Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 3, 2023

The Honorable Michael Regan
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20460

The Honorable Mandy K. Cohen
Director
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
395 E St SW
Washington, DC 20024

The Honorable Richard W. Spinrad
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Administrator Regan, Director Cohen, and Administrator Spinrad,

We write to request your agencies take immediate action to provide our communities with greater tools and data to respond to wildfire smoke incidents. As you are aware, in recent months dangerous smoke from the wildfires in Eastern Canada has blanketed the Midwest and the East Coast of the United States. For our West Coast communities, while fire has always been a part of the landscape, these overwhelming smoke events caused by catastrophic wildfires become all too common in recent years. Due to a combination of past land management practices, climate change, and the significant work ahead to tackle this wildfire crisis, we can unfortunately expect a future that continues to include smoke in the air.

These incidents are more than enough evidence that our communities need more tools to protect themselves from this hazardous smoke. Smoke from wildfires kills more people than the wildfires themselves do. Additionally, studies estimate that long-term smoke exposure is responsible for approximately 6,300 additional deaths annually.[1] Furthermore, wildfires disproportionately impact rural and underserved communities and we know these types of events are only going to happen more frequently and with greater intensity.

To enhance decision-making tools for individuals and jurisdictions to protect public health, we request that you issue smokewave alerts via the nationwide Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) system, which is designed for issuing emergency alerts, such as severe-weather messages currently issued by the National Weather Service (NWS). The NWS currently distributes smoke messages defined by state agencies through lower-level alert pathways, but we urge you to use the WEA system to ensure this important information is standardized and reaches the greatest number of individuals possible. Recognizing that some heavily impacted states like Oregon have already invested in upgrading their smoke monitoring networks, we also urge you to continue to partner with and support pathways for state and local jurisdictions to rapidly densify their air-quality-monitoring networks wherever feasible. The new smoke alerts should be issued according to best practices for alerting, and the latest science on harmful smoke-concentration levels. Furthermore, a national program ensures continuity nationwide so all communities have timely warning of potentially deadly smoke disasters.

In addition, we request that NOAA and the EPA work to create a nationwide smoke concentration dataset of ground-level smoke PM2.5 concentrations by integrating air monitor data and satellite data. The proposed data stream should provide smoke concentrations at the highest resolution that is technically feasible. We also encourage the agencies to continue to improve this resolution over time so that smaller-size communities have the data resolution they need to make informed decisions. This data is a critical precursor for estimating smoke mortality and the extent to which smoke is contributing to poor air quality in communities. Additionally, making a smoke-concentration dataset real-time would assist public health decision making and provide a helpful expansion of existing EPA resources such as fire.airnow.gov.
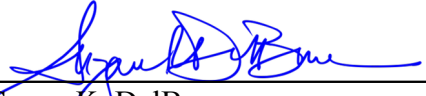
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[1] https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/21/us/wildfire-smoke-health-impacts-east-west-climate/index.html#:~:text=Epidemiologists%20at%20Colorado%20State%20University,1%2C700%20occurred%20in%20the%20West
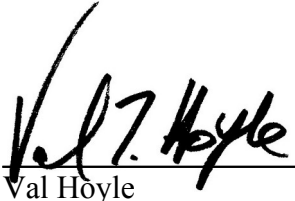
Finally, we request that the CDC and the EPA create a smoke mortality dataset that includes a data inventory of nationwide morbidity and mortality due to smoke from wildland fires. The proposed data stream should provide adverse health impact data at the resolution of county or better. In particular, we encourage the agencies to maintain the data at smaller-sized community levels in areas with large counties or counties with complex topography or weather patterns that would result in large differences in smoke impacts within counties. As feasible, this dataset should track the smoke health impacts contributed by each source wildfire and findings should be disseminated in NIFC wildfire impact summaries.

We believe these are three commonsense steps that your agencies could take today to ensure our communities have the tools needed to properly understand and respond to wildfire smoke. We would appreciate your timely response on your ability to carry out these recommendations, including whether you have the necessary funding, resources, and statutory authority.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your prompt response.
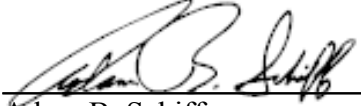
Sincerely,

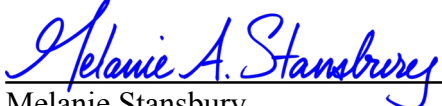Suzan K. DelBene
Member of Congress

Val Hoyle
Member of Congress

Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

Katie Porter
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

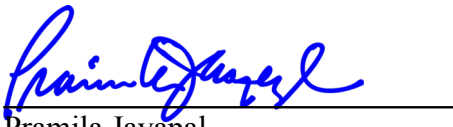Melanie Stansbury
Member of Congress

Josh Harder
Member of Congress

Brittany Pettersen
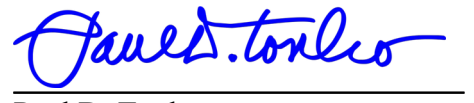Member of Congress

Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress

Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

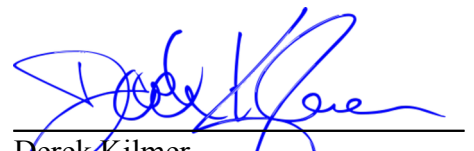Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress

Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress

Joe Neguse
Member of Congress

Rick Larsen
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

Mike Levin
Member of Congress