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New report finds fossil fuels in Oregon homes generate more smog-forming pollution than power plants

Healthy air standards for HVAC and water heaters are needed to cut pollution, boost access to cooling, and slow climate change

Portland, Ore. — Burning fossil fuels for heating and water heating in Oregon homes and buildings generates as much lung-damaging nitrogen oxide (NOx) pollution as the state’s cement manufacturing and power generation combined, according to a new report released today from Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, Verde, Beyond Toxics, Oregon Sierra Club and RMI. Regulators can dramatically reduce this pollution by setting healthy air standards for homes and buildings.

“Burning fossil fuels for space and water heating is an underrecognized driver of outdoor air pollution in Oregon, which disproportionately impacts low-income communities and communities of color. State regulators limit pollution from vehicles, power plants, and other key drivers of smog, but no equivalent standards currently exist for HVAC and water heating equipment. Closing this loophole is essential to achieve cleaner air in Oregon,” said Melanie Plaut, MD, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility.

The report, *Oregon’s Hidden Air Pollution Problem: Fossil Fuels in Buildings*, finds that health care costs from fossil fuel pollution in Oregon associated with buildings is pegged at almost \$88 million annually. When property damages from climate change are added to the societal costs, that price tag reaches a staggering \$1.1 billion.

Communities of color across the state are disproportionately impacted by air pollution from homes and buildings. Black Oregonians, for example, are exposed to nearly twice the amount of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) pollution from burning gas in homes as white residents. Fossil fuel pollution from homes and buildings also adds to existing concentrated pollution “hotspots,” which disproportionately occur in these communities.

“Air regulators must ensure that all communities across the state breathe clean air, with a particular focus on those who have been historically marginalized and those who are facing environmental injustices. The combustion of fossil fuels in homes significantly contributes to localized pollution, placing an undue burden on communities that have been historically wronged in Oregon,” said Xitlali Torres, Air Quality and Climate Program Coordinator, Verde.

In addition to cutting dangerous air pollution, the report finds transitioning to pollution-free HVAC and water heating equipment could dramatically reduce planet-warming emissions. Fossil fuel combustion in homes and buildings is responsible for more carbon pollution than Oregon's entire industrial sector. Upgrading to heat pumps from gas equipment cuts climate pollution from the average Oregon home [by 41%](#) in the first year and a stunning [84%](#) over the lifetime of the equipment.

Heat pumps also provide some of the most efficient cooling on the market. Installing them in Oregon homes can help keep households safe during extreme heat events, such as the climate change-fueled 2021 heat dome during which temperatures across the state reached a blistering 116 degrees. According to a review of the more than 100 heat-related deaths in Portland during the event, [85%](#) occurred in homes without air conditioning.

"Our futures in Oregon depend on meeting our climate targets, and burning fossil fuels in homes and buildings is a real barrier. While the state has made significant progress on other major sources of climate pollution, we must now prioritize emissions from homes and buildings. Adopting a healthy air standard for HVACs and water heaters can change that," said Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of Beyond Toxics.

The report comes on the heels of a major agreement between nine states, including Oregon, to accelerate the transition to pollution-free HVAC and water heating equipment in homes. The [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) includes a shared goal across participating states to meet at least 65% of residential-scale heating, air conditioning and water heating shipments by 2030 and 90% by 2040.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) can support their new commitment while tackling a key source of lung-damaging pollution by setting a healthy air standard for HVAC and water heating equipment. Such a standard would ensure that only pollution-free technologies like heat pumps are sold or installed in homes, starting from a specified end date.

"Nearly half of Oregon homes burn methane gas, a potent fossil fuel. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. Highly efficient electric heat pumps are already available to replace gas furnaces and water heaters. Heat pumps mean lower energy costs, cleaner air, and access to cooling during the hottest months. It's a no-brainer: Oregon should act fast to set a date by which all new HVACs and water heaters are pollution-free," said Damon Motz-Storey, Director, Sierra Club Oregon Chapter.

Read the report: [Oregon's Hidden Air Pollution Problem: Fossil Fuels in Buildings](#).

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About Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility:

Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility (Oregon PSR) is an organization of health professionals and public health advocates working collaboratively with community partners to

educate and advocate for societal and policy change that protects human health at the local, state, national, and international level. Oregon PSR seeks a healthy, just, and peaceful world for present and future generations.

About Verde:

Verde's mission is to build environmental wealth through organizing, advocacy, and social enterprise. We live our mission to build environmental wealth by investing in climate resilience through our profound belief that frontline communities are the most important voices in the climate movement. Our programs in education and engagement are designed to strengthen community voices in decision-making spaces and raise the next generation of climate leaders. We believe that communities experiencing the harshest impacts of climate change should be front and center in policy and advocacy.

About Beyond Toxics:

Beyond Toxics uplifts voices from Oregon communities disproportionately impacted by pollution and climate change. We are a statewide nonprofit founded in 2001 with offices in Lane and Jackson counties. We collaborate with other nonprofits, educators, and tribal organizations to build a movement to demand that state and local policies require fair, inclusive, and equitable access to clean air, clean water, and safe spaces for all to live and work in.

About the Sierra Club:

The Sierra Club is America's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization, with millions of members and supporters. In addition to protecting every person's right to get outdoors and access the healing power of nature, the Sierra Club works to promote clean energy, safeguard the health of our communities, protect wildlife, and preserve our remaining wild places through grassroots activism, public education, lobbying, and legal action.

About RMI:

RMI is an independent nonprofit founded in 1982 that transforms global energy systems through market-driven solutions to align with a 1.5°C future and secure a clean, prosperous, zero-carbon future for all. We work in the world's most critical geographies and engage businesses, policymakers, communities, and NGOs to identify and scale energy system interventions that will cut greenhouse gas emissions at least 50 percent by 2030. RMI has offices in Basalt and Boulder, Colorado; New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, D.C.; and Beijing.