American Lung Association.

September 6, 2022

The Honorable Tom Carper, Chairman
The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member
Committee on Environment and Public Works
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Capito:

The American Lung Association supports S. 2421, the Smoke Planning and Research Act of 2021 and S. 2661, the Smoke-Ready Communities Act of 2021.

Wildfires have become more frequent and extreme in recent years. The loss of property, ecosystems and life can be devastating, leaving long-term burdens for families and communities. The fire itself, however, is not the only danger to people's health and safety. Smoke produced by wildfires can be extremely harmful to the lungs – especially for certain populations like children, older adults, pregnant people and those with an existing lung disease.

Wildfire smoke produces particle pollution – microscopic particles that can lodge themselves deep in the lungs. Particle pollution can trigger asthma attacks, heart attacks and strokes and can even be deadly. In children, wildfire smoke can damage lungs that are still developing while older adults are more likely to have a pre-existing lung or heart disease exacerbated by exposure to smoke. Pregnant people are also at a greater risk, with exposure to wildfire smoke contributing to low birth weight, preterm birth or gestational diabetes. Anyone who has difficulty breathing under good air quality days – those with asthma or existing respiratory diseases – would have even greater difficulty when wildfire smoke worsens air quality.[1]

The prevalence and increasing extremity of wildfires means more people are exposed to wildfire smoke. According to the American Lung Association's 2022 "State of the Air" report, more than 63 million people live in counties with failing grades for daily particle pollution. This represents almost 9 million more people than last year's report and the most out of any of the last seven reports. All but one of the 25 worst counties for short-term particle pollution were in the western part of the country

[1]Hill, L. A. L., Jaeger, J. M., Smith, A.; PSE Healthy Energy. (2022). (rep.). Can Prescribed Fires Mitigate Health Harm? A Review of Air Quality and Public Health Implications of Wildfire and Prescribed Fire. Retrieved from https://www.lung.org/getmedia/fd7ff728-56d9-4b33-82eb-abd06f01bc3b/pse_wildfire-and-prescribed-fire-brief_final_2022.pdf.

– areas known as wildfire hotspots. Wildfires are increasing the number of days and the severity of deadly particle pollution spikes.[2]

Policies to slow the acceleration of climate change will help slow the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires. But addressing the health impacts that wildfires are creating right now is just as critical. The Smoke Planning and Research Act and the Smoke-Ready Communities Act will help accomplish two necessary actions. First, better research on the health impacts of wildfire smoke and how federal, state and local leaders can protect individuals and communities will help shape wildfire response efforts in the future. Second, providing funding so states and communities can use the tools identified by research as effective measures can get timely, science-backed information to the public that can help protect them when wildfire smoke is worsening air quality.

The threats that wildfires pose to overall health, safety and wellbeing necessitate action by the federal government. We are pleased to see the Environment and Public Works consider legislation that would help protect health when faced with these dangers and work towards improving lung health in the future.

Sincerely,

Harold P. Wimmer
National President and CEO
American Lung Association

[2]American Lung Association. State of the Air. Apr 2022. www.lung.org/sota