



FARMWORKER JUSTICE

Legislation Would Provide Farmworkers Protection from Wildfire Smoke

On June 12, 2019, Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR), introduced “The Farmworker Smoke Protection Act of 2019,” S.1815. The bill seeks to address health concerns as a result of the increasing frequency of wildfires and the wildfire smoke that can often travel hundreds of miles. Wildfire smoke can remain in the air for extended periods of time carrying toxic chemicals and causing dangerous air quality conditions. The inhalation of wildfire smoke is harmful to farmworkers, who regularly work outside in the smoke without proper respiratory protection.

The impact of wildfire smoke on farmworker communities includes the damage smoke and ash can cause crops and the detrimental health effects on the farmworkers who harvest the crops. In efforts to quickly get crops off fields during or after a wildfire, farmworkers are expected to put their health at risk by working outside in smoky conditions. Without smoke protection, farmworkers are susceptible to experience trouble breathing, headaches, and dizziness, among other symptoms.

The bill would require employers to provide N95 or N100 masks or another type of certified respiratory equipment to all farmworkers exposed to wildfire smoke. The use of the equipment would be mandatory when the air quality reaches a dangerous level. In addition to the mandatory provision of protective equipment, the bill also requires training and educational materials on how to properly use the equipment to be made available to farmworkers, in a language that they understand. The bill also directs the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to develop and publish an official standard to protect employees affected by exposure to wildfire smoke. Currently, there are no federal standards regarding farmworkers’ wildfire smoke exposure.

Farmworker Justice supports this bill. It is a necessary step towards providing protection for farmworkers who are vulnerable to health risks caused by wildfire smoke. Wildfires are expected to be an ongoing and frequent health hazard as temperatures rise due to climate change and prolonged droughts become increasingly common.