

FIREFIGHTERS, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND TOXIC CHEMICALS

OVERVIEW

Climate change has created the perfect conditions for out-of-control wildfires, especially in the West.

An increase of heat and prolonged drought is a dangerous recipe for wildfires, making them more frequent, more intense, and more widespread than in the past. Scientists tell us, if we don't break the warming cycle, we can expect more dangerous wildfires in the future. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, in 2020 there were 58,950 wildfires, and about 10.1 million acres burned in the United States.

The lasting effects of wildfires go beyond acres burned. Wildfires generate massive amounts of fine particles and other harmful air pollution. And changes in air quality seriously affect human health. While communities suffer greatly from asthma, heart attacks, and other health harms from breathing wildfire smoke, firefighters have unique exposures to dangerous levels of toxic, cancer-causing chemicals when fighting wildfires.



FIREFIGHTERS AND TOXIC CHEMICALS

The leading cause of firefighter fatalities is heart attacks. Firefighters face heart disease from repeated exposure to a range of toxic chemicals, particulate matter, and extreme heat. The chemicals emitted during wildfires are also associated with high rates of cancer.

A study that tested the blood of firefighters found high levels of polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs—fire retardants found in household furniture, carpets, plastics, mattresses, computers, foam insulation, and more.

This study also showed that some firefighters had high levels of dioxins and furans. These compounds, linked to cancer, are released when flame retardants burn. In fact, the levels of dioxins and furans found in firefighters were “hundreds of times higher than has ever been detected in the general population.”

Firefighters are put at grave risk when flame retardants combine with other chemicals, creating a chemical cocktail that seeps into protective gear, penetrates masks, and causes breathing problems.



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REGULATING FLAME RETARDANTS

The EPA has the authority to regulate flame retardants under the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). But this can be a slow process that addresses chemicals one at a time. Often a phased-out substance is replaced by a similar chemical with similar health harms. Because of gaps in the federal chemical regulatory system, many states are legislating to eliminate toxic flame retardants in furniture and baby products. The bills are tracked [here](#).

It's an uphill battle, as the American Chemical Council (ACC) has a financial stake in keeping flame retardants on the market. At the expense of firefighters' health, ACC opposes bills by lobbying against legislation that would ban flame retardants.

"I'm watching my brother and sister firefighters contracting cancer at an alarming rate right now. Minimizing our exposures to chemical carcinogens is of the utmost importance to us."

— ADAM COSNER, SANTA CLARA FIREFIGHTERS LOCAL 1165



IT'S ALWAYS FIRE SEASON NOW

The nature of wildfires is changing. In parts of the West, it's almost always fire season now.

Scientists predicted this, and now our brave firefighters are taking enormous health risks when protecting our families from wildfires.

Along with fighting for strong regulations for flame retardants, we must protect our firefighters by addressing one of the most significant underlying factors fueling out-of-control wildfires: climate change.

Visit www.momscleanairforce.org to learn more about how you can demand policies to protect firefighters.

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Sources: www.momscleanairforce.com/sources-firefighters

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