

California Senate Bill 702 (Escutia, 2001)

EXPERT WORKING GROUP on Environmental Health Surveillance

Expert Working Group members:

Joyce C. Lashof, MD
(Chair)
Professor Emerita, School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley, and
Associate Chair, Editorial Board of the Berkeley Wellness Letter

Thomas McKone, Ph.D.
(Co-Chair)
Senior Staff Scientist and Group Leader for Exposure and Risk Analysis,
Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, and Adjunct Professor/Researcher, School of Public Health, UC Berkeley

Running Grass, MS
Environmental Justice Specialist, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 9

Mark Horton, MD, MSPH
Deputy Agency Director and Health Officer, County of Orange Health Care Agency

Joseph Lyou, Ph.D.
Executive Director, California Environmental Rights Alliance

Larry Needham, Ph.D.
Chief, Analytical Toxicology Branch, National Center for Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

William Pease, Ph.D., Chief
Technology Officer, GetActive Software

Dorothy Rice, Sc.D. (Hon.)
Professor Emeritus, Institute for Health and Aging, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, UC San Francisco

Beate Ritz, MD, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Epidemiology, Department of Epidemiology and Environmental Health, School of Public Health, UC Los Angeles

William Satariano, Ph.D.
Professor of Epidemiology and Director of the Health and Social Behavior Program, School of Public Health, UC Berkeley

Paul Schulte, Ph.D.
Director of the Education and Information Division, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Gina Solomon, MD, MPH
Senior Scientist, Health and Environment Program of the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine, UC San Francisco

KEY MESSAGES

Strategies for Establishing an Environmental Health Surveillance System in California: A Report of the SB 702 Expert Working Group.

1. *Californians care about the environment and see a connection between health and the environment*

- The majority of Californians are concerned about risks to their health from environmental pollutants. Approximately 9 in 10 Californians say their state and local governments should give important or top priority to reducing the number of illnesses caused by environmental problems; and the same number support the establishment of a national environmental health tracking system.
- A statewide survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California found that nearly all Californians agree that environmental protection should be a priority for California. Almost one-third (32%) think it should be a top priority for Governor Schwarzenegger's administration while a large majority (57%) say it should be an important priority.
- Many diverse organizations, including Physician for Social Responsibility, American Lung Association, American Cancer Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and Aetna U.S. Healthcare, support environmental health tracking. Currently, Kaiser Permanente, Pacific Institute, UC Berkeley, California Air Resources Board, California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, California Department of Health Services, and other local, state, and national agencies are actively collaborating in environmental health tracking planning efforts in California.

2. *Environmentally-related diseases are costly and increasing*

- Today, chronic diseases have replaced infectious diseases as the major killers. The estimated total cost of chronic diseases in California in 2000 was over \$100 billion. In California, the cost of 9 environmentally-related chronic diseases (5 types of cancer, child lead poisoning, childhood asthma, neuro-behavioral disorders and birth defects) is estimated to be \$10 billion per year, or \$288 per person.
- In 2000, cancer accounted for 23 percent of the deaths in California. There is a suggestive or strong association between an increased risk of cancer and environmental hazards.
- The prevalence of adult asthma increased 76% in California from 1984 to 2003. According to Trust for America's Health, asthma rates are estimated to double in 20 years unless efforts are made to track environmental causes and institute preventive measures. Other diseases potentially related to the environment such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and autism appear to be on the rise, but there's little information about other diseases such as learning disabilities and auto-immune disorders.

3. *Reliable information is a basic tool for preventing disease and we currently have an information gap*

- Tracking disease is a cornerstone of public health and over the past century and a half; public health advances have been responsible for the dramatic increase in life expectancy. For example, reliable information about lead has informed effective prevention policies. Unfortunately, the tools of tracking have not been consistently applied to environmentally-related chronic diseases.
- Because of inadequate infrastructure, capacity, and funding, California lacks reliable information about many known and potential environmentally-related diseases. Incomplete data makes it impossible to adequately track environmental exposures, and disease incidence and explore the relationship between environmental hazards and disease.
- Environmental data and health outcome data are collected by different agencies, thus leading to a failure to connect environmental information with public health problems. As a result, we know very little about what the public is being exposed to and the role the environment plays in the health of Californians. Paul Locke of the Pew Environmental Commission notes, “In this country we probably know more about the levels of PCBs in fish in the Hudson River than we do about the contamination in your body.”

4. *Prevention works: it saves lives and money*

- The ultimate goal of environmental health tracking is disease prevention. By decreasing the burden of nine environmentally related diseases by only 1 percent, the annual savings to California would exceed \$100 million. The net benefits of Federal environmental policies from 1992 to 2002 are estimated to range from \$110-188 billion; the majority of these benefits are attributed to clean air policies.
- When we reduce pollution, we prevent disease and save money. During the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games alternative transportation policies that reduced traffic-related pollution resulted in the number of acute asthma attacks and Georgia Medicaid claims falling by 41% and pediatric emergency admissions dropping by 19%. Reliable information about sources of lead in the environment, blood lead levels, and the health effects of elevated levels, has been effectively employed to reduce exposure the incidence of lead poisoning.
- Governor Schwarzenegger acknowledges the connection between health, the environment, and the economy in his *Action Plan for California's Environment*, where he states, “California’s economic future depends significantly on the quality of our environment... overwhelming evidence demonstrates that clean air and water result in a more productive workforce, and a healthier economy, which will contribute to a balanced state budget.”

5. *SB 702 report is a blueprint for closing California's environmental health information gap*

- The establishment of a cost-effective environmental health tracking system is the essential first step for closing the environmental health information gap to improve environmental quality and protect public health in California.

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- The establishment of this ambitious and innovative system will place California in a position of national and international leadership in public environmental health. Despite current gaps, there is immense potential for improving our understanding of the environment and health. We now have opportunities to leverage existing systems, public opinion, and advances in science and technology to close the information gap and ultimately prevent disease.
- The Expert Working Group proposes a five point strategic plan for environmental health tracking in California:
 - A. Track environmental hazards to guide exposure prevention efforts;
 - B. Track disease trends to understand if they are changing over time, in residents statewide, in specific populations or in certain geographic areas;
 - C. Link environmental hazard information, exposure data, and disease reports to support environmental health research;
 - D. Inform the development and evaluate the effectiveness of disease prevention and environmental protection programs and policies; and
 - E. Facilitate public access to information on environmental health issues.

The SB 702 report was partially funded by The California Wellness Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The complete report may be found at www.catracking.com.