

Who are we and what do we want to be?

I recently wrote an [editorial](#) for the journal with this very title. In that editorial, I looked at issues that our profession is facing today (like the possible creation of a new Food Safety Protection Agency, the emergence of accreditation for local environmental health programs and even where environmental health should fit within the overall debate about health care reform) and asked:

- What do we want to see for the future of environmental health?
- How would we like these specific issues to play out?
- How should these issues play out so that the cause and practice of environmental health can be enhanced?

NEHA views these questions with an unprecedented seriousness. In fact, because we are so concerned about how these issues evolve, we have devoted our entire AEC opening Keynote to a panel discussion of our profession's future. We've also made questions about our future the centerpiece for our conference focus groups this year.

Coming up with an intelligent position/perspective on these policy issues that is representative of the environmental health community (or profession) as a whole is no small task. I say that because environmental health as a profession is unbelievably fragmented. (Even within what we might call the purest piece of the environmental health community (i.e., that piece that exists within the public health field), the majority of our practitioners practice with no formal education and/or degree in environmental health!) In fact, even the idea that there is a professional environmental health community is probably more an illusion than a reality – since our profession is practiced in so many different settings by so many differently educated people and with so little (if any) linkage between the settings.

And yet who could argue that these policy issues (to say nothing of our profession) wouldn't stand to benefit from having an environmental health perspective integrated into their ultimate resolution? After all, and as I pointed out in my journal editorial, if a new federal Food Agency ultimately leads to a collapse of local environmental health programs (as might happen if local food safety professionals all move into new state Food Agencies in a manner similar to what happened following the creation of a multitude of state EPA's) and NEHA said nothing about unintended consequences at a time when such an insight could have prevented such an outcome, that would constitute a failure on NEHA's part of the largest proportion.

But before NEHA can fashion a policy position that truly represents a community as fragmented as ours, we need input. We need to know what professionals think about the broader issue of what our future can be as well as what we should be saying on the emerging policy issues that have such major implications for environmental health as a practice.

Thinking like this led us to the creation of this, our first blog. We want to reach out as best we can to invite anyone and everyone who practices environmental health anywhere to share with us (and your professional colleagues), thoughts that you have on both the broader topic of our profession's future as well as the more specific policy challenges that are now emerging for our profession.

If interested in sharing your thoughts and views, you are also welcome to [view the background paper](#) that was prepared for our conference focus group discussions this year.

To help others to follow your points, we ask only one courtesy. As you present your viewpoints, please identify which question below you are responding to by beginning your response with the code term for the question of interest to you.

Thank you for letting us know what you think!

Questions:

- What are the unintended consequences (especially for local health departments) if a new federal Food Protection Agency is created? What should NEHA be saying to policy makers about this proposal? (**Issue 1 – Food Agency**)
- What should environmental health look like after successful health care reform is instituted? (You can talk about any aspect of this fascinating issue, e.g., which institutions should environmental health should be practiced in, what funding mechanisms should be used for EH, what should the relationship between environmental health and the personal health care system look like, etc.) (**Issue 2 Health Care Reform**)
- How should accreditation evolve as a policy consideration for local environmental health programs? (**Issue 3 – Accreditation**)

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