

Wildfire Pollution and Climate Change in SWPA

Climate Change is impacting the lives of people across the country, including in SWPA, producing unusual conditions that impact our lives. Increasing temperatures and heat, increasing severity and frequency of weather events, drier conditions and other impacts are [resulting in extreme and widespread wildfires](#) that put people's health at risk. Wildfire pollution mixes with and adds to existing pollution from local sources, such as coking plants, steel plants and petrochemical processing plants. Environmental justice communities face the greatest burden at these times.

How Does Climate Change Harm Communities?

Climate Change is one of the most devastating problems that humanity has ever faced. The burning of fossil fuels has resulted in increases in carbon dioxide that continue to warm the planet. Sea levels rise. Extreme weather has become more commonplace. A range of impacts—from wildfires to flooding, to extreme heat and drought—increasingly become more likely and more severe. ([Union of Concerned Scientists](#))

To address global warming, we must end the era of fossil fuels and speed a just transition to clean energy that creates millions of jobs and opens the door to a better life for us all. ([Climate Reality Project](#))

Pollutants from burning fossil fuels and rising temperatures compound already-worsening air pollution. Infants, children, adults with chronic upper respiratory disease or heart disease and people who are economically disadvantaged are most at risk of health harm from air pollution. ([Pa. Dept of Health, "The State of Equity in Pa. 2019"](#))

Climate Change is a serious factor in the increasing degree of severity of wildfires in the U.S. ([National Interagency Fire Center 1980-2022](#)). The wildfire season has lengthened due to factors including warmer springs, longer summer dry seasons and drier soils and vegetation.

Wildfires are far from the only risk to SWPA. Climate Change is a serious factor in the increasing degree of severity of rainfall, flooding and landslides that result in SWPA. Pittsburgh is the most landslide-prone region in the state of Pa. ([PublicSource, January 2023](#))

More ground-level ozone is produced in the summer, formed when nitrogen oxides from sources like vehicle exhaust and industrial emissions react with organic compounds in the presence of heat and sunlight. Ozone can cause many health and respiratory problems, including lung damage and diseases. Wildfire smoke exacerbates the degree of ozone-produced poor air in the summer. ([EPA Air Now](#))

Major oil and gas companies [knew](#) decades ago that unabated use of fossil fuels could lead to ["potentially catastrophic"](#) results. Instead of doing the right thing, Big Oil lied to the public and delayed climate action for decades. ([Center for Climate Integrity, "They Knew," 2023](#))

Oil and gas companies are raking in massive profits and polluting people. Environmental Justice communities are paying the steepest price with their health and well-being. ([Center for Climate Integrity Report, 2023](#))

A study by the Center for Climate Integrity (CCI) reports that 2,000 municipal governments across Pennsylvania face more than \$15 billion in climate adaptation costs by 2040 to protect residents from eight different Climate Change impacts related to hotter weather, heavier rain and rising sea levels. ([CCI Report, July 2023](#)) ([CCI Social Media Toolkit, 2023](#))

The financial burdens of climate adaptation will not fall equally on all Pennsylvania communities. Municipalities with significant rural, high-poverty and high-disability populations will pay much higher adaptation costs compared to the statewide municipal average. ([CCI Report, July 2023](#))

Heavy rainfall will strain stormwater drainage capacity and require additional sewage overflows to prevent flooding. Increased road maintenance as a result of heavy rain and heat stress and protection from frequent landslides. Increased pollution from heat and wildfire pollution will take a toll on the health of residents.

Wildfire Pollution: How to Protect Yourself and Your Family

- Check real-time air monitoring on air quality alert days on the following apps and websites:
 - [Smell PGH](#) - Report pollution and bad smells
 - [AirNow.gov](#) (EPA) - [Fire and smoke](#) map to view wildfire pollution in your community
 - [Purple Air Low-Cost Monitor](#)- Real-time Map
 - [Allegheny Health Department](#) - Watch for watches, warnings and advisories by signing up for [Allegheny Alerts](#)
 - [DEP Ambient Air Monitor](#) to view the latest pollution and weather data

Ways to Protect Yourself from Pollution, Indoors and Outside

- In-Home Air Filters
 - [VCAN's air filter distribution program](#) – To improve residents' health and understanding of air pollution impacts, VCAN is installing portable air cleaners for 300 residents in Clairton and adjacent municipalities.
 - [LEVOIT Air Purifiers for At Home Large Room](#) is an inexpensive room air purifier
 - [EPA Do-It-Yourself air filters](#)
- Mask Protection is highly recommended on bad air days to help filter up to 95% of airborne pollutants
 - [N-95 Masks](#), [KN95 Face Mask](#)
- On days when the air quality is orange, red, purple or maroon ([10 Tips to Protect Yourself, ALA](#)):
 - Reduce the time you spend outdoors and the intensity of activity to under 30 minutes.
 - If you must go outdoors, consider wearing a mask. A well-fitted N95 or KN95 masks have better filtration capabilities and may be beneficial during high AQI days.
 - Keep indoor air healthy by shutting windows and doors. Those with air conditioning should run the recirculate setting, use a portable HEPA air cleaner or, in severe circumstances, create an [ALA Clean Room](#).
 - **Those without air conditioning are urged to go to a designated cooling center during periods of extreme heat or when the temperature is above 90 degrees. ([Pittsburgh Cooling Centers](#))**

Climate Change, Wildfires and Environmental Justice

- The same industries that pollute frontline and environmental justice communities already faced with poor air quality are the same industries making the climate crisis worse.
- **Mon Valley Episodic Air Rule:** When weather conditions are likely to exceed acceptable levels for the Mon Valley, companies impacted by the rule must execute plans, submitted and approved by the Allegheny Health Department, that will reduce their emissions. ([Allegheny Health Dept. 9/2021](#))
- Communities most impacted by climate pollution often [do not have the resources to best protect themselves](#).

Call to Action

Call on local, state and national health leaders to mobilize resources **immediately** to issue warnings and alerts and provide financial support for air filter distribution programs and assistance with medical costs associated with bad air days for low-income families.

Sign [SWPATHS Petition](#) to UPMC and AHN asking them to break the silence on Allegheny County's poor air.