



ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES CASE STUDY

Ensuring water safety in Oregon

When state and federal natural resources and environmental agencies noticed an increase in Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) in Oregon's waters, they contacted the state environmental health department for a better understanding of the health risks, assistance in developing evidence-based standards for advisories, and providing risk communication to local communities. Diverse agencies and organizations now work together to protect Oregonians from the health risks of HABs exposure.

HABs in Oregon

A little over a decade ago, the Oregon Public Health Division (OPHD) started to receive requests from the public and other state and federal agencies (natural resources, drinking water, parks and recreation) for information about the health impacts of HABs in Oregon's waters. HABs are composed of cyanobacteria that, depending on environmental conditions, can form cyanotoxins. Human, pet and wildlife contact with water containing HABs has been linked to skin irritation, rash, diarrhea and cramping. Consumption of large volumes of water can cause fainting, numbness, tingling, dizziness and paralysis. Additional health concerns exist for local rural communities, who may consume contaminated fish or use the water as their primary drinking water source.

HAB Advisories: A Multi-Agency Effort

When a HAB is identified, waterbody managers will take water samples. Depending on results, OPHD will issue a public advisory about the risk

of coming in contact with the water. A press release is coordinated by multiple agencies and communicated to the public through a variety of other channels, including signage at the site. Water is monitored until the HAB dies and the water is once again considered safe for recreation and consumption.

A Growing Public Health Concern

Two toxicologists in OPHD's Environmental Public Health Section were responding to requests about HABs and all other environmental health concerns that fell outside the scope of funded programs. In 2008, OPHD received a CDC grant to provide public education on health risks and issue and lift public health advisories about HABs. The funding allowed the OPHD to conduct outreach to the public, dog owners, veterinarians, partner agencies about the science and policy of HABs, and develop best practices for advisories.

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Prior to OPHD's involvement in advisories, they were issued by the municipality with jurisdiction over each individual water body, creating an inconsistent approach that was not linked to the scientific evidence.

Public health advisories to close recreational waters have a major economic impact on local economies, as recreational fees often decline at times of high use such as the summer season. A literature review based on the available evidence of the health impacts of HABs helped OPHD create consistent guidelines for recreation and drinking water that can be used to post HAB advisories in a consistent and fair way. Although the CDC funding ended in 2013, these guidelines are still in use. They also provide clarity on shared responsibility for water monitoring after the initial bloom is discovered, and communications with decision makers, the general public and the media.

Sustained Success

The HABs initiative in Oregon is a clear example of an effective Health in All Policies approach. Multiple state, federal and local agencies and organizations, including the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Forest Service, the state environmental and natural resource agencies, the state drinking water

program, two state universities, the local parks and recreation departments and the Oregon Lakes Association all requested the involvement and assistance of the OPHD in providing a health perspective and risk communication about HABs that was previously absent. OPHD not only provided a health lens, but filled necessary gaps in the effort when they assumed authority for issuing and lifting advisories, coordinating monitoring efforts and developing much needed educational materials. The funding also allowed partners to build relationships through regular convening at meetings and an annual conference, and provide training to environmental health specialists. Despite the loss of program funding OPHD created guidelines and educational materials that are still in use by partner agencies, and developed sustained relationships with partner agencies that continue to work on HABs issues, now with a careful consideration of impacts to the public's health.

For more information, please contact:

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The development of this resource was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number EH11-1110 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Health in All Policies is a collaborative approach that integrates and articulates health considerations into policymaking and programming across sectors, and at all levels, to improve the health of all communities and people.

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