

Focus on the West

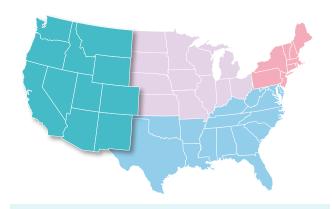
The U.S. must take rapid climate action to prioritize and protect health and equity, including a rapid transition away from the burning of fossil fuels.

The Western region is experiencing the impacts of climate change. Temperatures are rising across the region. Warmer, shorter winters and longer, drier summers are contributing to droughts. The past two decades were the driest in the Southwest in centuries. More frequent and severe droughts impact the region's water quality and have reduced flows in lakes, rivers, and reservoirs to record low levels in 2021. Hot and dry conditions are making devastating wildfires more common. The past two years were record-breaking wildfire seasons in the Western U.S.

Climate change is harming the health of residents in the West

- Extreme heat: Extreme heat can cause heat exhaustion and heat stroke; contribute to poor pregnancy outcomes; harm lungs, kidneys, and hearts; worsen mental health; and lower air quality. Extreme heat means lost labor hours for outdoor workers and fewer days children can safely play outside or participate in sports. In the Pacific Northwest heatwave in June 2021, emergency room visits were 70 times higher than normal, and over 600 people died in one week in Washington and Oregon due to heat-related illness.
- Droughts: Droughts lead to worse air and water quality; increase lung, heart, and infectious diseases; and affect mental health.
 Droughts reduce water access, quality, and safety in many Western states. Rural and Indigeneous communities are especially impacted.
- Wildfire: Wildfire smoke contains many harmful pollutants

 especially for children. Exposure to wildfire smoke can cause
 heart and lung disease, preterm birth, poor mental health, and
 premature death. Wildfire smoke also closes schools, affects
 recreation, and puts workers at risk. The 2018 California wildfires
 caused an estimated \$32 billion dollars in health costs alone.



Climate change is harming mental health

People and communities experiencing and observing climate disasters face large mental health impacts including stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Communities that are more vulnerable to climate change and that have less ability to protect themselves are at especially high risk for mental health impacts. Tribal and Indigenous communities are particularly impacted as climate change threatens the wildlife, plants, and ecosystems central to their livelihoods, culture, traditions, and identity.

Climate change deepens health inequities from discriminatory policies

Everyone's health is at risk from climate change, but some communities bear a greater burden. Decades of racially-biased policies including structural discrimination in housing, zoning, and industrial and transportation infrastructure put certain communities at higher risk of the health harms from air pollution and climate change. Black, Latinx, Alaskan Native or American Indian, Asian American or Pacific Islander, and other people of color are more exposed to unhealthy levels of air pollution. Discriminatory policies also negatively impact the health of low-income communities and make it harder to adapt to the rapidly changing climate, deepening health inequities. People with certain medical conditions, outdoor workers, pregnant people, children, and the elderly are also at higher risk from climate change.

Residents in the West are worried about climate change and **support climate action.** The majority of adults in the western states are worried about climate change, believe climate change will harm people in the U.S., and think Congress should do more to address climate change.2

Action on climate is critical to protect health and advance equity in the Western region

Taking urgent action to address climate change today is one of the most important things elected officials can do to protect the health of residents in their states. The 2021 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief outlines three policy recommendations to highlight how health and equity can guide action on climate change:

- 1. Rapidly increase funding to protect people's health: Make urgent investments in research and local solutions that reduce the health impacts of climate change and that prioritize health and equity.
- 2. Account for the health-related costs of burning fossil fuels in decision-making: Incorporate health-related costs of fossil fuels into calculations of the social cost of carbon and climate change to guide policies that prioritize health equity.
- 3. Rapidly cut greenhouse gas emissions, especially in areas suffering most from fossil fuel-related air pollution: Reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 57-62% of 2005 levels by 2030 with a goal of a near zero-emission economy by mid-century. Direct at least 40% of investments towards improving air quality in under-resourced communities.

The Lancet Countdown U.S. Brief is supported by a diverse group of health experts from over 70 U.S. organizations. This document is supported by data and recommendations from the 2021 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief and global report, and prior years' reports. Additional regionspecific information was obtained from the the Fourth National Climate Assessment. The Western region includes: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Washington, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming.

- 1. https://www.nytimes.com/article/drought-california-western-united-states.html
- 2. Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020. https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/