

Tracks: A National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network Overview

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC— safer, healthier people.

[Narrator] Hello everyone. Thanks for tuning in to the Tracks podcast, where we explore topics related to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network.

Today, joining us is Dr. Mike McGeehin, Director of the Division of Environmental Hazards and Health Effects in the National Center for Environmental Health at CDC. Thank you for joining us today, Mike.

[Mike McGeehin] I'm glad to.

[Narrator] In your own words, can you tell us what you think the goal is of the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network?

[Mike McGeehin] Well, the goal of the network is really to establish a national environmental public health surveillance system. And by that, I mean what we're trying to do is to bring together standardized data from environmental contamination, human exposure, and human health outcomes into one location from a variety of different sources that can then be used by the public, by our elected representatives and policymakers, and by scientists and researchers.

[Narrator] How do you feel the Tracking Network will, overall, improve public health?

[Mike McGeehin] Well, an environmental public health surveillance system like the Tracking Network is needed for public health because there are many questions about the associations and the possible associations between environmental exposures and health outcomes. And part of that is the tremendous increase in chronic diseases that we have seen over the last 50 years in the United States and the impact that has on the health of the public. And part of that is that the public, and many scientists, believe that many of these chronic diseases are associated with some environmental exposures.

What we need to do is we need to get the information together in one place that looks at the environmental exposures and at the health outcomes in a standardized way, and that's very important that it be in a standardized way, so that we can begin to answer the questions about: are our diseases, are our health outcomes, is our general health affected by environmental exposures?

[Narrator] Could you explain who you think will be using the Tracking Network and why they might come to this Web site?

[Mike McGeehin] Sure. The Tracking Network is designed for multiple audiences, and it has been from the very initiation of the program. And the audiences are any group of people or any

individual who really wants to know more about how their environment might be affecting their health. We have designed the network so that it can be used by people who are making policy decisions on the environment or on health outcomes, such as our elected representatives and their staffs. Certainly, it can be used by scientists as we gather these data together in one place from multiple sources and they're standardized so that scientists and researchers can look at these data and look at possible links and associations.

But it is also designed so that it can be used by the individual person who is interested in how their state or how their community might be impacted by environmental exposures or how their health might be impacted. So we have tried to design this entire project so that it can meet multiple audiences' needs. But the overall goal of it isn't changed, and the overall goal of it is to bring together standardized data from a variety of sources that answer questions about the impact of the environment on health.

[Narrator] What do you feel are the next steps for the Tracking Network?

[Mike McGeehin] Well, we have a few next steps that we want to begin right after the launch of this network, and, obviously, we need to tweak the Web site and the network to refine it with the data we currently have. But the next big step is we want to add more data on health outcomes and exposures and environmental contaminations. And so our next process will be to work with our states and our city health departments to determine which data sets we will be adding to the Web site.

But there is an additional step that I would like to focus on. And that is that my vision of this Web site, my vision of the entire program is that, eventually, our Web site will be the site that people go to to get broad environmental health information. So that, when people want to know about environmental issues and human health, not only will they go there to find our data, but they'll go there to find the latest information, the latest publications.

So what we want to do is to take the Web site as it currently is, continue to expand the data in it, continue to refine the data. But we also want to make sure that it is an information portal for people so that they can find high-quality, valid data on a number of different environmental health issues—sort of a one-stop shop for environmental health.

[Narrator] To go along with your vision where people can find broad environmental health information, why do you feel there is a need and how important is it for all 50 states, as well as a national Tracking Network, to be included?

[Mike McGeehin] Well, I think it's extremely important that we have all 50 states, eventually, part of this network. Just as I feel it's extremely important that all 50 states participate and have the benefits of any health surveillance. I think it's important for the communities in all of the states as I described earlier, that they are able to get this information.

And I think it's very important, if we are talking about policymakers using this information or researchers using this information, that we are able to look at differences in geography, that we are able to look at differences in populations, that we are able to look at the nation as a whole on

the trends that we're seeing with the health outcomes, on the trends that we are seeing with the environmental exposures and the environmental contamination.

It's very important that this, eventually, be a national system so that, when we refer to the data and when we analyze and interpret the data, we are really looking at it from a national perspective.

[Narrator] Thanks, Mike. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude the podcast?

[Mike McGeehin] I just, once again, want to say that how we envision this is that this will be a dynamic tool. That people will go to the Web site, that they will enjoy using the Web site, and that they will come away from it with more information and a better understanding of how the environment impacts their health. And, particularly, as we refine it and as we get the data more and more at a local level, that they will understand how the environment may be impacting their community. We're excited about this opportunity, we're excited about what we've done up until now, and we really look forward to the future.

[Narrator] I'd like to thank our guest Dr. Mike McGeehin again for joining us and would like to encourage all of our listeners out there to experience the Tracking Network for themselves by visiting www.cdc.gov/ephtracking.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.