

▶ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Tom Butts, MSc, REHS

Environmental Health Professionals: Stand Up and Be Recognized

Greetings from Colorado. I am honored to have been elected to serve as the 2023–2024 president of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). I have been a member since 1985. Prior to being elected to the NEHA Board of Directors, I served as the technical section co-chair for terrorism and all-hazard preparedness in 2003–2005 and counted NEHA election ballots back when they were paper.

I have observed many changes at NEHA and am now part of working to assure we actively support the profession and build a solid foundation to continue that work moving forward. This work is not without its own challenges for a profession that regularly steps up to meet the ever-evolving list of national emerging issues to backyard disasters. The profession is faced with the need to evolve and grow. The profession is also challenged at times to manage directives to trim back when economic pressures or other priorities impact their budgets—a hazard of being partly or fully funded by program fees.

I have benefited from attending and presenting at a variety of NEHA Annual Educational Conferences (AECs) over the years in great spots such as Denver, Anchorage, Las Vegas, Grand Rapids, and Spokane. I look forward to the 2023 AEC in New Orleans with anticipation about both the content and the people. The AECs and the variety of other webinars and continuing education programs and opportunities NEHA provides are quality ways to refresh knowledge, learn new skills, and engage with subject matter experts and peers from across the country.

We need to capitalize on the contacts and community members we interact with to demonstrate the value of our work.

I landed in the environmental health undergraduate program at Colorado State University after considering environmental engineering and other programs. The program appealed to my interests in science and the environment, and how that impacts human health, disease control, and epidemiology. The final piece of this program was an internship with a toxicologist from Region 8 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency where I listened to community members impacted by sites in urban communities and in the rural Rocky Mountains, and witnessed the challenges of responding to large and complex sites with evolving environment data, health effects, and toxicology uncertainties.

After graduating with a bachelor of science degree in environmental health with a minor in chemistry, I took an entry-level position as an environmental health specialist with the Tri-County Health Department in the Denver metropolitan area. I benefited from a well-crafted, agency-specific training program to become field ready. My knowledge and skills were also built, in a significant way, by

attending many general and specialized training and education programs provided by the Colorado Environmental Health Association (CEHA). The great annual educational conferences offered by the NEHA affiliates are still the places many go to share successes and learn about new ways of doing our work.

I joined CEHA as a student in 1984 and later served as a regional board member from 2007–2009 and treasurer from 2009–2011 (yes, I did the ever-important organization tax 1099s and maintained our nonprofit good standing status). I then served as the CEHA president elect, president, and past president from 2016–2018. Working with my peers from across the state—from the uniformed services to retail food and wastewater industries—was rewarding and challenging. This work helped me to understand the range of systems we operate in and the driving forces we need to acknowledge. Having support from my employer to participate in these roles to build skills and knowledge paid dividends when I took on leadership roles in the agency.

Early in my career, I learned from the first environmental health director I worked for at Tri-County Health Department, Dr. Chris Wiant, that an environmental health group could play a key role identifying and working to address a wide range of community challenges. Dr. Wiant went on to serve as president of NEHA from 1992–1993. He was open to exploring new activities and programs, with the supporting funding of course, and while working to support and improve existing core environmental health programs. This exploration resulted in

unique coordination with organizations that represented consumer product safety, local first responders, and healthcare providers. Dr. Wiant empowered the staff to participate in Local Emergency Planning Commissions, to learn and use GIS to map old landfills, and to work directly to represent local interests where Superfund sites impacted communities. These efforts were supported by hiring engineers and occupational health staff (i.e., certified industrial hygienists) to address community hazards.

During my career in environmental health at the local government level, I have had the pleasure of holding positions with responsibilities in food safety, water quality and wastewater, childcare, household chemical waste, hazardous waste, air quality, and emergency preparedness, along with leadership roles as the environmental health director and agency deputy director. Each position provided an opportunity to collaborate with peers to learn, grow, and engage. Currently, I am an environmental public health consultant.

As community needs and interests change, so has the scope of the environmental health practice. It also varies widely with large agencies having up to 20 or more programs and small agencies only able to provide core programs. Working to assure compliance with sound science-based regulations is founda-

tional for food safety, water quality, and other programs. Working to influence land use cases to address healthy eating, active living, environmental injustice, and local hazards is an important role as well. Explaining that all these issues are encompassed by environmental health is the real trick.

NEHA and our members currently face the ongoing evolution of the food industry and must continue to engage with many partners to assure food safety. We also must find ways to keep and gain new funding and provide support for our communities. We should become more prepared for emerging issues such as harmful algal blooms and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in our water, wastewater, and biosolids. We must strengthen our risk communication skills to be prepared to engage with citizen science using low-cost tools to gather air and water quality data in our communities. The Spark! Leadership Series and Environmental Health Leadership Academy offered by NEHA are terrific programs to build skills and interface with experts and peers.

Here are a couple of issues I hope you will see as priorities for our profession and NEHA:

- Assure support for and recognition of environmental health practitioners and the key roles they play in protecting communities from adverse health impacts.

- Reinforce and enhance the value and recognition of the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential.
- Encourage an active role for environmental health professionals as evidence-based policy advocates as we work in all our environmental programs and to address environmental justice, sustainability, and climate change.

I see governmental environmental health professionals as the most can-do part of the public health system. We have great partners in industry and academia that we must continue to actively work with and support where possible.

Environmental health professionals have more contact with the community than any other element of the environmental public health system. We need to capitalize on the contacts and community members (e.g., the regulated community, local agency contacts, the public at large) we interact with to demonstrate the value of our work. As I reflect on the work we do, I like to say, “Public health is an important part of environmental health.” ✨



President@neha.org

Did You Know?

For every \$1 we receive in membership dues, we return \$19 in the form of investments in capacity building—leadership, training, and education. Join now to take advantage of this return on investment at www.neha.org/membership.

Stand out in the crowd.

Show the world you are the environmental health expert you know you are with a credential. You might even earn more or get promoted.

neha.org/credentials

