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The United Nations, Climate Change, Environmental Health, and You

Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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The leading authority globally on climate change is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) within the United Nations. Every 5 years, the panel releases an extensive 3-part assessment on climate change that explores the science, the impacts, and the solutions. In February 2022, IPCC released findings from Working Group II as part of its Sixth Assessment Report. The Working Group II report—3,675 pages long itself—focused on climate change impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human communities. So, what do these findings mean for environmental health and you?

The Working Group II contribution to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report chronicles how climate change impacts human systems, including water scarcity and food production; health and well-being; and cities, settlements, and infrastructure. These systems span both the natural and built envi-

ronment and are closely or directly related to the environmental health field. The diversity of environmental health professionals ranges from inspectors who monitor our air, water, and food, to city planners who implement design strategies that keep us safe and mitigate the risk of harm around us. Environmental health professionals are at the core of public health, and therefore, also at the core of climate change solutions.

The IPCC (2022) report states with “very high” confidence that “climate change has negatively affected human health and well-being in North America.” We all see and feel the impacts of our changing climate but like many other environmental health challenges, risks and consequences vary by population. Factors including age, gender, location, and socioeconomic status influence how heavily the burden of climate change impacts various groups of people (IPCC, 2022). Within the U.S., communities of color

are disproportionately impacted by climate change. For example, Black and African American individuals are more likely to live in areas with the highest projected increase in deaths from extreme temperatures due to climate change (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). Additional IPCC health projections include “very high” confidence that morbidity will be impacted by mean temperatures and air pollution. Mortality will be impacted by severe windstorms. Morbidity and mortality will be impacted by extreme heat (IPCC, 2022).

We see these impacts played out in our own communities. Many people in the U.S. report that they have already experienced the impacts of climate change. For example, 79% of survey respondents report having noticed more extreme heat in the past few years (Hill, 2021). And a majority of people in the U.S.—especially in the West—report noticing more severe wildfires in the past few years (Hill, 2021). From a national poll, 78% of respondents indicated that they have been personally impacted by extreme weather in the last 5 years (NPR et al., 2022). At the same time from a different survey, 96% of U.S. adult respondents agree that we have a right to live in a healthy environment with clean air and water (Hill, 2021b). What actions can we take to get there? What can environmental health professionals do?

The most important thing you can do to help slow, stop, and reverse climate change is to communicate, especially about the health risks. From a 2022 survey, 60% of respondents say they are curious about climate change (Hill, 2022a). We need to turn that curiosity into action. Furthermore, 61% of people in the U.S. surveyed associate heat

waves with climate change and 50–60% associate severe storms, drought, wildfires, and floods with climate change (Hill, 2022b). Less understood impacts of climate change include air pollution, seasonal allergies, and disease-carrying insects. Of those surveyed, only 21% noted the association of climate change with disease-carrying insects (Hill, 2022b). As trusted professionals, talking about climate change in terms of real, tangible, and local impacts helps build support for climate action.

So, when you talk about climate change, keep these factors in mind:

- **Start with people.** Consider the concerns and values—such as family, community, health, and fairness—of those you are speaking to and honor them. Then, move from people to climate.
- **Make it real.** Focus on local realities everyone can see with their own eyes and bring forward your own climate journey to personalize the issue.
- **Focus on solutions and personal benefit.** Avoid speaking about climate solutions as a matter of sacrifice. Solutions invest today in the future we want tomorrow. Emphasize local, tangible, and effective solutions.
- **Inspire and empower.** People are often told that we cannot make a difference on climate change but that is not true. Provide hope and optimism by sharing solutions and letting your audience know that we can make a difference.
- **Be thoughtful.** Be considerate to your audience and ask them to get involved in action today.

Additionally, you can bring climate change forward in all aspects of your life. A total of 88% of surveyed people in the U.S. are either very, somewhat, or a little concerned about climate change, which means there is an opportunity to help initiate climate conversations in your neighborhood, workplace, and community (Hill, 2022c). For environmental health professionals in community health departments, state agencies, or the federal government, consider the following about people in the U.S. who we surveyed in 2021:

- 70% say it is the responsibility of local communities to address climate change,
- 69% say it is the responsibility of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to address climate change, and

“Climate change is here today. It’s impacting our health today. And there’s something we can do about it. It’s all in our hands.”

Georges C. Benjamin, MD,
Executive Director, American
Public Health Association
(ecoAmerica, 2022, 6:13)

- 64% say it is the responsibility of states to address climate change (Hill, 2021b).

Notably, more than any other group, people in the U.S. said that it was their personal responsibility to address climate change (Hill, 2021b). Your colleagues, friends, and family want to be part of the solution. Reach out to everyone, every day. Follow these steps and contact your local elected and appointed officials to get started on advocacy:

1. **Know who represents you.** It takes only a moment to find out who your local representatives are. Learn about their priorities to see how and why climate change ties into their interests.
2. **Look for local connections and leverage points.** Focus on solutions that can take place in your local community first, then engage with them and help local government make the connections.
3. **Do not limit yourself.** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to climate change at the local level. See where you can make the greatest impact and engage with elected officials on those issues.
4. **Be persistent and clear.** Use several means of communication. Especially when voting is around the corner, use all forms of communication to let elected officials know you expect ambitious climate action. Phone calls, email messages, and all forms of social media can help get your priorities across.

5. **When you send an email, put your “ask” in the subject line.** Make your request clear so elected officials can count you as a constituent that cares about climate solutions.
6. **Tell a personal story that brings the issue home.** Focus on issues that are important to you to help make your message stick.
7. **Say thank you.** When elected officials follow through with climate action, show gratitude.
8. **Join a local organization that focuses on climate issues.** If there is not one in your local community, work with your family and neighbors on climate advocacy.

The latest IPCC report shows that climate change already has—and continues to have—adverse impacts on our health, ecosystems, and communities. The findings, however, remind us how critical it is to take action. Join us in these steps toward solutions and invite people in your local environmental health community to join you. 🌱

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Thank you.

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