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February 24, 2004

Establishing a California Environmental Health Surveillance System: Recommendations of the SB 702 Expert Working Group

Statement from Senator Martha M. Escutia

Two years ago, I created a working group of technical experts to devise possible approaches to establishing an environmental health surveillance system to reduce the human and financial toll of chronic diseases related to the environment. The SB 702 Expert Working Group (EWG) includes expertise in the areas of exposure assessment, epidemiology, information technology, medicine, environmental justice and health of children, seniors, and workers.

Today, a report released by the SB 702 EWG reveals not only recommendations to establish a statewide environmental health surveillance system, but also the fiscal toll that Californians face if we fail to act. The SB 702 EWG estimates that Californians pay over \$10 billion per year for nine environmentally-related chronic diseases (including childhood asthma, cancer, and lead poisoning).

If we could reduce the cost of environmentally-related diseases by just 1%, California could save \$100 million for just nine diseases. We cannot afford to ignore this finding and the potential savings in health care costs to California by preventing these diseases.

Reliable information is the most basic tool for prevention of chronic diseases that are related to the environment. Without information obtained by tracking health and links to environmental factors, California will continue to fight chronic diseases with costly treatment, rather than cost-effective prevention.

According to the working group, the State of California currently has an *inadequate* surveillance system to describe trends with environmental hazards/exposures and environmentally-related diseases. There are *inadequate* resources to carry out special studies to explain the trends. Multiple state agencies collect and manage health and environmental data, which could be used for tracking, but which *need to be updated and made uniform*. Furthermore, there is *no* systematic analysis of these data.

I am grateful to the SB 702 EWG for its insightful long-term blueprint for California, and look forward to reviewing their recommendations in detail in order to formulate an implementation plan for a much-needed environmental health surveillance system. In this time of severe fiscal constraints, creative solutions will be required; yet, the savings will far outweigh the costs of a surveillance system.

Without the support and contribution of numerous organizations, this report would not have been possible. Those supporters and contributors include:

California Department of Health Services, Division of Environmental and Occupational Disease Control Cal/EPA - Office
of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment
California Policy Research Center, University of California
California Wellness Foundation
U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Various community-based organizations

I thank the SB 702 EWG and these organizations for their interest and commitment to reducing the human and fiscal toll from environmentally-related chronic diseases.