

Climate and Health Policy Statement

POSITION

State and territorial health officials (S/THOs) can provide critical leadership to prevent, protect, and respond to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events. ASTHO supports building and sustaining public health programs that increase capacity to improve the overall readiness and resilience of a community.

BACKGROUND

Climate and weather have an appreciable impact on public health, safety, and quality of life. In July 2022, nighttime temperatures were the warmest in U.S. history, and nearly two-thirds of people across the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico were affected by drought. Additional examples of climate change impacts throughout the U.S in 2020-2023, include megadrought¹ and wildfires² in the West, extreme precipitation in California³ and the Gulf Coast⁴, warm ocean anomalies⁵ and extreme heat events in the Pacific Northwest⁶, two debilitating ice storms in Texas⁷, and wildfire smoke drift from Canada to the East Coast and Midwest⁸. Since 1980, climate change and extreme weather events have cost the United States an estimated \$2.15 trillion.⁹

Summary of Recommendations

- Expand sufficient and sustained federal funding, technical assistance, and training.
- Support efforts to conduct climate adaptation and vulnerability assessments and planning activities.
- Expand state and territorial health agency monitoring and surveillance capacity.
- Incorporate assessment and evaluation strategies.
- Build public awareness, messaging, and education—including effective risk communication—to increase the public’s will and support for climate and health programs.
- Promote environmental stewardship.
- Strengthen cross-sector partnerships.

In addition to the financial costs, the anticipated health effects related to weather and climate include death and illness from heat waves physical and mental health impacts from catastrophic events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods; increased air pollution with concurrent rises in respiratory and cardiovascular diseases¹⁰; detrimental impacts on water quality and quantity; and an increased incidence of vector-borne, foodborne, and waterborne diseases including hazards from harmful algal blooms.¹¹ Recent climate and weather-related challenges, from extreme weather events to changing patterns of disease, have already demonstrated the critical need to improve public health capacity and capability to identify, prevent, and respond to these threats. Moreover, most jurisdictions do not have adequate funding or capacity to address climate change impacts.

In November 2018, Volume II of the Fourth National Climate Assessment was released by the [U.S. Global Change Research Program](#). This report is a product of 13 federal agencies and contains supporting evidence on climate change impacts, risks, and adaptations occurring in the U.S. The report states that human health and safety, our quality of life, and the rate of economic growth in communities across the U.S. are increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The report also notes that climate change threatens the health and well-being of the U.S. population through an increase in the frequency and duration of extreme weather events, worsening air quality, the spread of vector-borne, food-borne, and water-borne diseases, and declining availability of food and water.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ASTHO recommends the following policy considerations for public health to adopt to increase capacity to prevent, protect, and respond to the impacts of climate and extreme weather:

- **Expand federal funding, technical assistance, and training to include all state, territorial, freely associated state, and local health agencies to build, sustain and expand key health security programs that increase**

capacity to prevent, protect, and respond to the human health impacts of climate and extreme weather.

This may include but is not limited to, CDC’s Climate-Ready States and Cities Initiative, the CDC Public Health Emergency Preparedness cooperative agreement, the CDC Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity cooperative agreement, and HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response’s Hospital Preparedness Program. CDC’s Climate and Health Program needs to continue to serve as the scientific leader and provide resource support and technical assistance to state and territorial health agencies to identify, prevent, and respond to climate-related health impacts in their communities. Additionally, ASTHO encourages all federal agencies to consider including public health when providing funding for climate-related infrastructure and to consider opportunities to maximize health co-benefits of mitigation investments, such as Inflation Reduction Act programs.

- **Support state and territorial health agency efforts to conduct climate adaptation and vulnerability assessments and planning activities.** Climate and weather-related impacts will not affect every population, state, territory, or region in the same way. State and territorial health agencies should prepare and plan for climate effects likely to, or already impacting, their unique geography and communities, recognizing the interconnected nature of our natural, built, and social systems. Vulnerable populations, including those who are biologically, culturally, economically, geographically, and politically vulnerable, are likely to be disproportionately impacted. With the necessary support of relevant federal agencies, state and territorial health agencies can take steps to assess their distinct vulnerabilities, both locally and regionally, and develop a framework for adapting to experienced and expected climate and extreme weather health impacts.
- **Expand state and territorial health agency monitoring and surveillance capacity.** Developing strategic climate monitoring, surveillance, and response systems to prevent and respond to climate-related impacts may include creating decision support systems that enable agencies to predict, anticipate, and model events and early warning systems that enable rapid response. The capacity to systematically collect, manage, analyze, and interpret climate and extreme weather data and the impact on human health is critical to making informed climate policy. CDC’s Environmental Public Health Tracking program must be expanded to all jurisdictions and enhanced so as to guide and evaluate public health actions that can prevent or mitigate environmental hazards’ impact on health. Additionally, continued investments in CDC’s National Syndromic Surveillance Program will enable early detection of climate and extreme weather-related outbreaks, or other novel incidents, and promote rapid response.
- **Incorporate assessment and evaluation strategies.** Rigorously evaluating all state and territorial health agency climate and weather interventions will help ensure that they are cost-effective, impactful, and advance the principles of health equity. State and territorial health agencies can employ tools such as CDC’s Building Resilience Against Climate Effects framework to assess climate readiness and health impact assessments. This will help states and territories determine the health implications of existing and future policy decisions.
- **Build public awareness, messaging, and education—including effective risk communication—to increase public will and support for environmental public health programs that increase capacity to prevent, protect, and respond to the health impacts of climate and extreme weather.** State and territorial health agencies are uniquely positioned to inform communities, policymakers, other government agencies, and industry about the public health impacts of climate and extreme weather. Raising public awareness and improving effective risk communication about the health-related impacts of climate and weather events can build a broader constituency that supports public health programs and helps ensure their sustainability.
- **Promote environmental stewardship.** State and territorial health agencies are poised to advance policies that protect public health and maintain a healthy environment in which to live, work, and play. Public health professionals may educate and advise stakeholders about the potential health implications of individual and

social behavior and consumption of goods and services that may contribute to the negative impacts of climate change. Public health leaders can advise stakeholders on the responsible use and protection of the natural environment in order to mitigate the potential and evidence-based catalysts of climate change and extreme weather.

- **Strengthen cross-sector partnerships.** An interdisciplinary approach to address the health effects of climate and weather variations can protect lives, reduce costs, improve effectiveness, and build valuable relationships with a variety of partners. State and territorial health agencies must integrate climate readiness into and across all programs. Public health officials at all levels of government should redouble their efforts to raise awareness and advocate for a “Health in All Policies” approach to climate and weather preparedness and resilience. This will promote healthier and more sustainable communities through improved land use planning; facility siting; critical infrastructure maintenance; and housing, transportation, energy, agriculture, and water supply management and quality.

POLICY APPROVAL HISTORY

Climate and Health Policy Statement (current policy)

Environmental Health Policy Committee Approval: July 25, 2023

Board of Directors Approval: October 23, 2023

Policy Expires: October 31, 2026

Climate and Extreme Weather Events Policy Statement (prior policy)

Drafting Committee Approval: September 23, 2019

Board of Directors Approval: December 11, 2019

Policy Expires: December 31, 2022

ASTHO membership supported the development of this policy, which was subsequently approved by the ASTHO Board of Directors. Be advised that the statements are approved as a general framework on the issue at a point in time. Any given state or territorial health official must interpret the issue within the current context of his/her jurisdiction and therefore may not adhere to all aspects of this Policy Statement.

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¹ NIDIS, NOAA. “Research spotlight: Climate-driven megadrought.” <https://www.drought.gov/research-spotlight-climate-driven-megadrought>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

² “This is the worst fire season the American West has ever seen.” *The Economist*. October 14, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/10/14/this-is-the-worst-fire-season-the-american-west-has-ever-seen>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

³ NOAA. “More heavy rain, snow, and wind hitting western U.S.” March 24, 2023. <https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/news/more-heavy-rain-snow-and-wind-hitting-western-us>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁴ Cappucci M. “Historic downpour in Fort Lauderdale dropped 88 billion gallons of rain.” *The Washington Post*. April 14, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2023/04/14/florida-fort-lauderdale-flooding/>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁵ Li D, Chen Y, Qi J, Zhu Y, Lu C, Yin B. “Attribution of the July 2021 record-breaking Northwest Pacific Marine Heatwave to global warming, atmospheric circulation, and ENSO.” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*. 2023;104(1). <https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/bams/104/1/BAMS-D-22-0142.1.xml>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁶ White RH, Anderson S, Booth JF, et al. “The unprecedented Pacific Northwest Heatwave of June 2021.” *Nature Communications*. 2023;14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-36289-3>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁷ Homeland Security Digital Library. “2021 Texas Power Crisis.” August 25, 2022. <https://www.hsdl.org/c/tl/2021-texas-power-crisis/>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁸ Salahieh N. “More than a third of the US population, from the Midwest to the East Coast, under air quality alerts from Canadian wildfire smoke.” *CNN*. June 28, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/27/us/canada-wildfire-smoke-great-lakes/index.html>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

⁹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. “Highlights of the Findings of the U.S. Global Change Research Program Climate Science Special Report: Executive Summary.” <https://science2017.globalchange.gov/chapter/executive-summary>. Accessed 7-24-2023.

¹⁰ National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. “Cardiovascular Disease and Stroke: Climate and Human Health.” https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/programs/geh/climatechange/health_impacts/cardiovascular_diseases/index.cfm. Accessed 7-24-2023.

¹¹ National Climate Assessment. “Fourth National Climate Assessment. Volume II: Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States. Summary Findings 6: Health.” <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov>. Accessed 7-24-2023.