



Jae C. Hong/AP Photo

Wildfire smoke has made the coronavirus pandemic worse, a new study concludes.

Harvard study says wildfire smoke worsened pandemic

By DOUGLAS PERRY
The Oregonian

Wildfire smoke causes COVID-19?

That's not true, but it's understandable how confusion over the connection between smoke and the deadly novel coronavirus has spread on social media.

Researchers from Harvard University and other institutions concluded in a recently published study that wildfire smoke from last year's fire season worsened the coronavirus pandemic in western states.

"Thousands of COVID-19 cases and deaths in California, Oregon, and Washington between March and December 2020 may be attributable to increases in fine particulate air pollution (PM2.5) from wildfire smoke," the Harvard Gazette reported last month.

The study itself reported that high levels of particulates from wildfire smoke last year played "a key factor in exacerbating the severity of the

COVID-19 pandemic."

Note that the study does not say smoke from wildfires causes COVID-19. But the research did find that exposure to wildfire air pollution, as the Harvard Gazette put it, "amplified ... COVID-19 deaths for up to four weeks after the exposure."

"Wildfire smoke can irritate your lungs, cause inflammation, affect your immune system and make you more prone to lung infections, including SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19," the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states.

The part about inflammation and your immune system is important. Wildfire smoke elicits an inflammatory response from the body, which can weaken the immune system and thus worsen one's COVID-19 infection.

Smoke also causes people to cough more — meaning more respiratory droplets sent out into the world, some of which will carry the coronavirus virus.

Smoke particles can capture COVID-19-infused respiratory droplets — and smoke can be easily pulled deep into a person's lungs.

"Definitely, there are some factors that link the spread or the increase in transmissibility of the virus to the fire," University of British Columbia infectious-disease specialist Dr. Horacio Bach told Canada's Global News. Bach was not involved with the Harvard-led study.

So if you're in an area impacted by wildfire smoke, be extra careful — and be aware of symptoms of both smoke exposure and COVID-19.

The CDC points out that "some symptoms, like dry cough, sore throat and difficulty breathing can be caused by both wildfire smoke exposure and COVID-19."

It also adds that "(COVID-19) symptoms like fever or chills, muscle or body aches and diarrhea are not related to smoke exposure."

Oregonians see dire outlook on fire and climate change, survey says

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

Humankind has little chance of solving the climate crisis and the growing frequency of wildfires. That's the majority opinion of Oregonians recently polled in a survey conducted by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

Two-thirds of Oregonians (66%) responded that there is only a small chance or no chance at all of reversing the direction of climate change. More than 1,150 Oregon residents aged 18 or over took part in the survey, conducted Aug. 9 through Aug. 17. A similar number (67%) said the wildfire crisis in the state will continue to increase.

The concern Oregon residents have about the environment is not without evidence. According to NASA data, Earth's average surface temperature has risen about 2.12 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century, an increase caused by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels.

Most of the increase has occurred in the past 40 years, according to NASA, with the seven most recent years being the warmest.

Research provider Rhodium Group reports the U.S. currently contributes 11% of the world's carbon emissions into the atmosphere. China leads the planet among polluters, contributing 27% of the world's carbon output. Other leading polluters include India (6.6%), the European Union (6.4%), Indonesia (3.4%), Russia (3.1%), Brazil (2.8%), and Japan (2.2%).

Climate change impacts the planet in a variety of ways, including the melting of polar ice, which causes sea levels rise, as well as droughts, flooding and other extreme weather events. Most Oregonians (54%)

believe that climate change is the primary cause of wildfires, the survey said.

What else can be the root cause for the increasing number of wildfires? Some 23% of Oregonians believe the primary cause to be public forest practices allowing excess dead fuels to build up, and 11% said the main cause is environmentalists who oppose forest thinning, the survey said.

Demographic quotas were set to ensure a representative sample of answers for the survey. The margin of error was 1.7% to 2.9%

and 80% believe that climate change is at least partially responsible for the drought.

What needs to be done for humankind to mitigate the impacts of climate change? More than half (60%) of respondents said that both strong individual actions and government regulations are needed while 11% of respondents said no action is needed.

The survey also asked what actions respondents had taken to address climate change. Some 61% of respondents said they have "dramatically" reduced their use of gas-powered vehicles while 57% said they have "examined and reduced important emissions behaviors." One-third of respondents (34%) said they have communicated to elected officials the need for policies to combat climate change.

Would Oregonians be willing to pay more for gas to help offset emissions? Some 65% said yes, but amounts varied — 13% said less than 25 cents, 9% said 25 cents to 50 cents and 12% said between 50 cents to \$1 extra. Others were willing to splash out more: 9% said they would pay \$1 to \$2 extra, 7% said \$2 to \$4 extra, and 15% higher than \$4.

The survey also included data on race and socioeconomic backgrounds. Nineteenth (93%) of respondents were white or Caucasian; 4% were Hispanic or Latino; 3% were Native American; 2% were African American, and 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander.

Respondents also listed their geographic locality — 44% were from the Portland area; 28% were from the Willamette Valley and 28% were from other parts of the state. There was also a question on political affiliation; 41% were Democrat; 22% Republican and 13% were nonaffiliated.

MOST OF THE INCREASE HAS OCCURRED IN THE PAST 40 YEARS, ACCORDING TO NASA, WITH THE SEVEN MOST RECENT YEARS BEING THE WARMEST.

According to the survey, most Oregonians favor support for environmental causes even if it means slowing economic growth — 76% of respondents said they would lean toward environmental protections compared to just 13% who favor support for the economy over the environment.

The survey showed broadly that Oregonians see climate change as causing severe events such as hurricanes, flooding and forest fires. Among the respondents, 81% believe that climate change is at least partially responsible for creating longer, hotter sum-

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