

WISCONSIN

Keeping Track, Promoting Health



"CDC's National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network is the most important accomplishment of the past decade."

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For decades, the United States has faced a fundamental gap in understanding how environmental contaminants affect people's health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working to close this gap by improving surveillance through the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network). The Tracking Network is a dynamic Web-based tool that, for the first time, provides health and environment data in one easy to find location.

Policy makers and public health officials can use the Tracking Network to make critical decisions about where to target environmental public health resources and interventions. Health practitioners and researchers can use the Tracking Network to learn more about health conditions related to the environment, and improve treatment plans. Anyone can use the Tracking Network to find out how the environment may be affecting them, their family's or community's health.

The building blocks of the national network are state and local health departments around the country that are funded to build local tracking systems. These systems supply data to the National Tracking Network and address local environmental public health concerns. The tracking programs use their networks every day to improve the health of their communities.

Why Tracking Matters in Wisconsin

Wisconsin has a long tradition of strong local health departments committed to protecting people in their communities. Every day local health departments address a wide range of environmental health concerns, such as cancer, birth defects, clean drinking water, and indoor air quality. Because of the wide range of issues, it is not possible for the local departments to dedicate resources to every environmental or health issue in the state. The Wisconsin Tracking Program helps local health departments stay on top of these issues. For example, while most departments deal with asthma-related issues in their day-to-day work, they often lack the resources to have a separate program for handling asthma concerns. The Wisconsin Tracking Network is able to show how asthma affects people in areas served by the departments, and the network allows the local health departments to respond more efficiently to their clientele.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has been part of the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program since 2002. As a member, Wisconsin collects, examines, and provides environmental health data for policy makers, elected officials, agency partners, health care providers, and the public. In 2009, Wisconsin launched the Wisconsin Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. Going forward, the site will be updated to reflect ongoing and emerging environmental public health issues.



TRACKING IN ACTION

	The Problem	Tracking in Action	Improved Public Health
<p>Addressing community concerns about outdoor wood boilers</p>	<p>Outdoor wood-fired boilers, also called wood boilers, have become popular as an energy source in the wake of rising costs for heating homes. Wisconsin is one of the top five states for the number of wood boilers used. Smoke from wood boilers can lead to coughing, eye and nose irritation, and aggravation of lung and heart disease. As the number of complaints about wood smoke from the public to local and state health departments grew, data were needed to allow a better understanding of community air quality and how wood boilers could affect it.</p>	<p>The Wisconsin Tracking Program provided air quality data to local health department staff to support easy, quick understanding of air quality conditions in different areas of the state over a period of time. The data showed that annual averages for fine particulate matter had increased over recent years.</p>	<p>By learning about air pollution levels and how these data are generated, local health departments have been able to identify and evaluate air pollution interventions based on whether local combustion sources (such as wood smoke) or regional sources (such as motor vehicle exhaust) are likely to pose a bigger problem in their communities. This allows for resources for air pollution interventions to be directed to those that are most likely to improve local air quality.</p>
<p>Identification of environmental health issues for prioritizing local health activities</p>	<p>Local health department staff has many responsibilities but limited resources to perform their jobs. It is important for the staff to be able to prioritize issues and distribute resources to activities that have a large impact. Data can help prioritize issues by tracking environmental health changes over time and allowing a comparison of similar communities across the state. However, local health departments often have few resources for data gathering and analysis. It is very difficult to select and merge the information needed for a complete evaluation and prioritization process.</p>	<p>The Wisconsin Tracking Program created a data summary, the County Environmental Health Profile, for every county in the state. The profiles include data and information about environmental health topics to show changes over time and comparisons to other counties. The profiles are available on the Web site for viewing by health professionals, persons in academia, and the public.</p>	<p>Developing these County Environmental Health Profiles provides local health departments with immediate online access to data that can be used for community health plans and program evaluations. Local health department officers have reported using the profile in their community health improvement processes and long-term plans. They use the data to assess current needs and track improvements over time. The Tracking program adds automation and efficiency to local health surveillance, saving time and resources.</p>
<p>Clean drinking water in areas vulnerable to contamination</p>	<p>Clean drinking water is critical to human health. Several contaminants in the environment can affect our drinking water. The Wisconsin Bureau of Environmental and Occupational Health is working with its partners to assess factors that possibly can pollute water sources. A challenge was identifying drinking water sources—for example, surface water versus groundwater—across the state, as well as identifying the people who use these sources.</p>	<p>The Wisconsin Tracking Program collected and combined a large amount of water quality data. This work included a calculation of the number of state citizens getting their drinking water from the different sources and the identification of areas where human health would be negatively affected. The data were summarized in tables, charts, and maps and were made available on the Wisconsin Tracking Network.</p>	<p>Now available online, analyses and visualizations of these data have been used in discussions aimed at identifying and prioritizing water sources that are both vulnerable to contamination and the areas with the greatest risk to human health. The ability to view maps, charts, and tables describing contaminants and define populations served by water systems has helped implement plans to reduce exposure to water contaminants that may result in adverse health outcomes.</p>