

June 30, 2020

Patrick Allen, Director
Oregon Health Authority
500 Summer Street, NE, E-20
Salem, OR 97301-1097

Dear Director Allen,

We are writing on behalf of a broad coalition of groups representing Oregon's public health, environmental, labor, business, and culturally-specific communities to applaud the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) for moving forward with its implementation of the climate and public health directives established by Governor Brown's Oregon Climate Action Plan (EO 20-04). We also applaud your strong and stable leadership in addressing a parallel public health crisis, COVID-19. This pandemic has further underscored the relationship between climate change, the spread of infectious diseases, and public health impacts more broadly. It has also reinforced the need for decision makers to base policy in sound science, incorporate stakeholder and community input, and prioritize remedying impacts to vulnerable communities. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on OHA's climate and health work,¹ and are committed to working with you and other state agencies to rebuild healthier and more resilient communities.

As OHA noted in its preliminary report to Governor Brown on OCAP implementation, climate, health and equity are inextricably interlinked. Climate change threatens to worsen public health outcomes across Oregon, while disproportionately impacting Native American tribes, communities of color, lower-income households, rural communities, and other traditionally underrepresented communities. As discussed at length in the Oregon Global Warming Commission's 2018 Biennial Report² and the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute's 2019 Fourth Climate Assessment Report,³ climate is already adversely affecting the health of Oregonians: Science shows increased rates of respiratory illnesses, lung and heart disease related to air pollution;⁴ dehydration, worsened asthma⁵ and other illness and death resulting

¹ Oregon Health Authority Climate Change and Community Health survey, available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GKWXXNZC>.

² Oregon Global Warming Commission Biennial Report to the Legislature (2018), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59c554e0f09ca40655ea6ebo/t/5c2e415doebbe8aa6284fdef/1546535266189/2018-OGWC-Biennial-Report.pdf>

³ Oregon Climate Change Research Institute Fourth Oregon Climate Assessment Report (2019), available at <http://www.occri.net/media/1095/ocar4full.pdf>

⁴ Fine particulate air pollution is single largest environmental risk to human health-the UN special rapporteur (June 23, 2020), available at <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/fine-particulate-air-pollution-is-single-largest-environmental-risk-to-human-health-the-un-special-rapporteur-49783992>.

⁵ Killer Heat in the United States: Climate Choices and the Future of Dangerously Hot Days (July 2019), available at <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2019/07/killer-heat-analysis-full-report.pdf>

from extreme heat;⁶ and physical harm and psychological stress caused by climate change,⁷ wildfires, and other natural disasters. Disturbingly, a recent study from the JAMA Network showed that heat stress and air pollution are contributing to stillbirths and premature births, disproportionately affecting Black mothers.⁸ Further, there is evidence that climate stressors like extreme heat and wildfire smoke may exacerbate symptoms for people with COVID-19, and that people who live in places with higher air pollution are more likely to die from the disease.⁹

OHA's forthcoming report on climate change and public health provides an opportunity to ensure more equitable health outcomes across racial, economic and geographic demographics in Oregon. What OHA chooses to prioritize and highlight in this report also has the ability to advance greenhouse gas emission reductions in Oregon by influencing climate policy decisions across state agencies. OHA's deep knowledge and expertise make it a trusted advisor in policy to ensure equitable climate and health outcomes in Oregon. By monitoring climate and health indicators across Oregon, OHA's report can help inform other agencies in developing policies to reduce carbon emissions while maximizing public health benefits across agencies and sectors. We therefore urge OHA to work in collaboration with other state agencies as they implement OCAP's directives, to ensure that their actions consider and incorporate public health impacts of climate change.

As OHA moves forward with its report on the public health impacts of climate change in Oregon, we urge you to prioritize consideration of the following health and climate risks: air pollution, wildfire smoke and heat stress, increases in infectious diseases,¹⁰ occupational risks, water insecurity, impotable drinking water (from toxic algae blooms, for example), and mental health effects of climate anxiety. In particular, we are concerned about the health risks posed to frontline and outdoor workers from exposure to wildfire smoke and excessive heat; studying this issue will help inform OHA's work with the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to develop proposed standards to protect workplace employees. These standards should be developed in consultation with frontline workers. We are also concerned about the use of chemicals or pesticides and the exacerbation of the health effects of these chemicals due to higher temperatures.

⁶ Rules lag in keeping workers safe from heat-related illness, death (July 21, 2019), available at <https://www.oregonlive.com/business/2019/07/rules-lag-in-keeping-workers-safe-from-heat-related-illness-death.html>.

⁷ 'Climate Grief': Fears About The Planet's Future Weigh On Americans' Mental Health (July 18, 2019), available at <https://khn.org/news/climate-grief-fears-about-the-planets-future-weigh-on-americans-mental-health/>.

⁸ Climate Change Tied to Pregnancy Risks, Affecting Black Mothers Most (June 18, 2020), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/climate/climate-change-pregnancy-study.html>.

⁹ Linking Air Pollution to Higher Coronavirus Death Rates (April 20, 2020), available at <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/biostatistics/2020/04/linking-air-pollution-to-higher-coronavirus-death-rates/>

¹⁰ How Climate Change Is Contributing to Skyrocketing Rates of Infectious Disease (May 5, 2020), available at <https://www.propublica.org/article/climate-infectious-diseases>.

Oregon's public health system has a critical role to play in supporting communities to address climate change. As OHA moves forward with implementing OCAP's directives, we urge you to consult with and prioritize actions that will help vulnerable populations and impacted communities adapt to climate change impacts. This includes Native American tribes, communities of color, low-income communities, frontline workers, rural communities, elderly populations, children, and pregnant women.

Studying the public health impacts of climate change will help inform climate mitigation strategies, while also helping to inform OHA's work to improve the lifelong health of Oregonians and ensure that all people and communities have access to quality, affordable healthcare. With this in mind, we also urge OHA to study how climate change will affect healthcare costs and to incorporate the capacity building needed into its ongoing modernization process.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. Our organizations and our members look forward to continuing to work with you in ensuring the strongest possible health and climate outcomes for Oregon's families and future. We appreciate you raising the urgency of addressing climate change as a public health imperative.

Sincerely,
350 Eugene
350 Salem Oregon
350.org Washington County
Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon
Beyond Toxics
Center for Sustainable Economy
Climate Solutions
Douglas County Global Warming Coalition
Engineers for a Sustainable Future
Environmental Caucus of the Democratic Party of Oregon
Environmental Defense Fund
League of Women Voters of Oregon
NAACP Eugene/Springfield
Natural Resources Defense Council
NW Energy Coalition
OLCV Metro Climate Action Team
Oregon Climate and Agriculture Network
Oregon Environmental Council
Oregon League of Conservation Voters
Oregon Public Health Association
Oregon Wild
Our Children Oregon
Our Climate
Residential Energy and Water Intelligence (Res-Intel)
Southern Oregon Climate Action Now
Umpqua Watersheds