This Great Recession continues to have significant impacts on the delivery of services in environmental health and protection. In spite of high public awareness and support for food safety and other environmental health programs, we routinely see media accounts of the reduction and even elimination of vital governmental programs that had been established to protect public health and safety. Earlier this year NEHA completed an Environmental Health Regulatory Food Safety Program Capacity Assessment (now posted online at www.neha.org/food_safety/index.html) with 58% of reporting jurisdictions indicating a recent decrease in overall budgets and 14% indicating an increase in overall budgets. Somewhat surprisingly, 48% or more of assessment participants indicated no change for programmatic capacities, with many apparently able to carry out their programs with no major hardship. While this is clearly the worst economic climate of my lifetime, economic downturns are not unprecedented and we can learn much from our past experiences, especially from those innovative programs that have not only survived but thrived when challenged.

More With Less?
“Doing more with less” has become the refrain of many as they have experienced revenue and resource reductions. This may be more of a slogan than a reality, since it might be described more accurately as “doing things differently with less.” Strategies and actions can almost always be taken to reduce costs, better utilize existing resources, and even augment available revenues. Every organization will have some unique characteristics, but nearly all could enhance service delivery by using some combination of these strategies.

Decreasing Costs
In the past, many environmental health operations have not had the need or even the ability to influence many of their program costs. Salaries and benefits drive most program costs and these can generally be reduced only by staffing reductions. Many other costs are allocated or determined by agency policy or practices and are difficult if not impossible to change. That said, it is always valuable to periodically review all costs to make a good-faith effort to seek out all potential savings. Examples of cost decreases might include elimination or reduction in costs associated with underutilized equipment or vehicles. In some instances the impact of staffing decreases can be minimized by selectively reducing activities associated with low-risk operations. For example, food operations that only sell prepared packaged food such as candy do not require the same attention as a facility that prepares more potentially hazardous food items.

Better Use of Existing Resources
Existing resources can at times be better utilized with consolidations, scheduling, and routing. For most activities, administrative and travel time are much less productive than time in the field, and field time can be increased by changes to staff schedules that have more days beginning and ending in the field rather than the office. Scheduling and routing inspections in a geographic cluster can also increase efficiency. Consolidating inspections (e.g., having one specialist perform multiple inspections at a single site) can provide savings, especially when the other inspections are fully funded. A word of caution—I have seen instances in which the time required to cross-train specialized inspectors was greater than the savings derived from consolidation.

Augmentation of Revenues
Faced with decreased tax revenues, many environmental health agencies have augmented—and some have even completely replaced—tax revenue with “fees for service.”
Fees are generally defined as cost-recovery assessments that are directly related to activities associated with a given program (e.g., a restaurant fee to recover the program costs associated with implementing a food safety program. It is important to note that effective cost recovery includes recovery of all costs including overhead, training, travel, and any necessary follow-up, and that this is not simply an “inspection fee.”). In addition to fees, opportunities are frequently available to increase revenues by applying for grants or taking on contracts. In California, environmental health program activities are funded by a variety of fees including volume-based solid-waste fees; advance disposal fees for electronics, appliances, and tires; an assessment on gasoline sales that pays for underground storage tank cleanups; a surcharge on paint manufacturing that pays for childhood lead poisoning activities; and more. All of these revenue-enhancing solutions have a common requirement that the revenue is dependent on and requires the performance of specific activities and outcomes.

While increased fee or contract revenues can allow for a higher level of staffing and resources, impacts also occur on program priorities and flexibility. Specific fee revenues must be spent on specific program activities, generally with little flexibility. Fee payers expect to be treated as customers or clients and will require accountability for their assessed fees. Elected officials are usually reluctant to impose or raise fees if significant industry opposition exists, so programs need to develop communication and a working relationship with the regulated community.

The Promise of Technology

Technology can frequently provide program savings, but often only after an initial investment. For instance, you may be able to find savings in going from paper forms and files to an electronic format, but only after investing in equipment, software, and training. As this initial investment is not necessarily an ongoing cost, a grant, a loan, or a one-time allocation can be an appropriate funding mechanism. This is a good example of when the return on investment can be significant, but only when you have adequate access to resources in order to meet the initial implementation costs.

One Size Does Not Fit All

All communities and organizations have unique characteristics, and while there are no universal solutions, many lessons can be learned from others who have survived and even prospered during difficult times. My personal experiences and observations in California and elsewhere have led me to believe that environmental health enjoys public support and revenue opportunities that are not always available to others in public health and government in general, and these current challenges can eventually create opportunities to stabilize and solidify the base finances for our programs.