

Post-Wildfire Environmental Assistance Act

In June 2025, the Rowena Fire tore up the Historic Columbia River Highway and through the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, destroying 56 homes in Wasco County, Oregon. While the fire was quickly granted approval for a Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAG), the damage did not meet the threshold for a Major Disaster Declaration, which would have unlocked federal aid for the cleanup of hazardous material debris.

The **Post-Wildfire Environmental Assistance Act** would:

- Make it easier for communities to receive federal support for hazardous material clean up following a wildfire, and
- Allow the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide relevant expertise and technical assistance to states and local governments for safe debris removal.

Across Oregon and the West, wildfires have increasingly caused widespread damage to properties and businesses. While rapid recovery is rightfully focused on lives, homes, and businesses—states and local governments can also be overwhelmed from navigating the recovery process when hazardous substances and materials are left behind, which can cause long term damage to human health and the environment when not remediated properly. This can include:

- Toxic exposure: Burned structures and vehicles can release harmful, cancer-causing chemicals—like asbestos and heavy metals—into the air, water, and soil.
- Contaminated wells and septic systems: Exposed wells and septic systems risk contamination from hazardous runoff and dangerous chemicals can leach into groundwater, threatening drinking water safety for the community.
- Soil erosion and water contamination: Wildfire can increase soil erosion, increasing the likelihood of hazardous runoff washing into rivers and waterways, harming our aquatic ecosystems and fisheries.
- Long term soil degradation: Burned debris and other chemical contaminants in the soil can impact future agricultural production and land use in rural areas.
- Vulnerability of at-risk populations: Older adults, individuals with pre-existing conditions, and children face heightened risks from long-term exposure to hazardous substances as well as ash and dust.

The EPA has the skills and expertise to support communities with this kind of clean up, but this kind of assistance is only authorized when the President makes a Major Disaster Declaration. Under this bill, the damage threshold is lowered to provide communities more support in the event of a wildfire.