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, and outlines recommendations to educate and prepare communities for the impending wildfire season.

Healthcare leaders urged state officials to “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.”

“Preliminary research shows that an increase of only 1 microgram per cubic meter of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) is associated with an 8% increase in the COVID-19 death rate,” said Tom Ward, MD, Infectious Disease specialist. “By taking proactive action to fund air filtration, Oregon can protect lung health from wildfire smoke and ameliorate the impacts of COVID-19 on Oregonians this fire season.”

“As a primary care physician and an adult living with asthma, this is especially important to me,” said Elis Madrigal, MD. “I could definitely notice a big difference during the last fires. Implementing these ideas can make a big difference in many people's lives.”
“Scientists are telling us that we can expect a very active fire season this year – which means more smoke and greater impacts to Oregonians with health issues,” said Kelly Campbell, Executive Director of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility. “To avoid additional stress being placed on our already strained healthcare system, we must make smart investments now in the proven strategies that mitigate smoke’s health impacts.”

The letter’s signatories endorse a number of policies put forward by Governor Kate Brown’s Wildfire Response Council last year. These recommendations include:

1. Expanding public education to reduce health impacts from smoke.
2. Providing financial assistance for advanced air filtration systems.
3. Establishing smoke shelters in communities across the state.
4. Providing financial assistance and technical resources to help at-risk communities harden their homes and maintain defensible space.

The letter concludes:

“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.”

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