



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Editor's note: a press conference will be held on Feb. 24, 1 p.m., in the Governor's Press Room, State Capital, Room 1190, Sacramento

**UC AND GOVERNMENT HEALTH EXPERTS RECOMMEND  
STATE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM**

Sacramento — A state system to track chronic diseases and environmental hazards and exposures could save lives and millions of dollars a year, according to a working group of public health and environmental experts.

In a report released today by the California Policy Research Center (a program of the University of California Office of the President), the working group found that nine such diseases for which economic data were available (e.g., childhood asthma, cancer, and lead poisoning) cost the state an estimated \$10 billion per year, or \$288 per person. Some of these illnesses are also on the rise, especially among children.

Asthma affects approximately 743,000 children in California below age 17, for example, and each year about 1,100 children under the age of 15 are diagnosed with cancer. Neurological disorders are also increasing, and 10% of neurodevelopmental disorders in children are estimated to result from exposure to environmental hazards.

“An effective surveillance system that reduces just 1% of the cost of environmentally related chronic diseases would save Californians \$100 million annually,” said Jack Lewin, MD, Executive Vice-President and CEO of the California Medical Association.

Environmental hazards include chemicals, physical agents, and biological toxins in the environment that have a negative impact on health. Exposure to environmental hazards accounts for a significant proportion of many chronic diseases. More than 33 million Californians live in areas where exposure to air pollution results in increased risk for chronic disease. Environmental hazards, the researchers found, are also disproportionately distributed by racial and ethnic groups as well as by income.

The working group was created by legislation (Senate Bill 702, Escutia) that made California the first state in the nation to plan such a network. SB 702, which was signed into law by Governor Davis in October 2001, required the Department of Health Services' Division of Environmental and Occupational Disease Control, in cooperation with the California Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment and the University of California,

to establish a working group of technical experts to devise possible approaches to creating an environmental health surveillance system and estimate the costs.

A cost-effective environmental health surveillance (or tracking) system is expected to give the state vital information needed to improve existing pollution- and disease-prevention programs.

Senator Martha Escutia, who authored SB 702, said: “Effective public health and environmental policies begin with accurate information about exposures and diseases. An efficient tracking system could monitor the frequency and geographic distribution of these illnesses and exposures, protect public health, and reduce health care costs.”

Dr. Joyce Lashof, chair of the working group, said that the group believes there is a "critical need to create a coordinating office to effectively analyze and integrate data already collected by state health and environmental agencies, and inform the public about environmental hazards and environmentally related diseases.”

The group proposes formation of an interagency Office of Environmental Health Tracking, to be established and run by the Department of Health Services and the California Environmental Protection Agency.

Among its goals would be to enhance the capacity of state laboratories to monitor human samples for contaminants; develop new surveillance systems for priority environmentally related diseases, including asthma, childhood neurodevelopmental disorders, and neurodegenerative disorders (such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease); report hazard, exposure, and health-outcome data by race, ethnicity, and income to be able to monitor issues of environmental justice; and provide technical assistance to communities so people can participate meaningfully in public-health policymaking.

Bill Magavern, a senior legislative representative with Sierra Club California, noted that “If the state implemented this report's recommendations, those committed to working for environmental protection would be able to focus resources on the pollutants that are most detrimental to public health.”

The report’s authors recommend that the Department of Health Services establish uniform guidelines for state and county health authorities on how to respond to community concerns and when and how to further investigate disease clusters. The researchers also believe the state should commit funding to implement an effective environmental health infrastructure in California. Unless the state can address environmental-health threats, the collection of environmental health-tracking data is meaningless, they say.

The establishment of an effective environmental health surveillance system would require the active commitment of the legislature and the executive branch, as well as partnerships between the public and private sectors, academia, and communities. Such an ambitious and innovative system would place California in a position of national and international leadership in public environmental health.

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A policy briefing sponsored by the California Policy Research Center will be held Tuesday, Feb. 24, from 2:30-4:00 p.m. in the State Capitol, Room 113.

Working group members who will summarize the report findings and recommendations at the press conference and policy briefing include Joyce Lashof, Professor Emerita, University of California, Berkeley and Associate Chair, Berkeley Wellness Letter Editorial Board (working group chair); Joseph Lyou, Executive Director, California Environmental Rights Alliance; Beate Ritz, Associate Professor of Epidemiology, University of California, Los Angeles, and Gina Solomon, Senior Scientist, Health and Environment Program of the Natural Resources Defense Council and Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco.

The California Policy Research Center (CPRC) is a University of California program that applies the research expertise of the UC system to the analysis, development, and implementation of state policy as well as federal policy on issues of statewide importance. ([www.ucop.edu/cprc](http://www.ucop.edu/cprc))

A CPRC Policy Brief summarizing the report, as well as a pre-publication draft of the report and related background, are available on the web at [www.catracking.com/media](http://www.catracking.com/media).

Please direct questions about the report to Dr. Joyce Lashof, U.C. Berkeley School of Public Health, at (510) 642-2493.

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