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OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

# The West Is on Fire. It's Past Time to Act on Climate Change.

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Credit...U.S. Forest Service

By Kate Brown

Ms. Brown, a Democrat, is the governor of Oregon.

SALEM, Ore. — If you are on the East Coast, the sunrises you saw last week were probably tinged with a bit of red. That haze was the smoke from the fires scorching the West, including the 400,000-acre-plus Bootleg Fire in southern Oregon, the largest in the country at the moment and the latest in a string of climate-related natural disasters to befall my state.

We are no strangers to forest fires in the West. About half of Oregon, some 30 million acres, is forestland. But in the past decade, as our summers have grown longer, hotter and drier, our lush forests have turned into tinderboxes. I have

declared drought emergencies in 22 of our 36 counties already this year, as rivers and reservoirs run low because of insufficient snowpack and the lack of rainfall. Last summer, Oregon experienced its most devastating fire season in many years, when [more than 2,000 fires](#) burned 1.2 million acres. We [lost](#) at least nine lives and more than 5,000 homes and commercial structures. Fires burned in Clackamas County outside the Portland metro area, causing the area to have some of the world's worst air quality for several days, and through Santiam Canyon, on the outskirts of Salem, our state capital.

This summer, we are already on pace to eclipse last year's totals, and it's only the first few days of August. In June, Portland set a 116-degree high-temperature record, while Salem reached 117 degrees, also a record. About 200 people lost their lives in Oregon and Washington. In February, Oregon was hit by unseasonably harsh ice and wind storms that knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of households. Before that, counties were hit by flooding. A recent climate assessment of the state by the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute at Oregon State University [warned](#) that "the number and intensity of heavy precipitation events, particularly in winter, is projected to increase throughout the 21st century."

And, as is the case with the Covid-19 pandemic, our most vulnerable communities are hardest hit by these disasters: rural and low-income ones and communities of color that are already disproportionately affected by longstanding disparities and systemic racism. Because of that, our Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander residents face a disproportionate burden of the economic, health and safety impacts of climate change.



The author at a site destroyed by the Beachie Creek Fire in Oregon last year. Credit...Nikki Fisher/Office of Governor Kate Brown, via Associated Press

We are taking steps in the short term to adapt to this new normal of harsh weather and a fire season that never ends. But over the long term, we must take concerted, nationwide action to address climate change. It's one climate. We need to put politics aside and act as we watch its changes play out.

We are working to lead the way in Oregon, with some of the most ambitious goals among the states for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and the adoption of electric vehicles. In 2020, I signed an [executive order](#) to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and Oregon is finalizing rules to cap emissions from our largest transportation, industrial and natural gas sources. Last week, I [signed](#) into law Oregon's clean energy bill, mandating 100 percent clean electricity by 2040 — one of the fastest state timelines in the nation. The bill is rooted in the idea that our electric infrastructure should support opportunities for living-wage jobs, work force equity and energy resilience.

I signed the bill at Electric Island, the first publicly accessible fast-charging station designed especially for heavy-duty electric trucks and buses near the Interstate 5 freight corridor — the product of a partnership between Daimler Trucks North America and Portland General Electric. As chair of the Western Governors' Association, I worked with my fellow governors to expand access to electric vehicles and charging infrastructure across the West, prioritizing rural and low-income areas and communities of color.

We have a strong partnership with the Biden administration, which has combined a collaborative approach with my state to wildfire response and preparedness with investments in clean energy, climate action and environmental justice.

What we need now is bold action from Congress. The recently announced infrastructure deal, which includes [the largest ever investment](#) in electric vehicle infrastructure, is a great start, but we must continue to do more. As the bills are finalized in the legislative process, lawmakers must look for opportunities to reduce emissions and modernize the electrical grid. We have an opportunity right now to get millions of Americans back to work in clean energy jobs, address the climate crisis and center equity in our investments.

Building back better means building a more just and equitable country for all. In Oregon, we have taken decisive action on climate while still growing our economy, with many green technology companies choosing Oregon for their operations.

States and cities are on the front lines of the climate crisis. But this is a problem that knows no borders. Climate change is playing out here now, with a fury, but it will be in your backyard next. People are dying. Congress must act, now.