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School District Prepares for Air Quality Action Days

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As fall term begins, Brookings-Harbor School District is one of many districts across the Western United States affected by wildfire smoke and related air quality concerns. The district recently shared air quality information for students and parents (available at www.bit.ly/airqualityBHSD), and has the following additions and clarifications in response to community concerns.

An air quality advisory team has been formed including the Superintendent, District Nurse and Athletic Director, that will monitor daily air quality reports generated by federal and state agencies, local experts and weather reports, as well as observations at the school sites and athletic venues.

This team will use a data-driven approach to issue timely updates to teachers and staff at intervals before and throughout the school day; and before and during any after-school athletics or activities.

When air quality is poor or deteriorating, these updates will include actions that must be taken immediately by staff. Possible actions range from curtailing outdoor recess, physical education classes and outdoor lunch; to cancelation or rescheduling of activities and athletics; to the possible cancelation or closure of school if warranted by local conditions.

Any action that affects bus routes, dismissal times or after-school activities will also be communicated to parents and the community via the district's usual means of notification, which includes an email and/or call to contact information in the student database; posts on district website and social media; and notification of local media.

During school days or parts of school days when the local air quality at the school site is assessed as "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" according to the Oregon Health Authority's guidelines, the Brookings-Harbor School District will initiate actions to protect the health of students and staff by adapting daily schedules and activities to minimize exposure to smoke and poor air quality.

The standard for Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups is met when local visibility is 3 to 5 miles or less and roughly equates to the “Orange zone” on Air Quality Indexes or an AQI of 101-150.

According to OHA guidelines when air quality meets this condition, “It is an OK day for students to be active outside or 15 minutes or less. Allow students who are unusually sensitive to air pollution to stay indoors ...”

For P.E. classes, athletics and activities, the OHA guidelines recommend “Move activities for students sensitive to air pollution indoors. Limit other students to light outdoor activities or move them indoors. Increase rest periods and make substitutions. Monitor symptoms and reduce or cease activities if symptoms arise.”

Children and the elderly are more likely to be sensitive to smoke, as are people with heart or lung disease. The school district will make air quality accommodation decisions on a district-wide level. If merited, entire classes and buildings will remain indoors, where our maintenance teams have added extra smoke-rated filters to HVAC, air conditioning systems and fans. Elementary and Middle School students will not be able to choose whether they go outside for recess or remain indoors. Adults will supervise and intervene if students are found that are not following safety guidelines.

Actions related to air quality advisories will escalate as air quality worsens to “Unhealthy” and “Very Unhealthy/Hazardous” levels.

Local air quality monitors can have inaccurate information and conditions can change rapidly due to wind direction and Brookings’s proximity to a major wildfire and individual health reactions to smoke can vary. Be watchful of smoke-related illness symptoms in those around you. Wildfire smoke can make asthma symptoms worse and it can trigger asthma attacks. Symptoms of asthma include coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing and chest tightness. Even students without known asthma can have symptoms when exposed to unhealthy levels of wildfire smoke pollution.

Students with asthma or other health issues should communicate with their school’s nursing staff about concerns and have an asthma action plan. Athletes with asthma should have rescue inhalers readily available as directed by their health care provider. If your child has a physician-documented asthma or another respiratory issue, please make sure that your child’s teacher or principal is aware with medical documentation. For information and questions, contact District Nurse Trish Walker at patriciaw@brookings.k12.or.us or 541-469-7417.

To read the full details of OHA’s recommendations at various levels of air quality due to wildfire smoke, please visit: <https://apps.state.or.us/Forms/Served/le8815h.pdf>

Brookings-Harbor School District: Every Student Can Succeed