



**2007 NORTHWEST ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FORUM:
A POSSIBLE MODEL FOR OTHER REGIONS**
October 2007

By Lisa Matthews, ECOS and Margo Young, U.S. EPA Region 10

INTRODUCTION

In recognition of Children's Health Month, the October edition of *ECOS Green Report* is devoted to recent activities related to children's and environmental health. At the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS) in Sun Valley, Idaho, ECOS passed resolutions on children's environmental health, reducing environmental factors that affect asthma in children, and support for the National Children's Study research plan. Links to these resolutions are available at: <http://www.ecos.org/section/policy/resolution>. In addition, the state environment and health agencies and U.S. EPA Region 10 held the second Northwest Environmental Health Forum (Forum) to discuss progress on the past year's activities and identify new priority environmental health issues for collaboration.

STATEMENT OF ISSUE

States organize their health, energy, environment, and natural resource programs in different ways. Only five states have the environmental agency combined with the health agency (Colorado, Hawaii, North Dakota, Kansas, and South Carolina). Since most state environment and health agencies function independently of one another, this divide has created a gap in the environmental health field. ECOS has sponsored regional environmental health forums in recent years in U.S. EPA Regions 1 and 10 to bring together state environment and state health agency leaders to foster collaboration around selected environmental health priorities. This collaborative effort has resulted in increased efficiencies and improved outcomes in addressing high priority environmental health issues.

SUMMARY

State environment and health agencies often work on environmental health issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries, yet surprisingly, there is limited communication between them. The states in

U.S. EPA's Region 10 – Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington – have attempted to bridge this gap by inviting leaders of the state environment and state health agencies to the Northwest Environmental Health Forums in 2006 and 2007. The Forums were held in conjunction with the ECOS Annual Meetings in Portland, Oregon in 2006 and Sun Valley, Idaho in 2007.

The 2006 Forum resulted in the formation of intrastate and interstate workgroups. Some of these workgroups developed programs and materials on issues of interest to both the environment and health agencies, such as fish contamination and consumption and refuge/shelter-in-place options for residents in active burn-affected areas.

At the 2007 Forum, the participants chose to continue work on the health impact of wildfires and communicating consistent environmental health messages in burn-affected areas. The group also chose to convene a small workgroup to focus on the built environment and healthy communities.

REPORT

Background

The first Northwest Environmental Health Forum was held in conjunction with the 2006 ECOS Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon. The Forum was conceived of and planned by a dedicated interagency planning team with the support and leadership of Stephanie Hallock (Director, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality), Gail Shibley (Administrator, Oregon Public Health Division), and Ron Kreizenbeck (Acting Regional Administrator, U.S. EPA Region 10). The Forum was attended by dozens of representatives of state environmental and health agencies, U.S. EPA, the Oregon Environmental Council, and other interested stakeholders.

The planning team chose to use the ECOS Annual Meeting as an opportunity to convene and foster high-level policy discussions among Northwest states on the topic of deepening collaboration between health and environment agencies in order to achieve efficiencies and enhanced health and environmental results. The planning team also saw a unique opportunity to choose a specific area of collaborative action and lay out a one-year action plan – with the intention of reconvening as a Northwest leadership team to refine and improve collaborative efforts at the 2007 ECOS Annual Meeting.

2006 Northwest Environmental Health Forum

Prior to the 2006 Forum, the planning team brainstormed potential areas of focus for this one-year pilot effort. The team then narrowed these potential focus areas to three that would be brought forward to the Northwest Forum for additional discussion, consideration, and action planning: 1) air quality and asthma/respiratory disease; 2) fish contaminants and developmental disorders and cancer; and 3) indoor air quality. The major criteria used to arrive at these three areas of potential focus were:

- Issues where both health and environment agencies have concern, expertise, authority, and current work;
- Issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries;
- Issues where there is a pressing need for improved health and/or environmental outcomes; and
- Issues where there are clear or suspected opportunities for efficiency gains.

Following the 2006 Forum, the steering committee worked on two of the three issues: fish consumption and refuge/shelter-in-place options for residents in active burn-affected areas. The Washington Department of Health (DOH) took the lead on developing a consistent consumer message on the risk of fish contaminants and fish consumption. Additionally, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) led a sub-group to examine interagency and intrastate strategies to address environmental health concerns associated with wildfires, field burning, and prescribed burns.

2007 Northwest Environmental Health Forum

The 2007 Forum was held on September 18 in Sun Valley, Idaho, in conjunction with the ECOS Annual Meeting. The 2007 Forum was planned by an interagency steering committee with the support and leadership of Toni Hardesty (Director, Idaho DEQ), Elke Shaw-Tulloch (Chief, Bureau of Community and Environmental Health, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare) and Ron Kreizenbeck (Acting Regional Administrator, U.S. EPA Region 10). Participants in the Forum included leaders from all Region 10 state environment and health agencies.

The objectives of the forum were to: 1) present the status/progress of the past year's activities; 2) identify new projects for collaboration; and 3) agree on how the Northwest states will work together in the future to commit to action items.

The States' Role in Children's Environmental Health

The Forum began with an overview presentation by Leah Ann Lamb of the Utah DEQ on state capacity building in children's environmental health. The Utah DEQ has been a leader in establishing a robust children's environmental health program. Children's environmental health issues bridge environment and health agencies, and it is critical that state agencies take the lead to address concerns such as asthma, the built environment, obesity, and poor indoor air quality. Lamb spoke of the need to incorporate children's environmental health into the core programs and collaborate with other federal, state, and local agencies to achieve better outcomes for children. She also identified the critical aspects of a successful state children's environmental health program: establishing a single point of contact, leveraging resources, ownership of the issues, partnerships, good science, plan development and implementation, measuring and adjusting, and celebrating success. Leadership at the top is critical and fundamental to make these activities work.

Update on Collaborative Projects

The Forum also provided an opportunity for updates on ongoing collaborative projects between the Northwest state environment and health agencies. Jim Vannoy of the Idaho Division of Health presented an overview of a study on particulate matter and health effects in North Idaho. The study was originally designed to determine health effects associated with field burning. However, the lack of burn days (due to tighter burn restrictions) led to a change in study direction to focus on health effects from particulate matter in general. Particulate matter pollution from wildfires, field burning, or urban sources impacts the health of those exposed.

Partners in the study included U.S. EPA (small grant), Idaho DEQ (environmental data), Blue Cross/Blue Shield and Medicaid (health data), Idaho Hospital Association (data analysis), and Boise

State University staff (identified a list of medical diagnoses associated with air pollution). Specifically, the study looked at health care encounters for cardiovascular and pulmonary illness and associations with hourly ambient air monitoring data. For PM10, the results showed an increase of acute lower and respiratory illnesses, acute stroke, and chronic cardiac illnesses. For PM2.5, the results showed an increased association with acute stroke.

The joint effort of Idaho Department of Health and Welfare and Idaho DEQ on this study has improved communication between the agencies. By coordinating on this study, the two agencies are now working more closely to develop a state communication plan to improve issuance of advisories to the public and school districts when smoke from wildfires impact an area.

Liz Carr of the Washington DOH provided an update on the Washington Fish Consumption Pilot Project called *Healthy Fish Choices*, which was launched recently in four participating grocery stores. Consumers have received mixed messages about eating fish. This project offers healthy choices of fish and puts the risk message back into perspective – eating fish is important, but consumers should choose those lower in mercury. The target audience is pregnant women, women who plan to become pregnant, nursing mothers, young children, and populations that consume large amounts of fish such as tribes. Washington DOH will be surveying 75 participating shoppers and analyzing the impact on the amount and type of fish purchased by consumers.

Washington DOH is working collaboratively with other agencies and plans to have the materials reviewed by members of subsistence-based communities. Participants at the Forum agreed that a consistent consumer message in the Region 10 states on fish consumption and contamination would be beneficial to the public. In order to facilitate this, Washington DOH is sharing its materials with any agency interested in using them.

National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program

An overview of health and environment informatics (in this case information technology, collection, and collaboration models) was presented by Bill Sonntag of U.S. EPA. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in agreement with U.S. EPA, is creating the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program. The purpose of the program is to establish a nationwide tracking network to obtain integrated health and environmental data and use it to provide information in support of actions that improve the health of communities. The CDC has provided 16 state grants for implementation of environmental health tracking (see www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking/default.htm) with the goal of developing consistent messages for environmental health hazards. U.S. EPA, CDC, and state health and environment agencies are all working together in this process to provide additional health and environment information to the public and policy makers. Each Environmental Public Health Tracking Network State will be deploying a state information portal, as will CDC. In addition, the Tracking Network will support new health and environment indicators.

Topics being developed in the tracking network include: hospitalizations for asthma; hospitalizations for myocardial infarction; ozone and particulate matter hazards; data/information on key water contaminants that may include heavy metals; pesticides; and data/information from at least two data sources or tracking systems including birth defects, cancer, child blood lead levels, or vital statistics. Regional examples of tracking projects include Washington State's analysis of fish tissue contamination and birth defects to populate the tracking network and the Oregon Environmental Public

Health Portal's inclusion of demographics, hospitalizations, U.S. EPA and DEQ air quality data, waste contaminants, drinking water, blood lead, and vital statistics. Informatics can help bring together environment and public health professionals and communities. The information managed in these systems can provide early warnings from weak signals in communities allowing public health officials to provide targeted information to their communities.

NEXT STEPS

Before and during the 2007 Forum, the group identified the following issues as good candidates for potential collaborative projects and voted on which issues would be most appropriate for action. Health impacts from wildfires and built environment/health communities were the top two issues.

- Wildfires/Smoke/Particulate Matter
- Built Environment/Healthy Communities
- Climate Change
- Environmental Health Messages
- Contaminants in Private Wells
- Pharmaceuticals in the Environment
- Consumption of Contaminated Fish
- Toxics Use Reduction
- Exposure to Air Toxics and Ozone
- Opportunities for Institutionalizing Collaboration
- Organizational Support for Environmental Health
- Harmful Algae Blooms
- Shellfish Contamination
- Pesticides/Fertilizers
- Lead Sources/Surveillance

In follow-up to the Forum, a small committee will be formed to do scoping work on collaborative projects on the health impacts of smoke and wildfires, including consistent health messaging in burn areas. A group is also being convened to determine potential outcomes of a regional workgroup on built environment and health communities.

The 2006 and 2007 Northwest Environmental Health Forums have helped expand the purview of environment and health agencies by offering an opportunity for high-level discussions that have resulted in better communication between state environment and health agencies as well as the sharing of resources.

HOW OTHER STATES CAN GET INVOLVED

State environment and health agencies in other regions may also benefit from coming together in a similar regional environmental health forum to foster collaboration around selected environmental health priorities and to achieve efficiencies and enhanced health and environmental results. Interested states may contact Lisa Matthews of ECOS at lmattews@sso.org or (202) 624-3671. We are also interested in success stories from other regions that have collaborative environment and health projects.

In addition, states may join the ECOS Environmental Health Forum. The purpose of the Environmental Health Forum is to establish closer links between state health departments and state environment agencies, and examine possible links between environmental conditions and health outcomes. The scope of the Environmental Health Forum is being expanded to cover children's health and the impact of the built environment on public health. We are planning a session on built environment and healthy

communities for the 2008 ECOS Spring Meeting in April in New Orleans. ECOS members or their representatives interested in joining the Environmental Health Forum should contact Lisa Matthews.

“In the broadest sense, environmental health comprises those aspects of human health, disease, and injury that are determined or influenced by factors in the environment. This includes not only the study of direct pathological effects of various chemical, physical, and biological agents, but also the effects on health of the broad physical and social environment, which includes housing, urban development, land-use and transportation, industry, and agriculture.”

– Healthy People 2010,
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

RESOURCES AND CONTACTS

For more information about the Northwest Environmental Health Forums, contact Margo Young, Children’s Environmental Health Coordinator, U.S. EPA Region 10
phone: (206) 553-1287 or e-mail: young.margo@epa.gov
http://www.ecos.org/section/asthmaenvironment/environmental_health

Creating a Healthy Environment: The Impact of the Built Environment on Public Health
by Richard Jackson and Chris Kochtitzky
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/articles/Creating%20A%20Healthy%20Environment.pdf>

Urban Sprawl and Public Health
by Howard Frumkin
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/articles/Urban%20Sprawl%20and%20Public%20Health%20-%20PHR.pdf>