

Smoke season



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In addition to winter, spring, summer and fall, there is a new season that many letter carriers are coping with: smoke season. While most of the smoke originates in the forests of the American West, the reach of these fires has spread far across the country.

Earlier this year, East Coast residents witnessed colorful sunsets from smoke that had traveled more than 2,000 miles from the Bootleg Fire in Oregon. As I write this, several fires burning in California are sending smoke east-

ward. Fire season used to be confined to the summer months. With the prolonged drought in the West, it now spans most of the year.

In my younger days, I spent several years on a fire crew, fighting forest fires across the western United States. In those days, large fires were measured in the thousands of acres. Today's forest fires are measured in the hundreds of thousands of acres. Wildfire smoke that used to be localized is now traveling around the globe.

Wildfire smoke is made up of a complex mixture of gases and fine particles. The number of toxic chemicals found in wildfire smoke is substantial. In addition to particle pollution, wood smoke contains several toxic air pollutants, including benzene, formaldehyde, acrolein and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons.

The major health threat from wildfire smoke is from fine particles. These microscopic particles can get into your eyes and respiratory system, where they can cause health problems such as burning eyes, runny noses and illnesses such as bronchitis. Fine particles also can aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases like asthma—and have been linked to premature deaths in people with these conditions.

AirNow, a government entity, reports air quality using the official U.S. Air Quality Index (AQI), a color-coded index designed to communicate whether air quality is healthy or unhealthy. AirNow aggregates information from a number of federal, state and local sources.

The AQI is a measurement tool that runs from 0 to 500. The higher the AQI value, the greater the level of air pollution and the greater the health concern. AQI values at or below 100 are generally safe. When AQI values are above 100, the air quality is unhealthy—at first, just for certain sensitive groups of people, then for everyone as AQI values get higher.

Due to the nature of our work, many letter carriers cannot avoid wildfire smoke. Exposure to air ranging from unhealthy to hazardous has become increasingly common over the last few years.

For letter carriers with heart or lung disease, smoke may make symptoms worse. Carriers with heart disease might experience chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath or fatigue, and may not be able to breathe as deeply or as vigorously as usual. Symptoms include coughing, chest discomfort, wheezing and shortness of breath.

Exposure to wildfire smoke while delivering mail may constitute a workplace injury if the smoke is the cause of a health condition or aggravates a pre-existing one. Work duties alone do not have to cause a health condition from breathing wildfire smoke. The wildfire smoke need only contribute to the condition.

If you have a pre-existing condition that is not disabling but becomes disabling because of a work-related aggravation, then regardless of the degree of the aggravation, the resulting disability is compensable.

It is not necessary to prove a significant contribution by wildfire smoke to a disabling condition for the purpose of establishing a causal relationship. If the medical evidence reveals that the wildfire smoke contributes in any way to a disabling condition, the condition would be considered employment-related.

Letter carriers filing claims for wildfire smoke injuries should register and file the claim electronically via the ECOMP web portal. The "Injured on the Job" page at nalc.org has a link to the ECOMP registration page.

The type of claim you file will depend upon the length of exposure to the wildfire smoke. Injuries that occur in one day or during one work shift would be CA-1 claims for a traumatic injury. Injuries that occur over a longer period would be a CA-2, an occupational injury claim.

To get a claim accepted, you will need a medical report from a doctor that lists a history of your exposure to the wildfire smoke and a history of any underlying conditions that were aggravated. The doctor's opinion must be based on objective medical evidence, such as a physical exam, chest X-ray and blood tests to measure oxygen and carbon monoxide levels.

You can find historical air quality data at the Airnow.gov website to document the air quality index for the day or days of exposure.

There have not been enough long-term studies on the effect of wildfire smoke on the human body. Unfortunately, there are no Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations limiting excessive exposure to wildfire smoke. That should not prevent anyone from filing an injury claim if he or she suffers a smoke-related injury due to smoke season.