

to cancel events at a much lower level without proof that in the long run there is going to be a lot of harm.”

However, for those on the playing field, there is often a different sentiment.

“I think the standards should be tighter than they are, and the NCAA released standards that are, at least for the sport that I know, unhealthy and a serious mistake” said Kirk Elias, women’s long-distance coach for Nevada Track and Field.

Elias has experienced times where athletes were uncomfortable due to the air quality on smoky days when the AQI was between 75 and 80. When his athletes were not comfortable running outdoors on these days, he sent them to cross train indoors, where the air had been filtered.

The current policy is informed by a 2001 study from the British Journal of Sports Medicine. The study itself states that there has been little research examining the relationship between exercise and inhaling particulate matter. But the article makes no mention of anything related to wildfire smoke, save for one mention of fires lit in the homes of those in developing countries. It makes indirect mentions to smoke and only references it in terms of smoking or smoke control.

It is unknown what studies were used in the NCAA’s previous, more conservative guidelines.

Other than the study included in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, there is little published research on the long-term effects of

athletes’ exposure to poor air quality, let alone wildfire smoke specifically.

As a coach, Elias said he does not allow the lack of research to interfere with the safety and long-term health of his athletes. Instead, he bases his decisions on how athletes feel on smoky days and moves their practices indoors accordingly.

“It’s real simple. I’m not going to make athletes practice in conditions that they become uncomfortable with,” he said.

As a part of a long term plan to address the issue, UNR has proposed an indoor practice facility. The indoor fieldhouse would feature a track, football field and other amenities that would be used by collegiate and intramural athletes alike.

Details regarding the air filtration system of the new facility have not been publicly released.

BLAZING AHEAD

The writers of this story believe the first step to solving the problem of athletes’ exposure to poor air quality is to admit a problem exists. The contributors of this story—Adria Barich and Hiley Dobbs—are students at the University of Nevada, Reno. They completed this project as a part of a medical reporting class. Barich is a senior studying journalism with a minor in communications who runs and reports on sports. Dobbs is a Canadian student-athlete who studies

public health. The reporters believe when West Coast schools have nearly 20 days with poor air quality in a single year, the damage can be much worse than a month of lost practice days. With the potential to negatively affect the heart and cardiovascular system, poor air quality it is more akin to a public health crisis.

With wildfires annually blazing across much of the Western U.S., we need to prioritize awareness of the effects of exposure to poor air quality. The NCAA raising its recommendation for air quality paints the issue as not only trivial, but as an inconvenience.

The destruction of wildfires extends deeper than the ashes they leaves behind; it’s time to acknowledge that the poor air quality resulting from them could be a serious health concern and deserves to be treated as such. □

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**Kirk Elias, Nevada Women’s
Track and Field coach**



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