

Huffman, others ask EPA to Tighten Air Quality Standards

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As millions of Americans confront heavy wildfire smoke, Representative Jared Huffman (D-Calif.-02) and U.S. Senator Alex Padilla (D-Calif.)—as well as Representative Scott Peters (D-Calif.-50) and Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.)—led 21 of their colleagues in sending a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) urging them to allow the deployment of prescribed fires as EPA tightens federal health-based air quality standards.

The members are urging EPA to work closely with California’s air districts, land managers, and fire practitioners on developing a solution that both safeguards clean air and prevents the consistent cycle of devastating wildfires that undermines our efforts to make progress on clean air.

In January, EPA proposed to strengthen a key national ambient air quality standard (NAAQS) for fine particle pollution, also known as PM 2.5, to better protect communities.

In the letter, the Members of the California delegation outline their strong support for EPA's efforts to strengthen the NAAQS for PM 2.5 to ensure stronger public health protections, particularly for communities who are disproportionately affected by air pollution stemming from goods movement, catastrophic wildfires and more.

However, the Members outline their concern that implementation of the rule could inadvertently limit land managers from deploying prescribed fires, which help California communities avoid the larger catastrophic wildfires that more significantly pollute the air and threaten public safety. Prescribed burns have proven to be an effective and necessary tool to combat wildfires in the West and reduce emissions in the long-term. Numerous studies have shown that despite California's and EPA's collaborative efforts to reduce air pollution, wildfire smoke has unfortunately eliminated much of California's clean air progress. This outcome would only exacerbate the risk of catastrophic wildfires that decimate communities and fundamentally undermine the air quality gains that California and EPA are both aiming to achieve.

"California and the EPA have long worked hand-in-hand to achieve clean air gains, and no one supports the protection of clean air more than we do because we have seen how polluted air so negatively impacts public health and the quality of life for Californians. That's why we support the EPA's efforts to strengthen the national ambient air quality standard (NAAQS) for fine particle pollution," wrote the lawmakers. "However, we are concerned that the proposed rule could inadvertently hinder the ability of land managers to deploy prescribed fires that help California avoid the larger catastrophic wildfires that more significantly pollute the air and threaten public safety.

"Scientific and public health experts agree that a significant increase in the use of these beneficial fire practices is essential to reducing overall PM. 2.5 exposure and addressing the long-term impacts of rampant wildfire on our communities," continued the lawmakers.

In the last five years, California has experienced some of the largest fires in state history and the negative health impacts of lingering wildfire smoke. Collectively, these devastating fires have burned over 2.5 million acres of land, damaged 30,000 structures, and have been responsible for the destruction of entire communities.

The letter, led by Senator Padilla and Representative Huffman, is also signed by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Representatives Scott Peters (D-Calif.-50), Pete Aguilar (D-Calif.-33), Salud Carbajal (D-Calif.-24), Lou Correa (D-Calif.-46), Jim Costa (D-Calif.-21), Mark DeSaulnier (D-Calif.-10), John Garamendi (D-Calif.-8), Josh Harder (D-Calif.-9), Sara Jacobs (D-Calif.-51), Mike Levin (D-Calif.-49), Ted Lieu (D-Calif.-36), Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.-18), Doris Matsui (D-Calif.-7), Kevin Mullin (D-Calif.-15), Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.-31), Jimmy Panetta (D-Calif.-19), Katie Porter (D-Calif.-47), Adam Schiff (D-Calif.-30), Mike Thompson (D-Calif.-4), Juan Vargas (D-Calif.-52), Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.-14), and Brad Sherman (D-Calif.-32).