

Prepare your business for wildfire season



Prepare for emergencies:

- Provide annual wildfire smoke training for all employees.
- Plan for how to get employees to safer locations or when to release employees safely before situations worsen.
- Designate essential personnel and duties.
- Create an emergency communication plan (bit.ly/3PiGFYo).
- Set aside adequate supplies of water, food, personal protective equipment, and communication methods and devices.

Wildfires are getting bigger, lasting longer, and happening more often in Oregon and across the western United States. In addition to immediate harm from the fire itself, hazardous smoke travels well beyond the fire lines, putting people and businesses at risk.

Oregon OSHA has adopted a permanent rule (bit.ly/3AV7UUn) to address this growing threat. This guide shares insights from the new rule and resources to help you and your employees achieve the highest level of protection.

How does wildfire smoke impact health?

Smoke from wildfires may contain chemicals, gases, and fine particles. The greatest health hazard comes from breathing these particles, which can reduce lung function; worsen asthma and other existing heart and lung conditions; and cause coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing. Carbon monoxide also may be present in high concentrations, especially when fires are smoldering.

Who's at risk?

Exposure depends on many factors, including proximity to wildlands; resources to fight and mitigate fires; and environmental conditions, including wind, humidity, and precipitation. People who work outdoors, are over age 65, have respiratory conditions or cardiovascular disease, smoke, or are pregnant have a higher risk of health impacts.

What can employers do?

Before wildfire season:

- Provide annual wildfire smoke training for all employees. Include information on symptoms, potential health effects, air quality assessment, respirator use, two-way communication, and other emergency procedures.
- Include wildfire smoke events in your emergency response and business continuity plans. Designate a team for handling business and personnel impacts. Include members with authority to close business or stop work.

- Prepare production schedules and work assignments with potential business interruptions in mind, especially if you are in a high-impact area.
- Identify the risk of smoke exposure for each type of employee and task, including outdoor and indoor workers, and those who travel or provide transportation. Describe levels of increasing hazard and response for each work situation. Prepare necessary supplies for different responses, such as personal protective equipment, flashlights, cell phones, and radio communication.
- Identify resources for monitoring wildfires and air quality in your area. Train your team on how to use these resources and respond to quickly changing environmental conditions. One resource is Oregon Department of Environmental Quality's Air Quality Index: www.oregon.gov/deq/aq/pages/aqi.aspx

During a wildfire smoke event:

Both indoors and outdoors:

- Conduct an exposure assessment at the start of each shift to determine air quality. Adjust operations as necessary in accordance with Appendix B of OAR 437-002-1081 (bit.ly/3aKjtTZ). *(NOTE: Exposure assessment is not needed for indoor operations with adequate environmental control.)*
- Communicate frequently with employees and customers.
- Monitor communication channels, such as public service announcements and websites, including the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Oregon Health Authority, and others. Stay alert to quickly changing conditions.
- Offer filtering facepiece respirators for voluntary use when the Air Quality Index is at or above 101. Outdoor environments may present exposures to hazards not addressed by regular N-95 or N-100 masks; any voluntary respiratory protection would be for temporary, short-duration use.
- Require use of filtering facepiece respirators when the Air Quality Index is at or above 277. Refer to Appendix B of OAR 437-002-1081, Table 2, to determine the appropriate protection.
- Reduce or eliminate other sources of air pollutants, such as vacuuming or cooking (indoors) and smoking or burning fuel (outdoors).

Indoors:

- Shut down outside air intakes and allow air-conditioned buildings to operate on recirculated air. *(NOTE: This advice supersedes advice for increased outdoor air to reduce COVID-19 risk when outdoor air quality is hazardous.)*
- Change filters on HVAC units and use portable air purifiers with HEPA filters as necessary.
- Keep windows and doors closed; minimize entry and exit.

Outdoors:

- Relocate or re-assign work activities out of the smoke zone.
- Cease work when air quality and/or visibility present health and safety hazards, including carbon monoxide, heavy smoke, low visibility, or other highly hazardous conditions.

After a wildfire smoke event:

Discuss lessons learned; make any necessary changes to your plan and processes.

Where to get more information

Oregon OSHA Wildfire Smoke Rule key requirements bit.ly/3AV7UUn

AirNow.gov – Air Quality Index www.airnow.gov

Oregon Smoke Information www.oregonsmoke.org