

Environmental Protection Agency
Aging Initiative Agenda Report
From Public Listening Sessions

**Community Perspective on the Three-prongs of the
Aging Initiative**

“Older citizens are brimming over with good ideas and tried and true solutions. They have the time to give and are often motivated by the idea of leaving a legacy...making a difference for the future...”

Ronnie Duncan, Chair, Southwest Florida Water Management District

Executive Summary

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recognizes that there are unique concerns regarding the environment for an aging population and created the Aging Initiative to insure that the needs of this population are met. The three prongs of the agenda are to 1) Prioritize and study environmental health threats to older persons; 2) Examine the effect that a rapidly growing aging population might have on our environment and 3) Encourage older persons to volunteer in their own communities to reduce hazards and protect the environment. This report reflects the public commentary on the Aging Initiative. The comments were received via:

- Comments of registered speakers at six regional listening sessions across the United States.
- Written comments submitted to the EPA at the listening sessions by non-registered attendees.
- Written comments submitted directly to the EPA by post, e-mail or facsimile.

The comments from participants provided valuable insight on the agenda, both in what is well known and in identifying areas for additional study. The links, known and suspected, between our health and the health of our air, water and land were a common thread when discussing all three prongs of the agenda. The first prong of the agenda, environmental health threats to older persons, received numerous comments. While specific regional concerns such as coal mining were stated and are addressed within the report, the following environmental concerns were raised at every session: outdoor air pollution, indoor air pollution, water pollution, solid waste disposal and land development. Specific causes of the environmental concerns that were identified most often as contributing to a poor health environment were:

- Power plant emissions
- Vehicle emissions
- Ozone destruction
- Agribusiness
- Industrial waste
- Chemical contamination of land and water supplies through direct contact or leaching (seepage)

The health concerns that were identified as being linked to the environment included pulmonary disease (asthma mentioned most often), cancer, heart disease, neurological and autoimmune disorders, as well as contamination of water supplies. Specific areas were identified for action or study and included changes to the physical environment using smart growth principles, understanding the effects of chemical exposure both immediate and cumulative on older persons and increased attention to the indoor air quality that is created both by the quality of outdoor air and by personal choices. The personal choices that older adults will make may have a positive or negative impact on the environment. Since these choices and their affects are still unknown there were fewer specific comments on the second prong of the agenda and the primary recommendation was for ongoing study. In introductory comments participants commented on their health and abilities as well as those of their friends and relatives. It was clear from the comments that the range of health and activities among older persons indicate that that any Aging Initiative programs would need to be constructed around health and abilities, in addition to age.

Comments received on the third prong of the agenda indicate that older Americans bring a wealth of talent to volunteerism and are actively working to address environmental issues and its related health concerns. Types of programs mentioned include neighborhood based activities, intergenerational outreach programs, community grants, and partnerships with governments, universities and private agencies. Activities of these programs included education, monitoring

and activism. Based on current programs specific recommendations to expand or improve programs included:

- Involve older volunteers in all aspects of the program including planning, execution and evaluation.
- Present volunteer opportunities in a clear and concise manner.
- Increase intergenerational volunteer programs.
- Increase volunteer recruitment by networking with existing programs to develop new initiatives.
- Provide outreach for older adults by older adult volunteers.
- Provide transportation for older volunteers where needed.
- Employ multiple communication strategies including mail, e-mail and telephone contact.
- Provide basic incentives or stipends for older volunteers who have financial need.
- Provide volunteers with educational opportunities that include clear information and specific actions.

The participatory process taken by the Aging Initiative provided valuable insight to the EPA on what is currently a concern, areas for prioritization and the needs that EPA can meet to help strengthen volunteer efforts to improve the quality of the air, water and land for an aging population. The content of the following report is organized by the three-prongs of the agenda and includes a detailed discussion of the comments received on each of the prongs. The length and depth dedicated to any area is reflective of the number and depth of comments that an issue received.

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INTRODUCTION

“I may not be a senior, but I assure you, I do aspire to become one.”
Susan Glickman Florida Conservation Alliance

“One in five of my constituents is a senior citizen. Four out of five of us hope to be!” Farley
Toothman, Greene County Commissioner, Waynesburg PA

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and many other agencies and organizations, is responding to the demographic transformation of the aging American population. The number of persons aged 65 or older is expected to be 70 million by 2030. This will be 1 out of every 5 Americans. As noted in the quote above in some parts of America the ratio of 1 to 5 is already being experienced. An examination of the issues of aging and a plan for this aging of America from an environmental perspective are currently needed. To recognize and respond to the demographic transformation the Aging Initiative was created to develop a national agenda. This agenda would examine and address the specific air, water and land quality and use issues that are and will be affected by the coming demographic change. The EPA is addressing the aging of America because our bodies organ systems become more susceptible to environmental hazards as we age.

“There is a marked difference in susceptibility factors but age is a major one. As we discuss these issues, that factor needs to be addressed.”

Dr. Bernard Goldstein, Dean School of Public Health University of Pittsburgh

“The older we are, the more susceptible we become to threats from the environment, which may cause or worsen chronic life-threatening conditions.”

Donald Welsh Regional Administrator EPA Region III

“As we age, and as our immune system weakens, our bodies become more susceptible to hazards from the environment. These include water and air pollutants, pesticides, cleaning solvents and substances such as lead, mercury and asbestos.”

John Coyle, Acting Director, Los Angeles County Area on Aging

REPORT FOCUS:

This report focuses on the information and perspectives that were presented at six public listening sessions that addressed a three-pronged agenda. This agenda was created based on the National Academies of Sciences workshop, “The Differential Susceptibility of Older Persons to Environmental Hazards”.

The three prongs of the agenda are:

- 1) Prioritize and study environmental health threats to older persons;
- 2) Examine the effect that a rapidly growing aging population might have on our environment
- 3) Encourage older persons to volunteer in their own communities to reduce hazards and protect the environment.

SESSION LOCATIONS:

The six listening sessions were conducted in the following cities:

- ❖ Tampa, Florida April 3, 2003
- ❖ San Antonio, Texas April 8, 2003

- ❖ Iowa City, Iowa April 15, 2003
- ❖ Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania April, 23 2003
- ❖ Los Angeles, California April 29, 2003
- ❖ Baltimore, Maryland May 7, 2003

At these six listening sessions, the EPA heard from registered speakers and collected written comments. Table 1 provides the number of speakers by organizational affiliation. Table 2 provides the number of comments by region. For both tables the invited listening panel participants were excluded. Therefore the tables represent the attendees who spoke or submitted written comments and provide an overview of the participation. Additional written comments were submitted directly to the EPA and are included in this report.

Table 1: Comments by Affiliation

Affiliation	Number	Percent
Governmental Organization	55	21
Non-governmental Organization	88	33
Private Citizen	77	29
Education	45	17

N=265

Table 2: Input by Region

Region	Number	Percent
Tampa, Florida	46	17
Baltimore, Maryland	36	13.5
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	49	18.5
San Antonio, Texas	43	16
Iowa City, Iowa	34	13
Los Angeles, California	31	12
Unspecified (Direct to EPA)	26	10

N=265

This report summarizes statements made about each of the three prongs of the agenda and additionally, addresses a specific concern regarding an Office of Management Budget calculation.

DISCONTINUATION OF OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET CALCULATION

Prior to a discussion of the Aging Initiative Agenda it is important to reaffirm this statement made by former Administrator Christine Todd Whitman at the Maryland listening session:

*“We have not based any of our policy decisions on analysis that discounts any American life, whether infant, child, adult, or senior.” The Senior Discount factor that has caused so much concern has been discontinued by OMB for EPA regulations, and the bottom line is that **EPA will not-repeat not-use an age adjusted analysis for on decision making with Clear Skies or any other program or regulatory effort.**”*

Christine Todd Whitman, Former Administrator US EPA

Participants at the listening sessions knew of an Office of Management and Budget calculation called a senior death discount. Opposition to the inclusion of a senior discount in any EPA report was forcefully and repeatedly stated. While the EPA had no intention to use this

statistical number to weaken the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, or the land we live on, a high level of concern was expressed regarding how protective EPA policies would be toward aging populations.

This concern was expressed numerous times at all of the listening sessions and in written comments received by the EPA. This concern was taken seriously and a clear policy decision stating that a senior death discount will not be used is in effect. The EPA is committed to creating a national agenda that will help safeguard the health of all persons regardless of their age.

PRIORITIZE AND STUDY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH THREATS TO OLDER PERSONS

The first point of the agenda is to: prioritize and study environmental health threats to older persons. The comments indicated that the people who attended the listening sessions and submitted written comments are educated about various environmental threats. Some people expressed their concern in general terms such as “bad air” while others expressed their concern in specific health consequences such as, “fine particulate air pollution can pass from the lungs into the bloodstream.” For the purposes of this report the comments are grouped into issues regarding air, water and land along with multiple health indicators that were stated as areas of concern. Table 3 provides an overview of the concerns that were mentioned.

Table 3: Environmental And Health Concerns

Environmental Issues	Number	Percent
Outdoor Air Pollution	147	56
Indoor Air Pollution	25	9.5
Water Pollution	46	17.5
Land Pollution	44	17
Health Issues		
Pulmonary Disease	69	45
(Asthma as subset of Pulmonary Disease)	(34)	(49)
Cancer	30	19.5
Cardiac Disease	27	17.5
Neurological Disorders	6	4
Microbes in Water Supply	4	3
Autoimmune Disorders	5	3
Mental Distress	12	8

As shown in Table 3, many of the health concerns that are mentioned develop over a period of time. Throughout the listening sessions an identified area for prioritization is to determine if, and to what extent chemical exposures, both cumulative and immediate, affect the health of an older population. As noted, this is the first generation of aging adults to have been exposed to multiple chemicals in various amounts throughout their lifespan. Of special concern are chemicals such as mercury and lead that have the ability to remain and build up in the body. Mental distress, worry and fear, as expressed by people living in close proximity to mining and power plants warrant acknowledgement in this report. While the EPA understands that these added stresses are legitimate the EPA is not authorized to act on this issue. This is an area of concern that will be shared with agencies having the appropriate authorization and expertise.

“Increasingly the responsibility of government should be expressed in supporting research that will lead understanding the long-term causal chains between exposure to toxic environments and disease and death in the later years. Also government should develop and enforce policies for environmental pollution that will reduce the morbidity and mortality of older persons.”

James E. Birren, PhD, Associate Director of the Center on Aging, UCLA

“As emphasized by the US Centers for Disease Control, it is important to note that the mere presence of trace levels of chemicals in our bodies does not imply an adverse impact on health.”

American Chemistry Council

The lack of data on the cumulative effects of environmental hazards emerged as the overarching theme of the majority of proposed areas for prioritization and research. Ideas in this category included population level studies of those who have known exposures to coal or uranium mining, the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to help identify areas of known or potential environmental hazards for monitoring and education, and the study of the effect of specific chemicals effect on cell and organ systems in the body. These types of research programs proposed at the listening sessions are needed to answer the questions regarding cumulative exposure. The EPA continues to review programs that will determine the results of cumulative exposure effects and health impacts on an aging population.

Air:

The quality of air, both outdoor and indoor, was raised at all six listening sessions. Since air quality has been directly linked with several diseases, including asthma it is not surprising that air quality would continue to be an issue recommended as a priority area for the EPA.

“The only grandfathering I want to see, is my husband with his grandchildren not the grandfathering of power plants to continue to pollute our air and hurt the lungs of old and young alike.”

Saran Kirschbaum, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life of Southern California

“Diesel engines are strong contributors to soot and smog which aggravate and even contribute to earlier death in respiratory conditions and other health problems including heart disease and lung cancer.”

Barbara R. St. Amand, Citizen

The majority of the comments in this area focused on the health effects of outdoor air pollutants such as power plants, and vehicle emissions as well as ozone levels. Of special concern was the health of the people who live near or downstream of power plant emissions and of aging people in urban areas who are exposed to constant traffic. Additionally, it was suggested that people who had experienced a lifetime exposure based on either the location of where they lived or worked should be considered first when examining the cumulative health effects associated with exposure to emissions. Health related threats concerning reduced air quality that were most often mentioned as a concern were issues related to breathing, heart disease and cancer. The effects of reduced air quality and health effects were discussed in terms of limiting an older persons mobility and productivity.

“We spend most of our time indoors surrounded by air pollution from sources such as: consumer products-sprays, disinfectants, building materials, and cigarettes. We employ a wide variety of products in our homes to keep our homes sparkling clean, smelling fresh, and free of pests, germs and mold. If pollutants are present indoors, people will inhale them. Yet toxic

emissions from many of these sources are not controlled. And the elderly are told to stay indoors when outside air pollution is high.”

Meryl Karol, PhD, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, University of Pittsburgh

Indoor air quality, while mentioned less frequently than outdoor air quality, was proposed as an area of concern since older adults may remain indoors for longer periods of time. Poor indoor air quality can be created by a variety of factors including, the quality of the outside air, the types of cleaning materials that are used, ventilation, heating, cigarette smoke and the presence of animals or pests. The use and storage of products containing chemicals, even those approved for household use, such as cleaning supplies were raised as an area for increased education and study.

The need for clean outdoor and indoor air was clearly a high priority based on the health effects that were cited by a majority of the participants as concerns for the aging population.

Water:

Water and the environmental issues surrounding water include water treatment and delivery systems, storm drains and flooding as well as chemicals that are being found in bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and ocean. Comments received included every aspect of the environmental issues of water. A widespread concern was the pollution of all water sources from flooding and chemical contamination and the subsequent health effects. Environmental hazards expressed concerning chemicals included run off and soil penetration from agri-business, emissions, improper chemical disposal either directly into water sources or into land resources by consumers and corporations. Two specific areas of concern related to an older population. The practice of dumping or flushing unused medicine into a water source was cited as a concern that may increase as people age and increase their use of medications. Possible contamination by chemicals and subsequent health effects, including exposure to mercury via fish, were areas where additional studies and environmental programs were proposed. Participants also mentioned specific aquifers or wells that they believe may pose a danger while others mentioned possible endangered areas such as the Everglades or Gulf of Mexico.

“Older Americans are less able to fight off waterborne pathogens and these can be life threatening”

Kendl Philbrick, Deputy Secretary, Maryland Department of the Environment

“An involved and informed community will make wise water resource decisions.”

Ronnie E. Duncan, Chair, Southwest Florida Water Management District

Fewer specific comments were made regarding water contamination as in storm water sewage systems and water borne microbes like *Cryptosporidium* and *E. Coli*. This is a specific area that may emerge as a higher priority as there is an increase in both the understanding of water treatment and delivery systems and in the number of older adults. Suggestions for improvement included better detection of microbes and upgraded water treatment plants.

Land and Smart Growth:

While there were generalized comments regarding land and its use as it relates to air and water pollution, several participants discussed the field of Smart Growth and its approach to land development. Smart growth building principles emphasize the relationship of the built environment and its effects on the quality of air and water in addition to land use. By examining the relationship between the placement of buildings, roads, recreational and open spaces with the needs of a population over time, improved environmental outcomes can be achieved. These

outcomes include building a community that has different types of housing options, stores and physician offices within walking distance, trails and sidewalks, as well as an environmentally planned road system. The creation of mixed-use neighborhoods and reduced motor vehicle use, will result in reduced air pollution, improved water resource management, and increased opportunity for exercise and physical activity.

Smart Growth includes many aspects. The way streets, buildings and cities are designed impact the overall environment and health of older Americans. The lack of pedestrian friendly communities and viable public transportation systems to obtain needed goods and services are barriers to aging in place in America.

“We must make planning for senior friendly communities a priority whose net effect will be a better environment for everyone...Recognizing the importance of that link (between aging and the environment) will lead to better health greater independence, and communities that can be a home over the entire course of an ever growing lifespan.”

Carol Zernial, Director, Alamo Council of Governments, Bexar County Area Agency on Aging

A suggested area for study is the effect of a pedestrian friendly environment with access to parks, open spaces, and facilities on an older American population. Smart Growth concepts include reclaiming or creating compact mixed-use neighborhoods. These neighborhoods would create an environment where it is possible to walk or bike to stores, physician offices or community centers. Additionally, public transportation options would be examined to provide transportation to residents as needed. An additional area of study concerning the effects of Smart Growth principles was to examine the potential of such communities to use energy and water resources more efficiently and to create a healthier environment.

“Seniors also need pleasant places to live, such as communities that incorporate ‘Smart Growth’ alternatives of high density and walkable design to enable seniors and others to walk, bicycle or take convenient public transit to stores, physicians and to travel for whatever reason.”

Don Holtz,

Issues that affect the implementation of Smart Growth include current zoning restrictions, the desire of current older Americans to age in place and the possibility of higher housing costs in newly created communities. Additionally, existing attitudes towards land development and its multiple effects on the environment need to be expanded to incorporate Smart Growth principles. What we build and where that structure is located defines the use of that space and can affect the quality of the available air and water. The ability of older Americans to obtain needed goods and services and maintain their independence in a healthy environment is a current and ongoing issue that needs further study.

Regional and Population Differences:

While there are common national concerns it is clear that regional and population environmental concerns need to be addressed. Some people have grown up and are growing older in locations that are of special concern regarding the environment. Among these regional concerns were coal and uranium mining communities, areas with known toxic discharge into water supplies, farming communities and the urban poor. The mining communities expressed concern both at initial contamination exposure and at continuing exposure due to this industry’s long lasting environmental effects. The need for a national agenda to be sensitive to local issues and concerns when addressing ways that the environment may affect health was clear. The same environmental exposure may have differential effects based on gender or on race. Concerns

regarding the effects on women and minority populations were presented as areas for increased study.

EFFECT THAT A RAPIDLY AGING POPULATION MIGHT HAVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The impact an aging population will have on our environment is not well known and few comments were received regarding this point of the agenda. An ongoing need exists to continue creating programs that will monitor the effects of an aging population on our environment and that will provide responses to reinforce the positive impacts of an aging society and minimize its negative impacts. For example several comments focused on the use of sanitary landfills and suggested that as the population ages the current land fills will encounter increased strain. Potential strains may include increased disposal of medical supplies including incontinence supplies. One participant linked the health need for better medical treatment of incontinence as a means to reduce the use of incontinence supplies. This type of proposed potential issue and its link to a solution will be part of the ongoing Aging Initiative program.

Some of the concerns expressed focused on the need for people to consider how their consumer based decisions affect the environment. A specific example cited was the use of disposable goods. While there may be aspects about the use of disposable goods that apply specifically to an aging population, this is an area that also applies to the entire population. As more is known regarding specific behaviors of an aging population targeted programs such as recycling initiatives, can be modified to address identified needs.

The following third point of the agenda strongly indicates that an older population can make significant positive contributions to the environment by contributing their time and talents in environmental monitoring and education.

ENCOURAGE OLDER PERSONS TO VOLUNTEER IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES TO REDUCE HAZARDS AND PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT

That older Americans have been and will continue to volunteer in their community to improve and protect the environment was affirmed by comments received from organizations and local government agencies in describing current programs. Older persons are already working to ensure the quality of our air, water and land through volunteer programs that include education, monitoring and activism. This section will first describe the types of programs that were presented and provide suggestions for continued efforts and will conclude with a brief discussion of the facilitators of and barriers to volunteerism.

“Protecting our older persons from environmental hazards is important...we must also recognize the important role that when asked, they can and will play in protecting the communities they call home. Intergenerational strategies require that our society’s bookend generations-the youngest and the oldest-be viewed as vital assets today and not simply as yesterday’s heroes and tomorrow’s potential.”

Donna Butts, Executive Director, Generations United

At every session participants described volunteer activities that they organize or participate in that work to improve the environment. The variety of current volunteer activities included local volunteer efforts such as monitoring streams or involvement in large organizations that work on multiple environmental issues. Examples of the types of programs that were described included community grant programs awarded to educate or involve a community in water resource issues;

partnerships that include State Department of Environments, universities and private agencies that combine information and resources; neighborhood based programs to improve a local environmental hazards; education and lobbying; public outreach and multiple inter-generational programs were described.

“At present there are 19,500 Retired and Senior Volunteer Program volunteers serving in over 2,600 community based organizations that are involved in environmental service activities, such as safe drinking water and groundwater monitoring and detection, radon detection, recycling, environmental stewardship... to name a few.”

Tess Scannell, Director, Senior Corps, Corporation for National and Community Service.

This current level of volunteerism provides models that can be used to create new programs or to improve or expand existing programs through an exchange of ideas. An emphasized strength of older adults volunteers is that they bring with them a lifetime of experience, knowledge and skills. A unique contribution that this volunteer population can provide is that they have the skills to organize and plan a program. It was suggested that based on current information, older adults who volunteer want to be involved in all aspects of the volunteer programs including planning, execution and evaluation. Older adults are adept at matching their skills and interest to opportunities. The need for volunteer programs to present opportunities in a clear and well-organized manner to recruit older adults was described as a key component for successful programs. Inter-generational programs were described as a means to provide meaningful interaction between older adults and school age children. In this setting, both groups benefit from the exchange of environmental education or action and these were programs that older adults were interested in volunteering.

“Our experience shows that older volunteers are most effective when they have a specific mission and the feel they are in some way bettering their community”

Robert Blancato, National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs

Specific ideas to strengthen volunteer programs included increased educational opportunities developed by agencies such as the EPA. These opportunities should provide clear direction concerning environmental needs and specific action plans to improve the environment. While many older adults currently volunteer, a need exists to increase recruiting of older persons in environmental volunteerism through the development of new programs, networking with existing programs to increase their effectiveness, and outreach for older adults by older adults. Many older adults who came to the listening sessions stated their lives are active and busy. This active group has the energy, experience and time that can be used to help protect and improve our environment.

The listening sessions also pointed out several issues to be considered that may make volunteering more difficult for an older adult. Some older adults may have issues of mobility that would require assistance, some are able to use a computer and navigate the internet easily while others do not. Therefore, programs may need multiple communication strategies and physical locations selected for the volunteer activity should provide ease of access and accessible parking. Additionally, the economic situation of some older adults may make it more difficult for them to volunteer their time. Programs that incorporate basic incentives or stipends for volunteer time were suggested as a method to include older adults who may be in the workforce and may view environmental needs differently from those who are retired.

The listening sessions provided examples of multiple programs and potential partnership opportunities for the EPA Aging Initiative. Additionally it was suggested that the EPA could play a unique role in educating older volunteers about environmental threats and solutions.

Conclusion:

The listening sessions provided valuable insight on the three prongs of the EPA's Aging Initiative. The environmental health threats that are of concern were well articulated and showed the need for an overarching approach. The link between the health of older Americans and their environment continues to be an area for study and education. That little was stated regarding the second prong of the agenda, the effect an aging population might have on the environment, shows the need to continue to explore both the positive and negative impacts on the environment that accompany an aging population. The third prong, volunteerism, is already occurring and can be improved and supported by the EPA by providing clear action oriented information and by supporting current volunteer efforts. The information learned from these sessions will contribute to the planning of the Aging Initiative in order for the EPA and older adults to work together to insure that the health of our environment contributes to the health of older adults.

Appendix A: Methods

Table 1 and 2:

The tables presented in this report represent comments from the speakers and written responses that were collected at the listening sessions or submitted directly to the EPA. The invited listening panel comments were not included. The respondents are shown by region with the exception of the comments that were submitted directly to the EPA. In order to be counted a respondent had to express a specific concern regarding the air, water or land. The affiliation of the respondents was determined either based on respondent title when it was provided or by identification within the comments. If no affiliation was reported the respondent was counted as a private citizen.

Table 3:

The first time a concern regarding the environment or health was mentioned in the respondents comments it was counted. Subsequent expansion of the concern by the same respondent was not counted. This created a process where a respondent who mentioned the word mining as part of a list of concerns was for the purposes of providing a numeric count the same as a respondent who provided detail on why mining was a concern.

While some respondents expressed a single concern other respondents expressed multiple concerns, therefore the number of concerns is greater than the number of respondents.

The concerns were sorted and tabulated into the three major environmental areas of air, water and land and into six major areas of health related concerns. Each region was tabulated separately and then the regions were combined to create a table that reflected the concerns from all six listening sessions.