Public Health Communications during Wildfire Events

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Workshop on Wildland Fire Smoke Health Effects Research and Tools to Inform Public Health Policy and Recommendations
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What We Do

• Provide national leadership in environmental health response and health communications.

• Assist state public health agencies in responding to widespread fire events.
  — Forest fires: AZ, CA, GA, MT
  — Agricultural burns: KS

• Assist states with health effect surveillance and with developing and disseminating health communication messages.
Health Belief Model

• Perceived
  – susceptibility
  – severity
  – benefits
  – barriers
• Self-efficacy
• Cue to action
Health Belief Model

• Encourage residents to adopt protective actions: residents need to believe
  – that they are potentially susceptible to a serious health threat
  – that there is a relative advantage to taking action
  – that they are capable of taking action

• They must see themselves as able to overcome any barriers to taking an action

• They must be appropriately cued about when to take the action
Communications gaps

• What basic communications tools are needed?
• What basic event information is needed?
  – wind direction
  – smoke contents
  – smoke duration
• How do you get timely and useful event information?
Communications gaps

• What do you need to know about audiences?
  – demographics
  – existing health conditions
  – geographic location

• How do you get timely and useful audience information?

• What does not work?
Conference summary: International Biomass Smoke Health Effects (IBSHE)
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Wood smoke risk assessment: Defining the questions
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Public communication in unplanned biomass burning events
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Public communication in unplanned biomass burning events

• Lessons “learned”:
  • Know your audience
  • No substitute for experience
  • Experience and needs vary across states and localities
Public communication in unplanned biomass burning events

- Key vehicle for sharing experience is *Wildfire Smoke: A Guide for Public Health officials*
- When fires are “old” your messages need to be “new”
  - public perception of personal risk becomes tempered by the experience of having weathered previous years’ events
Public communication in unplanned biomass burning events

• All response is local
• Public health messages depend on event
  – “stay inside”
  – “limit exertion”
• Communications channels depend on community
  – Local news media
  – Local opinion leaders
Challenges for health agencies

• Air Quality staff may not be trained in emergency response
• Air Quality may not be part of emergency response planning
• Flexible messaging
New Mexico Visibility Method

- If it is smoky outside, is visibility closer to 5 miles, 3 miles or 1 mile?
  - Use the Visibility Mapping Tool, or
  - pick a landmark you are familiar with and see if you can see it.

Air Quality and Emergencies
http://www.cdc.gov/air/air_events.htm
http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/

For more information please contact Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30333
Telephone: 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)/TTY: 1-888-232-6348
Visit: www.cdc.gov | Contact CDC at: 1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/info

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.