

## NEHA NEWS

## New Perspectives on Environmental Health: The Approval of New Definitions

NEHA recently approved newly revised definitions of the terms “environmental health” and “environmental health professional” at the July 2013 board of directors meeting in Crystal City, Virginia. The approval was the culmination of a year-long process of reviewing previously published definitions, proposing revisions to the NEHA board of directors, publishing draft definitions for public comment, conducting an opinion survey, incorporating public comment, and final revision.

At the spring 2012 board of directors meeting, a work group was directed to review the definition of environmental health, which had been officially adopted by NEHA in 1996, as well as the definition of environmental health professional. The work group also was asked to consider how often these definitions should be revisited.

The work group met using conference calls and online tools for collaboration. They conducted searches for definitions used by textbook authors, government agencies, academic institutions, and individual practitioners. They employed group discussion and collaborative editing to draft the new definitions prior to reaching consensus among the work group members. The proposed definitions were submitted to the NEHA board of directors for approval, as well as to the *Journal of Environmental Health (JEH)* editorial staff for review.

In April 2013, NEHA President Brian Collins shared the draft definitions with the membership in his “President’s Message” column (Collins, 2013). He invited members of both NEHA and the public to participate in a survey about the definitions. The survey provided an opportunity to submit open-ended comments as well as responses to specific questions. A total of 206 people responded to the survey, conducted online using SurveyMonkey and a questionnaire developed specifically for the survey. Over 90% of respondents indicated agreement that the definitions should be periodically revised. Fifty-three percent of respondents, however, felt that the existing definition remained appropriate. Thus, it was evenly divided as to whether a change in definition was needed. In considering the proposed new definition of “environmental health” (Sidebar top right), 82% agreed that the new definition allowed understanding of the nature and purpose of environmental health.

When asked about the definition of “environmental health professional,” 81% believed that the new definition allows understanding of the nature and purpose of environmental health. A substantial number of respondents, however, indicated that the new definition of environmental health professional was overly complex, even though many more found it to be informative and inclusive. The work group carefully considered those comments and revised the definition substantially into the version presented here (Sidebar bottom right). Thus, the use of online surveys and public input were helpful in shaping the final definition as well as providing a “reality check.”

### Definition of Environmental Health

Environmental health is the science and practice of preventing human injury and illness and promoting well-being by

- identifying and evaluating environmental sources and hazardous agents and
- limiting exposures to hazardous physical, chemical, and biological agents in air, water, soil, food, and other environmental media or settings that may adversely affect human health.

### Definition of an Environmental Health Professional or Specialist

An environmental health professional or specialist is a practitioner with appropriate academic education and training and registration or certification to

- investigate, sample, measure, and assess hazardous environmental agents in various environmental media and settings;
- recommend and apply protective interventions that control hazards to health;
- develop, promote, and enforce guidelines, policies, laws, and regulations;
- develop and provide health communications and educational materials;
- manage and lead environmental health units within organizations;
- perform systems analysis;
- engage community members to understand, address, and resolve problems;
- review construction and land use plans and make recommendations;
- interpret research utilizing science and evidence to understand the relationship between health and environment; and
- interpret data and prepare technical summaries and reports.

Environmental health evolves as a field, and this trend generally means greater complexity of the field (Harrison & Coussens, 2007). The proposed definitions reflect this reality. A definition has a distinct purpose depending on how the definition is intended to be used. The work group’s intent was to provide an understanding of the concepts and allow accurate and inclusive communication,

based on contemporary practice and theory. The work group believes their efforts to be authoritative and complete definitions that may be used in official reports, textbooks, publications, and training materials. The revised definitions will provide for a better understanding of the conceptual basis of the terms as well as their scope and nature.

The work group acknowledges the great importance of clear and straightforward communications about environmental health and the profession. The definitions do more than just distill commonly used language about the concept and the profession. The newly adopted definitions will be useful when communicating with the public. One survey participant expressed that the definition should be “tweetable,” or communicated in 140 characters or less. To that end, we offer a tweet, based on a simplification of the definition:

*Environmental health evaluates hazards to health in the environment, protects all from harmful agents, and promotes health and well-being.*

The work group recommended that NEHA’s president appoint a work group every five years, or more often if necessary, to review the definitions and provide recommendations to the board of directors regarding appropriate changes and actions. NEHA’s board adopted this recommendation, and the policies and procedures now reflect the regular consideration of revision of the definitions in the future.

The work group appreciates that some people will disagree with NEHA’s newly adopted definitions; however, opportunity exists for additional definitions of the terms, based on philosophy, perspective, locale, and a host of other factors. NEHA recognizes that the definitions will change, and their internal process now recognizes that reality. NEHA hopes many will find the definitions useful to develop a better understanding of the field of environmental health.

What is your opinion of the new definitions? How will you use them? Will they be helpful to you when you communicate with the public? Please share your thoughts at <http://form.jotformpro.com/form/32254562666963>, or via NEHA’s Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/NEHA.org](http://www.facebook.com/NEHA.org)), or the LinkedIn forum entitled Environmental Health Professionals ([www.linkedin.com/groups/Environmental-Health-Specialist-Professionals-3820502?\\_mSplash=1](http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Environmental-Health-Specialist-Professionals-3820502?_mSplash=1)).

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- Sandra Long, REHS, NEHA Region Five Vice President;
- Adam London, RS, MPA, NEHA Region Six Vice President;
- Carolyn Hester Harvey, PhD, CIH, RS, DAAS, CHMM, NEHA President Elect; and
- Alicia Enriquez Collins, REHS, NEHA President.

## References

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- Harrison, M., & Coussens, C. (2007). *Global environmental health in the 21st century: From governmental regulation to corporate social responsibility*. Retrieved from [http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record\\_id=11833&page=R1](http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11833&page=R1)