

LOUISIANA

Keeping Track, Promoting Health

Building a Network

Without question environmental contaminants are affecting people's health. Environmental hazards are among parents' top health concerns for their children, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Understanding how these contaminants and other environmental factors are linked to chronic disease is essential to disease prevention—and to protecting the health of our communities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is leading the initiative to build the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. The Tracking Network is being developed in response to calls for better understanding of how the environment can affect people's health. This Web-based system will integrate health and environmental data and provide information to address public health concerns, educating the public about ways to protect themselves from possible contamination and disease.

States and communities can act upon data generated through tracking. Today, because of tracking, public health officials in Washington State can do more than determine mercury levels in fish. They can also compile information from many sources and use the data to educate citizens about healthy fish choices with greater speed and accuracy. In Maine, tracking has allowed researchers to examine high arsenic levels in well water and its effects on reproduction. Consequently, state public health officials can now warn well users about the hazards of exposure to arsenic during pregnancy.

The Tracking Network will enable and encourage communities, health care providers, state and local health departments and others to take control of their health.

The building blocks of this network are grants to state and local health departments and universities around the country to build capacity and demonstrate just what tracking can do.

Building the Foundation: Louisiana (2003 — 2006)

In 2003, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (LDHH) received funding from CDC to plan for a statewide Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. Louisiana used the funding to complete data linkage projects. The results range from improving surveillance to faster responses to environmental public health questions and action to prevent disease.

Why Tracking Matters to Louisiana

Louisiana has several inactive, abandoned creosote wood treatment sites across the state. With no environmental practices in place during the plants' years of operation, land and groundwater surrounding the sites have been contaminated with environmental pollutants such as arsenic, benzo(a)pyrene, chromium, copper, and pentachlorophenol.

The Louisiana Tracking Program worked with other state agencies to collect water quality and cancer data to determine the feasibility of analyzing this for a tracking project. For the project, Tracking Staff looked for an association between water quality and cancer rates near the wood treatment sites. Although the staff did not find such an association, the data feasibility project, by increasing capacity and forming data-sharing relationships, did lay the groundwork for future tracking projects.



"Capacity building may not sound exciting, but it has been one of the most rewarding aspects of this Program," says Judith R. Qualters, Ph.D., chief of CDC's Tracking Branch. "When we started, capacity varied widely in the health departments. But in just three short years, people were doing projects above and beyond what we originally envisioned."

Tracking in Action

Responding to Concerns about Post-Hurricane Health Hazards

What is the problem?

In August and September of 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck several regions of Louisiana. Affected Louisiana residents needed to know about a number of post-storm environmental health issues, including a major oil spill that occurred in the industrial and residential town of Chalmette. Many people were concerned about clean up and about exposure to petrochemicals. Also, flooding throughout the region caused health professionals and residents to be concerned about mold and respiratory health.

What did tracking do?

The Tracking Program had access to a geographic information system tool known as Internet Map Server (IMS). IMS allows the user to interactively create and query maps of a specific area. Using this tool, LDHH staff accessed and identified the health needs of the residents that were located in the storm-affected areas.

Tracking Staff also worked with other programs within LDHH to provide information about health effects of petrochemicals to residents and public officials and conducted interactive training for volunteers assisting residents in gutting flooded homes near the Murphy Oil facility in Chalmette.

Improved public health

The hurricane response demonstrated the need to have readily available environmental and health data, as well as personnel trained to use it in order to determine baseline health outcomes. The tracking project helped build capacity by 1) using environmental and health data collected across the state and 2) during times of health crisis, quickly providing information and guidance to the public.



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For more information about the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program please visit: www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking

