



For immediate release--

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## Climate crisis a current and growing threat to health of Oregonians

*New report: Low-income and communities of color most impacted by weather extremes*

SALEM, Ore. --Overburdened hospitals filled with people **struggling to breathe** due to smoke from more frequent and intense wildfires, frontline workers **sickened or killed** by longer stretches of extreme heat beating down from farm fields to construction sites to fishing boats, families struggling with **toxic stress, depression, and trauma** from climate disasters and an uncertain future-- not just a description of the year 2020, but Oregon's future unless we make significant progress.

A [new Oregon Health Authority report](#) demonstrates how the climate crisis is already harming our health and will grow ever worse without restorative action.

"Our families and community members are living this every day, working tirelessly through heat and smoke to put food on your table and theirs. It's helpful to have the state's academic findings match our lived experiences. We've been telling lawmakers and others these impacts have been growing worse for years and yet we're not seeing the action needed to match the challenge." said **Reyna Lopez**, Executive Director of [Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste \(PCUN\)](#), Oregon's largest farmworkers union. "Delays cost lives. In the short term, we need meaningful improvement in working safety standards, and then we must move quickly to improve equity and combat the climate crisis, so these burdens no longer fall hardest on those who can least afford them."

The Oregon Health Authority released its first annual report on the impacts of the climate crisis on Oregonians' health, fulfilling part of the **Oregon Climate Action Plan**, Governor Kate Brown's executive order 20-04 signed in March. The report will help Oregonians, lawmakers, regulators, and other stakeholders understand the current and growing threats to health because of climate change and fossil fuel pollution, and make decisions accordingly.

"Climate change is a public health crisis. It is no longer acceptable or viable for our lawmakers to fail to take immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the burning of fossil fuels," said **Jamie Pang**, Environmental Health Program Director at [Oregon Environmental Council](#). "From increasing asthma and respiratory illnesses, water systems contaminated with cyanotoxins, and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and mental illness, OHA's report demonstrates that climate impacts are measurable and quantifiable for the lives of many Oregonians."

The report makes clear there are class and racial components to the severity of climate impacts on Oregonians, with Black, Indigenous, Tribal, and people of color disproportionately harmed as a result of current and historical systems of oppression and disinvestment.

“Oregonians are dealing with so much right now. The sudden coronavirus pandemic, the quickly escalating climate crisis, and a renewed reckoning with racial injustice have all shone a light on disparities we’ve been tracking in the public health and scientific communities for some time. It’s important to recognize all of these crises are related, not separate problems with separate solutions,” said **Jessica Nischik-Long**, Executive Director of the [Oregon Public Health Association](#). “The findings in this OHA report put a much needed local focus on a global crisis. Defining the problems helps us work together on solutions to address many challenges at once. Transitioning off of burning fossil fuels and putting in place protections for those most harmed by climate change and air pollution must be done with a focus on improving health and equity.”

The next step for the Oregon Health Authority to fulfill its mandates of the Oregon Climate Action Plan is to jointly develop a proposal with Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for standards to protect workplace employees from exposure to wildfire smoke and excessive heat. The proposal should be completed no later than June 30, 2021. ([Section 11c](#))

"From a worker's perspective, standards for working in high heat are long overdue, especially as climate change makes things worse. Northwest Workers' Justice Project and others have been pushing Oregon OSHA for 5 years to put a strong heat standard in place, and give workers guidance on how to stay safe," said **Kate Suisman**, Coordinator of Campaigns and Alliances at [Northwest Workers' Justice Project](#). "We applaud Governor Brown for taking a bold step with the Oregon Climate Action Plan. We'll be watching for OHA and OSHA to follow through on the directive with strong rules so workers will finally have a right to rest, water and shade-- tools we know can save lives when it comes to heat stress."

The role of climate change in degrading our mental health, in addition to physical danger, is a growing field of study and understanding. The Oregon Health Authority report (pg. 24) highlights both the mental strain of disasters, and also the burden on those who understand the unfolding disaster and what it means for our lives and livelihoods.

“For the generation in power, they’re still operating under the idea the climate crisis is something to worry about another day. Young people are crying out for climate action because we’ve spent our lives living in the crisis. We know it’s here, harming our physical and mental health,” said **Laura Krouse**, **Oregon Organizer** for [Our Climate](#). “Failure to act today is forfeiting our health and future. For young people of color, decades of disinvestment in families and communities means the existing burden on their health is only compounded by climate-fueled heat, smoke, water shortage, and anxiety.”

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[Renew Oregon](#) is a clean energy advocacy [coalition](#) of businesses and workers, healthcare professionals and parents, farmers and ranchers, faith and community organizations, and individuals coming together to move our state away from polluting energy to a clean energy economy. We are working to create good-paying jobs for all Oregonians, protect air and water from pollution, and help families stay healthy.