

The Long View

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Climate Change and Public Health

By Ann McQuesten

On October 9, 2013, the Multnomah County Health Department released the Multnomah County Climate Change and Public Health Preparation Plan. The plan was developed in response to the City of Portland and Multnomah County's 2009 Climate Action Plan, which tasked county and city agencies with developing a plan to "adapt successfully" to changes in the climate. Below is a summary.

The full plan, including a discussion of each of the county's concerns and of individual strategies the county, its regional partners, and individuals can take to build local resilience to changes in our climate, is available at

https://web.multco.us/sites/default/files/documents/multnomah_county_climate_change_and_public_health_preparation_plan_2013.pdf.

Summary

Based on scientific data, we will likely feel the impacts from the current buildup of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere for decades.

These impacts, such as hotter summers and wetter, warmer winters for the Pacific Northwest, will likely affect our health, especially those most vulnerable. Communities must, therefore, begin to plan and prepare for the likely impacts that will be experienced because of the emissions already present in the atmosphere.

The Multnomah County/City of Portland Climate Action Plan identified "Climate Change Preparation" as one of its eight key action areas with the objective to "adapt successfully to a changing climate."

Adaptation means "to adjust to a new situation or environment" such as an increase in consecutive days over 95 degrees. The plan communicates what the local impacts may be; which populations and areas may be impacted; why equity and justice are key parts of this work; and what we can do to further prevent health issues and disparities.

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Key Findings

The County must prioritize protecting the health of vulnerable populations. This includes the elderly, people with pre-existing health conditions, people who live in poverty, and people of color. Members of these communities and their advocates must be involved in the implementation of the County's actions and new efforts.

Heat waves are becoming more common in our region and can be devastating, especially in urban areas like Portland that are not accustomed to extreme heat.

Many air pollutants are known to be detrimental to our health and hotter weather will worsen their impacts

The geographical spread of mosquitoes and ticks is changing and this may bring new diseases to our region.

There is a broad range of actions that can be implemented to better understand and vastly reduce these risks. For exam-

ple, we can plant trees in areas where we have a lot of concrete to provide natural cooling and reduce the heat island effect. Improving air quality generates multiple immediate health benefits and reduces the long-term impacts of climate change.

Assessing Vulnerability

The county Stakeholder Advisory Committee included members with expertise in heat-related morbidity and mortality trends, knowledge of asthma rates, awareness of emergency preparedness plans and capacity to respond to extreme weather events, knowledge of surveillance and monitoring of vectors, and overall awareness of health disparities and impacts to vulnerable populations.

Based on deliberations, research papers, and current county preparedness, the County decided to focus on heat-related illness, respiratory disease (asthma and allergies), and vector-borne disease.

Primary Health Concerns

Heat:

The impacts of heat and poor outdoor air quality are of high concern given their current impact and the disparities that exist among vulnerable populations and neighborhoods. Parts of our community are far more vulnerable to heat because of the urban heat-island effect and other social factors. The advisory committee felt strongly that we, as a community, must plan for these extreme-heat events and eliminate a disparity that may be amplified by climate change.

Air Quality:

Poor air-quality already impacts the health of our community. A separate study commissioned by DEQ found that air in the Portland metropolitan region exceeds health benchmarks for a number of toxics including diesel particulate matter, and the disparity in toxicity is an environmental justice concern. Because air quality will be worsening, even in the absence of climate change, it is particularly important to understand the interplay between climate change and air-quality, but the County must begin protecting our communities without delay. Climate change will also bring higher concentrations of ground-level ozone, a pollutant not addressed in the study mentioned above, elevating air-quality to a primary health concern.

Vector-Borne Illnesses:

Multnomah County has a history of addressing mosquito-borne diseases including West Nile virus. Because of the relative uncertainty around how climate change may impact vector populations, the advisory committee felt that the County's vector programs must be fully supported as we plan for new and emerging vector-borne diseases. ■

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