

The Florida Environmental Health Association Position Relating to Climate Change and Its Effects

This position paper is intended to clarify and extend the arguments made in FEHA Resolution – “FEHA SUPPORT STRONG EFFORTS TO REVERSE CLIMATE CHANGE AND ADAPT TO ITS EFFECTS” – as well as to cite specific best practices as required by that document.

1. Environmental Health and Climate Change

“Climate change will affect, in profoundly adverse ways, some of the most fundamental determinants of health: food, air, water.”¹

Dr Margaret Chan
Director-General of the World Health Organization, December 2007

Environmental Health stands at the intersection of public health and the environment. Food, air and water - the same elements so disturbed by climate change - are our business. This gives the field and its practitioners a special role to play in developing and implementing policies to protect the people of Florida against climate impacts.

Thus, the Florida Environmental Health Association (FEHA) has resolved to take a firm stand on the public health threat of climate change and the specific policies which its members feel will help to decrease that threat for ourselves and our children. In a brief space, then, FEHA will lay out specific threats to Florida and concrete solutions for *mitigating* the problem of climate change and *adapting* to those changes which are now unavoidable.

2. Public Health Threats

There is nearly universal consensus in the scientific community that the threat from climate change is both real and strongly influenced by human activities. In general, FEHA stands behind the Nobel Prize-winning work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), whose 2007 Fourth Assessment Report has changed the face of the climate change debate.

In Florida, particularly, climate change could result in both periods of extended drought as well as stronger & more frequent hurricanes. Drought related threats include decreases in water quality and quantity, aquifer salt water intrusion, and favorable conditions for the proliferation of harmful algal blooms, amoebas, (such as *Naegleria*) and waterborne bacteria, (such as *Vibrio vulnificus*). Threats from frequent hurricanes include wind and water damage to public health infrastructure and an increase in flooding, sewage spills, storm water pollutants, and vector populations. The results of these impacts may be increased threats from toxic exposures and the increased occurrence of vector borne, waterborne and food borne disease.

¹ Dr. Margaret Chen, The 2007 David E. Barmes Global Health Lecture; Bethesda, Maryland, USA; 10 December 2007. Cited at http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2007/20071211_maryland/en/index.html

Many changes will be gradual, but they are also unpredictable. That is why FEHA recommends specific policy solutions be implemented quickly, both on a local and state level.

3. Strategies for an Environmental Health Response to Climate Change

- FEHA supports a strategy that blends mitigation efforts (which slow down or reverse the trends of climate change) with adaptation efforts (which prepare communities for the impacts already taking place).

3a. Mitigation Efforts

- FEHA endorses concrete efforts by agencies, counties and municipalities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In particular, counties like [Miami-Dade](#) (with its [CO2 reduction plan](#)) and cities like Tampa have made great progress following the milestones laid out in the [Cities for Climate Protection](#) program developed by ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability. FEHA praises programs such as the Florida Department of Health’s Lean and Green initiative, as well as the drive for carbon neutral events and organizations.
- FEHA endorses efforts to design buildings more sustainability, in particular by following the [LEED](#) certification for developers. In Florida, FEHA applauds Sarasota County for accepting the American Institute of Architects [2030 Challenge](#) to design carbon-neutral buildings by 2030.
- FEHA believes that the time for solid policies to counteract emissions has come, and supports greenhouse gas taxes and incentives based on carbon pricing. We applaud the [official report of the Florida Energy Commission](#) recommending a return to Year 2000 emission levels by 2020 and urge its adoption.
- FEHA stands behind international efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through conservation. These efforts include support for the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and its attendant protocols, such as Kyoto and its potential successors.
- FEHA supports the deployment of alternative and renewable energy sources because we understand that conservation alone will not stop the effects of climate change or reverse the spread of greenhouse gasses.
- FEHA believes that humankind has always thrived through innovation and supports investment in research for new technologies to generate, use and transmit energy.

3b. Adaptation Efforts

- FEHA supports further evidence-based research into specific health effects for the various climate change models now under discussion as they pertain to Florida. As much as possible, this research should be publicly funded and applicable at the local level. California’s Public Interest Energy Research Center [publication on public health impacts](#) in that state is a positive model to follow.
- FEHA supports state and federal assistance that would aid communities in increasing sustainability, using standard tools like the new [ICLEI Star Community Index](#).

- FEHA advocates a deeper regard for the public health importance of the built environment, exemplified by the [principles developed by the Smart Growth Network](#) and the CDC's emphasis on [building healthy communities](#).
- FEHA urges counties and municipalities in Florida to include public health planners in their land use discussions. Specifically, we applaud the building of multi-county coalitions to fund Environmental Health Planner positions, as in Central Florida. These reduce fiscal burdens and increase critical partnerships in the face of climate change impacts.
- FEHA champions a robust structure for preparedness and response, since small shifts in climate can create more extreme weather events. FEHA supports the creation and strengthening of trained environmental health responders and strike teams, as well as better inter-agency communication for response through the National Incident Management System.
- FEHA recognizes the need for a strong and unified public health workforce in the face of climate change. This workforce will be needed both to conduct surveillance for and interventions against the proven health impacts of climate change - like increased ranges for tropical diseases and potential declines in the quality and/or quantity of water and food.

3. Conclusion

This is not a new problem, and it will not go away in our lifetimes. The most powerful strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change will be those that permanently improve overall environmental health capacity while protecting the public from the health effects of climate change for decades to come.

The membership of FEHA has taken the stand that these strategies to mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects are critical to the welfare of the human race. We urge immediate and concentrated action, such as the steps listed above, and are prepared to do our part to help such action succeed.