

# Wildfire Smoke Impacts Advisory Group



## Background

Wildfire smoke is an increasing threat to public health in Washington. For many years, wildfires have caused heavy smoke impacts to members of the public. In recent years, climate change and forest management practices have led to longer wildfire seasons with increased fuels, resulting in more smoke and increased air pollution impacts from fine particulate matter. The need for increased wildfire smoke preparedness to protect public health is clear with each passing year of increased exposure to poor air quality attributed to wildfire smoke.

Prolonged exposure to smoke from fires is linked to negative health impacts. Minor symptoms include coughing, headache, and sore throat. Severe smoke impacts can trigger asthma, cause tightening of the chest, impact fetal health, lead to increased hospitalizations, and even death. People most at risk for severe impacts make up more than 40 percent of Washington states' population and include:

- People with heart and lung disease
- Children
- Pregnant women
- People over age 65

## Purpose

In a wildfire smoke incident local health jurisdictions, tribal governments, and Washington State Department of Health provide health related information to the public and media in their communities. They coordinate with decision makers throughout their communities, including but not limited to: school administrators, school nurses, local government agencies, community organizations, and health care providers to make informed decisions in order to reduce smoke related health impacts.

In 2017, the local and state public health jurisdictions identified a need for more communication resources and greater statewide coordination of messages surrounding wildfire smoke impacts. In response, the Wildfire Smoke Impacts Advisory Group was established in 2018 by convening state and local health jurisdictions, tribal representatives, public information officers, health officers, and academic professionals. This group is charged with developing consistent messaging and providing fact-based health guidance to the respective agencies that provide resources and recommendations to the public. The group has three objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Develop ready-to-use communication templates that can be customized by local agencies. Items in the templates include:
  - Listed audiences and mechanisms for communicating to specific audiences.
  - Audience-specific messages related to pre, during, and post wildfire season.
  - Roles and responsibilities of resource providers (monitoring network, fire location reports, and weather forecasting).
  - Summary of available communication resources.
- **Objective 2:** School closures and outdoor event cancelations during wildfire smoke episodes. Support for local decision-makers prior to wildfire season. The closures guidance document will include:
  - An action level of indoor air quality for recommendation of school closures.
  - An action level of outdoor air quality for event cancelation or alternative actions.
  - Guidance about factors to consider in closure decisions.
- **Objective 3:** Provide recommendations for low-cost air sensors used for health risk evaluation of indoor and outdoor activities. The low-cost air sensor guidance document will include:
  - A summary of measurement reliability and accuracy of various low-cost sensors.
  - Options for addressing reliability issues.
  - Guidance about how, when, and where to use monitors indoors and outdoors.