



OREGON'S SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

The Farmworker Smoke Protection Act

The increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires has become a serious public health issue across the United States. These fires put homes and communities in jeopardy, and cause hazardous smoke that can affect people even hundreds of miles away. In the summer of 2018, Portland, Ore., had the second-worst air quality globally, and a single day of smoke exposure in San Francisco was equivalent to smoking half a pack of cigarettes. In Southern Oregon and throughout the West, the air quality was bad enough to cancel schools, prevent people from leaving their homes, and even shut down public transportation. Despite these dangerous conditions, hundreds of farmworkers continued to work outdoors without respiratory protection.

The impacts of wildfires are only expected to get worse. Factors like prolonged drought and extreme temperatures are increasing the prevalence of wildfires in the West. The 2018 National Climate Assessment concluded that the area burned by wildfires each year in the Western U.S. alone could increase by up to six times by 2050.

Smoke's impacts on the farmworker community: Smoke and ash are detrimental to crops, which means that fields must be harvested quickly after wildfires. As a result, farmworkers labor outside in smoky conditions, working quickly to get crops off the field. Many do this without proper respiratory protection, putting their health at risk. After serious wildfires in 2018, reports surfaced that many farmworkers did not have access to respiratory protection, and resorted to using wet cloth or bandanas to protect themselves from the smoke. They later experienced headaches, dizziness, and trouble breathing.

Without a federal standard or guidance from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), it is difficult for farmworkers to access the resources necessary to protect themselves from smoke exposure, and there is little recourse for those seeking proper protection.

The Farmworker Smoke Protection Act will help ensure that farmworkers are protected from hazardous wildfire smoke. The bill requires that employers provide N95 masks or other certified respiratory protection to all farmworkers exposed to hazardous air conditions. It also directs OSHA to develop and publish an official standard to protect employees from wildfire smoke exposure.