



As wildfire smoke clears, Oregon looks to controlled burns

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PORTLAND, Ore., Sept. 14 (UPI) -- After a summer of wildfires choked Oregon with smoke, state officials are looking to allow more prescribed burns in the spring and fall.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and its Department of Forestry say allowing more prescribed burns in the state's forests will reduce the severity of forest fires.

In August, public schools in Oregon and Washington cancelled sports practices and parks departments called off planned outdoor activities when the air quality index skyrocketed due to wildfires throughout the region.

Southern Oregon residents experienced 25 poor air quality days this summer, and Seattle and Portland were briefly listed on a top 10 list of cities with the worst air quality in the world.

The DEQ and the ODF say their proposed rule change, released in July, would mitigate the severity and impact of forest fires in the region, by allowing the agencies to burn more underbrush in forests during "shoulder seasons" -- the spring and fall months. The combination of burning during wetter, cooler seasons and focusing on understory creates a different type of fire, one where flames don't climb trees, jump from tree to tree and catch in high wind, Nick Yonker, meteorology manager at ODF, told UPI.

"When wildfire does go through, it will not be able to burn as much fuel, and it will be able to much easilier patrolled during the times of year we do have wildfires," Yonker said.

The concept of prescribed burns isn't new. Native American tribes regularly set controlled fires to manage agricultural lands; the U.S. Forest Service started using controlled burns in the 1990s.

The public comment period for the new rule ends Friday, and environmental groups have largely testified in favor of the rule. But it has critics.

Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, said her group supports prescribed burning under the right conditions, but that the proposed rule as written gives too much leeway for purposes other than clearing brush. The rule contains language about burning piles of debris, which to Arkin sounds more like burning woody piles from clear cuts than to clearing live brush in a standing forest.

"We're saying that the proposed smoke rules fail to distinguish the need for prescribed burning versus the amount of smoke that will be waste slash burning in an industrial forest," Arkin said.

She's also concerned that while the rules require county health departments to make a community response plan regarding intrusive smoke, they don't offer much in the way of specifics or a funding mechanism, let alone an emergency response plan.

"This is a mortality issue. People die from exposure to fine particulate matter," Arkin said. The status quo -- advising members of the public to shelter in place during smoky conditions -- places disproportionate burden on communities at risk from smoke inhalation.

Staying inside is often not an option for those who make their living outdoors. A 20-year-old firefighter died of pneumonia a day after returning from fire lines in southern Oregon.

Laura Peraza, who works with Latino Network in schools as a facilitator, said she and her husband stayed indoors and ran their air conditioner during the worst part of the August smoke, which coincided with a heat wave.

She noted many of her neighbors don't have air conditioning -- which is still relatively rare in homes in western Oregon and Washington, a region that until recently typically saw just a handful of days over 90 degrees each summer.

That advice was consistent with press releases from the Oregon DEQ , which advised residents to stay indoors and run air conditioning or air purifiers if possible. But Peraza said she gets information and advice about what to do when the air gets thick with smoke through word of mouth.

In May, Oregon launched a smartphone app called Oregon Air; the Oregon DEQ also maintains a blog called the Oregon Smoke Blog with regular updates on fires and air quality in the region.

That's because forecasting smoke levels contains all the difficulties inherent to forecasting the weather, but with added difficulties of predicting smoke density and movement, said Sim Larkin, a climate scientist for the USDA Forest Service in Seattle.

"When you start looking at the nature of smoke, you also start to realize that smoke is less like temperature and more like precipitation in that it's not a smoothly varying field across a region. It can exist in some places and not in other places and it can come and go, similar to how you might experience rainfall," Larkin said.

With precipitation, there's some language to convey that variability that helps people prepare -- like "30 percent chance of rain" -- that doesn't really exist for high smoke levels.

That lack of predictability -- along with variable, sometimes conflicting, advice from official entities -- can make it difficult to plan. Peraza said last year during the Eagle Creek fire her husband Manuel, who works as a landscaper, got sick due to the smoke

but didn't take time off or see a doctor, instead taking over-the-counter medication to help his breathing.

"No one really tells us anything," Praza said. "We're just living to live."

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