

Wildfire Smoke Relief Act of 2019

Each year wildfires become more and more severe. In 2018, over 2,000 fires burned nearly 900,000 acres in the state of Oregon. These fires produced weeks and weeks of wildfire smoke. When a wildfire burns, its smoke can travel hundreds of miles leaving behind a toxic mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and plants. In Southern Oregon alone, there were 39 days with unhealthy air quality directly caused by smoke from wildfires.

Wildfire smoke disproportionately affects vulnerable populations like children, the elderly, pregnant women, and low-income families. Additionally, those with chronic heart or lung conditions are at a similarly heightened risk. Symptoms from smoke inhalation can develop within a relatively short time of exposure, and according to research, is akin to smoking several packs of cigarettes per day. Symptoms vary and can include poor development of lungs in children, shortness of breath, coughing, chest pain, nausea, reduced lung capacity, bronchitis, headaches, and visual impairment.

When smoke is choking communities for weeks on end, people need proper filtration equipment, and, in extreme cases, need to seek refuge in smokeless areas. It all adds up to wildfires exploding into a comprehensive problem that requires a comprehensive attack.

Bill Summary

The Wildfire Smoke Relief Act of 2019 aims to provide federal emergency assistance to at-risk individuals in areas with unhealthy air quality caused by wildfire smoke. The bill would authorize the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to assist at-risk individuals by providing low-cost home improvements and smoke inhalation prevention equipment -- like masks and air filters -- when wildfire smoke causes unhealthy air quality levels for three consecutive days.

In extreme circumstances, when preventative measures are inadequate for health and safety, the Wildfire Smoke Relief Act authorizes FEMA to provide transitional sheltering assistance for at-risk individuals. In these severe cases, alternate housing is arranged for people to escape the smoke. By actively preparing for the effects of wildfire smoke inhalation this bill attempts to ensure the long-term health and security of all of those affected by wildfires.

This bill makes sure that prior to FEMA authorizing transitional housing assistance for individuals, FEMA must make smoke inhalation prevention equipment available to at-risk individuals, including the elderly, children and infants, low-income families, pregnant women, and those with chronic health conditions made worse by wildfire smoke.