

Protecting workers from wildfire smoke exposure



Wildfire smoke is a serious workplace hazard that affects workers in many industries. As of June 2023, rulemaking is underway for a permanent rule to protect outdoor workers from wildfire smoke exposure. The best practices presented here give employers practical steps they can take to keep workers safe from exposure to the particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) contained in wildfire smoke. This guidance document does not replace or supersede applicable workplace safety regulations.

Know your local wildfire smoke conditions

Reliable statewide air quality data is available online 24 hours a day:

- A reliable source of air quality information is the Environmental Protection Agency's AirNow Fire and Smoke Map, found at <https://fire.airnow.gov>. AirNow reports air quality data using the EPA's Air Quality Index (abbreviated AQI.)
- Air quality data is also available at the Washington Department of Ecology's Air Monitoring Network, found at <https://enwiwa.ecology.wa.gov/home/map>.
- Detailed smoke information and forecasts are available on the Washington Smoke Blog: <https://wasmoke.blogspot.com>.

Workers who are exposed to wildfire smoke require protection. As smoky conditions worsen, additional levels of protection are needed.

Protecting outdoor workers

Outdoor workers are at especially high risk of developing wildfire-smoke related symptoms. Minimize the health risks to workers by reducing exposure time to wildfire smoke. Each workplace is unique and requires a unique approach in protecting their workers from wildfire smoke. Take action to protect your workers from wildfire smoke exposure. The following are some suggestions:

- Provide enclosed buildings, structures, or vehicles with filtered air
- Relocate work to less smoky areas
- Reschedule work for a time with less smoke pollution
- Avoid work that creates dust, fumes, or smoke
- Reduce work intensity
- Provide additional rest periods
- Provide respirators, such as an N95

Protecting indoor workers

Wildfire smoke can also be a hazard for indoor workers. The Washington State Department of Health provides information on improving indoor air quality during wildfire smoke events at <https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/Documents/Pubs/333-208.pdf>.

Respirators

When chosen and worn correctly, respirators can reduce exposure to wildfire smoke. One common type of respirator suitable for protection against

wildfire smoke is a NIOSH certified N95 filtering facepiece respirator. Please note that KN95 masks and other types of face coverings will not give adequate protection from the very small particles in wildfire smoke.

Learn how to wear a filtering facepiece respirator from OSHA's *Seven Steps to Correctly Wear a Respirator at Work*: www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA4015.pdf.

Employers can provide respirators for voluntary use or they can require their employees to wear a respirator to protect against wildfire smoke exposure. Please refer to WAC 296-842 *Respirators* for information and requirements for safe respirator use in the workplace.

Worker illness due to wildfire smoke

Workers whose health has been affected by wildfire smoke should undergo a medical evaluation. Workers should go to the emergency room or health care provider of their choice, and explain they were exposed to wildfire smoke at work. The health care provider may help them file a claim. For more information see the L&I publication, www.Lni.wa.gov/go/F101-191-000.

Worker rights

Workers entitled to Washington state's paid sick leave protections may be entitled to use accrued paid sick leave to care for themselves or a family member whose health has been affected from exposure to wildfire smoke. Additionally, workers may use accrued paid sick leave if their child's school or place of care, or the employer's business or worksite has been shut down by a public official due to health-related reasons resulting from exposure to wildfire smoke and/or high temperatures. For more information about WA State's Paid Sick leave protections, please visit www.Lni.wa.gov/SickLeave.

Workers can file safety, wage, hour, and leave complaints by contacting any L&I office, calling 1-800-4BESAFE (1-800-423-7233), or by visiting: www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyComplaints.

Regulatory requirements

Rulemaking is currently underway for a permanent wildfire smoke workplace safety rule. More information regarding the proposed wildfire smoke rule is available at www.Lni.wa.gov/go/F417-302-000.