

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE  
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

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**MEMORANDUM**

**September 11, 2018**

**To: Subcommittee on Environment Democratic Members and Staff**

**Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Democratic Staff**

**Re: Hearing on “Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Mitigation and Management Strategies”**

On **Thursday, September 13, 2018, at 1:00 p.m. in room 2123 of the Rayburn House Office Building**, the Subcommittee on Environment will hold a hearing on “Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Mitigation and Management Strategies.” This hearing is a follow-up to a similar hearing, held on October 4, 2017. For further background information on climate change and the air quality impacts of wildfires, please see the previous [Democratic memo](#).

**I. CURRENT STATE OF WILDFIRES**

In 2017, over 66,000 wildfires burned nearly 9.8 million acres in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Already this year, over 47,000 fires have burned approximately 8 million acres. There are currently 89 active large fires in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Only 11 of these fires are contained.<sup>2</sup> The Mendocino Complex fire, which is still burning, is California’s largest recorded fire. It has burned almost 460,000 acres, amounting to 177,230 more acres burned than the Thomas Fire of 2017, the previous record holder.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Wildfires - Annual 2017* (www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/fire/201713).

<sup>2</sup> National Interagency Fire Center, *Statistics* (www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo\_statistics.html) (accessed Sept. 10, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Mendocino Complex fire now largest in California history, capping destructive year*, Los Angeles Times (Aug. 6, 2018) (www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-california-wildfires-danger-level-20180806-story.html).

## II. WILDFIRES, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND AIR QUALITY

Climate change fuels the severity, frequency, and size of wildfires by increasing the duration of droughts, causing long stretches of low humidity and high temperatures, and initiating early springtime melting which leads to dryer land in the summer months.<sup>4</sup> A 2016 study concluded that human-caused land drying from climate change is responsible for the doubling of the area burned by wildfires since 1984.<sup>5</sup> The National Wildlife Federation also found that climate change is one of the main contributing factors in the emergence of extreme “megafires” that burn hotter, longer, and are more frequent.<sup>6</sup>

Both wildfires and prescribed fires drastically increase the amount of atmospheric pollution, which can lead to pollution above what Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) establish as safe to breathe. The fine particle (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) NAAQS has lowered levels of this pollution in the United States over the past few decades; however, a recent study suggests that wildfires are erasing those gains.<sup>7</sup> Exacerbated by climate change, longer and more frequent wildfires are increasing the levels of fine particle pollution in the air. The study found that wildfires cause drastic spikes in PM<sub>2.5</sub> emissions, and resulted in the highest levels of fine particle pollution ever recorded in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

## III. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

**Herman Baertschiger Jr.**  
State Senator  
Oregon State Senate

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<sup>4</sup> *We won’t stop California’s wildfires if we don’t talk about climate change*, The Washington Post (Aug. 8, 2018) ([www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-wont-stop-californias-wildfires-if-we-dont-talk-about-climate-change/2018/08/08/99768218-9a80-11e8-8d5e-c6c594024954\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-wont-stop-californias-wildfires-if-we-dont-talk-about-climate-change/2018/08/08/99768218-9a80-11e8-8d5e-c6c594024954_story.html)).

<sup>5</sup> John T. Abatzoglou, A. Park Williams, *Impact of anthropogenic climate change on wildfire across western US forests*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Oct. 18, 2016)([www.pnas.org/content/pnas/113/42/11770.full.pdf](http://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/113/42/11770.full.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> National Wildlife Federation, *Megafires* (Oct. 19, 2017) ([www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/NWF-Reports/NWF-Report\\_Megafires\\_FINAL\\_LOW-RES\\_101717.ashx](http://www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/NWF-Reports/NWF-Report_Megafires_FINAL_LOW-RES_101717.ashx)).

<sup>7</sup> Crystal D. McClure, Daniel A. Jaffe, *US Particulate Matter Air Quality Improves Except in Wildfire-Prone Areas*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Jul. 31, 2018)([www.pnas.org/content/115/31/7901](http://www.pnas.org/content/115/31/7901)).

<sup>8</sup> *Fueled by Climate Change, Wildfires Erode Air Quality Gains*, Scientific American (Jul. 17, 2018) ([www.scientificamerican.com/article/fueled-by-climate-change-wildfires-erode-air-quality-gains](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fueled-by-climate-change-wildfires-erode-air-quality-gains)).

**Sonya Germann**

State Forester

Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation;

**Mary Anderson**

Mobile and Area Source Program Manager

Idaho Department of Environmental Quality

**Tom Boggus**

Director and State Forester

Texas A&M Forest Service

**Collin O'Mara**

President

National Wildlife Federation