

## ► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Bob Custard,  
REHS, CP-FS

## We Haven't Told Our Story

Advocacy—the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word as “the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.” That same dictionary goes on to define “cause” as “a principle, aim, or movement that, because of a deep commitment, one is prepared to defend or advocate.” So, in environmental health, what is the cause we are so deeply committed to that we are prepared to defend it and advocate for it?

Some might say, based on the visible lack of significant advocacy for environmental health in the U.S., that there is no such cause. On this point, I strongly disagree. Every environmental health professional I know is deeply committed to safer and healthier homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. We, as environmental health professionals, have chosen our profession not for the financial rewards, but for the ability to make a positive difference in the health and safety of our communities.

So why aren't we advocating for environmental health? I believe there are three primary reasons:

1. We have forgotten our history. In our day-to-day work we often see slow and uneven progress towards creating safer and healthier environments in our communities. We miss the big picture. Environmental health interventions like drinking water chlorination, milk pasteurization, safe sewage disposal, inspection of food establishments, and mosquito control are largely responsible for increasing the life expectancy in the U.S. by 32 years since 1900.
2. Many of us work for public agencies where we are encouraged not to talk to elected

*It is long past  
time for all of us  
as environmental  
health professionals  
to stand up  
and speak up.  
Environmental  
health is a  
contact sport.*

officials or the media lest we rock the boat. As a result, we go about our daily work conducting inspections, assessing risks, and preventing injuries and disease without ever telling our story.

3. We assume that the value of environmental health is self-evident to everyone. After all, who is against water that is safe to drink, food that is safe to eat, or air that is safe to breathe?

In his keynote address at this year's Annual Education Conference & Exhibition, NEHA's new Executive Director Dr. David Dyjack described environmental health as a profession shrouded in a “cloak of invisibility.” Indeed environmental health has been so successful at quietly doing its job that the

general public is not even aware we exist except in those relatively rare instances when our efforts fail to prevent an outbreak of disease. We are victims of our own success!

Absolutely no one questions the importance of safe drinking water, but almost everyone takes it for granted that water in the U.S. has always been safe to drink ... because we haven't told our story.

No one questions the importance of having food that is safe to eat, but few even think about food safety when they go to the grocery store ... because we haven't told our story.

No one questions the importance of proper sewage disposal, but no one ever thinks of the sanitarian who designed their septic system when they flush ... because we haven't told our story.

Somehow we believe that everyone should intuitively know the value of environmental health. Clearly that is not the case.

Today our country's environmental public health programs are under attack at all levels of government. For example, in the area where I live, many county and city vector control programs have been severely cut or totally eliminated despite the looming threats of chikungunya and dengue. The recent National Association of County and City Health Officials' “Forces of Change” survey showed that local health departments have lost 51,700 jobs since 2008 and that 27% of local health departments expect further budget cuts in the coming year.

At the federal level, the current (July 29) mark up for the FY16 budget in the U.S. Senate will cut funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for

Environmental Health (NCEH) by 19%. The Safe Water Program, which includes funding for investigating the causes of waterborne disease outbreaks, response to major toxic contamination and natural disasters affecting drinking water supplies, and the recreational water program that led development of the Model Aquatic Health Code, will be totally eliminated. Funding for the Environmental Public Health Tracking Network, which provides the data that allow environmental health professionals to focus resources where they will have the most impact, will be cut by 51%.

It is long past time for all of us as environmental health professionals to stand up and speak up. Environmental health is a contact sport.

### What Role Will NEHA Play?

We are imagining a new NEHA that is

- the unified voice of the environmental health profession,
- the recognized leader of a national dialogue on environmental health issues, and
- an effective advocate for making environmental health a national priority.

As an organization, we are making a new commitment to

- be at the table whenever and wherever national environmental health policy is being discussed,
- actively partner with other health and environmental organizations on environmental health issues,
- increase NEHA's influence on national environmental health policy by opening a satel-

lite NEHA office in Washington, DC, as soon as possible, and

- equip you, our members and affiliates, with the information and training you need to effectively engage your local community on environmental health issues.

### What Role Can You Play?

For far too long environmental health professionals have quietly done inspections, assessed risks, and implemented public health interventions while failing to engage the broader community. Few of the people in our communities know what we do or even understand how foundational environmental health is to their quality of life. Environmental health needs to tell its story.

As an environmental health professional you can tell the environmental health story. Start some conversations about the importance of environmental health with your friends and family. Help them imagine what life would be like if environmental health professionals were not there to protect their community. Here are some conversation starters:

- When I travel to Mexico, people always tell me, "Don't drink the water or you'll get Montezuma's Revenge." When people travel to the U.S. they aren't warned, "Don't drink the water or you'll get Uncle Sam's Revenge." Did you ever wonder why?
- Do you worry about the safety of the food you buy in the grocery store? What gives you confidence in the safety of that food?

In the course of your daily work, take the time to explain what you are doing and why.

Put your work in its broader context. For example:

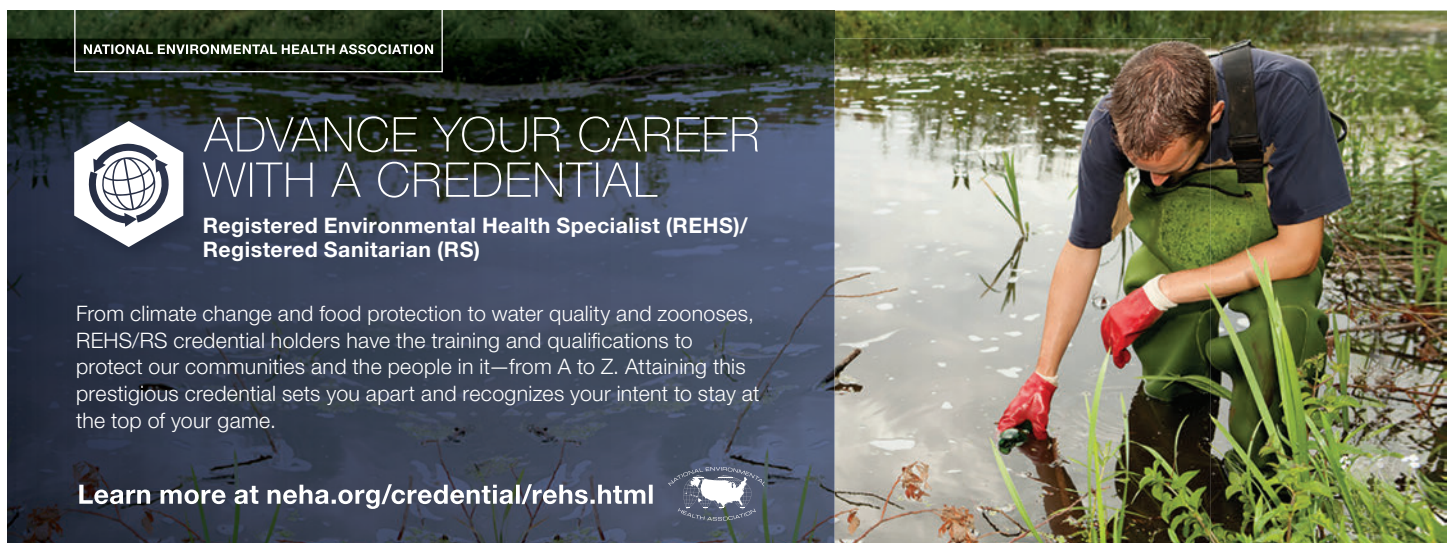
- "Did you know that unintentional injuries are the number-one cause of death in children ages one to four? Almost one-third of these deaths are due to drowning, even more than those caused by motor vehicles. One of the goals of our aquatic health program is to prevent as many of these deaths as possible."
- "Screens are important in keeping mosquitoes out of your house. Did you know that before screens were in common use that malaria and outbreaks of yellow fever were common in the U.S.? Today we worry more about West Nile virus and emerging diseases like dengue fever. Vector control is still really important to community health, but unfortunately many vector control programs are losing their funding."

Finally, please get to know your elected officials. Help them understand what you do and why it is important. If possible, arrange for them to shadow you for a day at work. Then when legislation affecting environmental health is before Congress or your state legislature, call them.

Environmental health is shrouded in a cloak of invisibility because we haven't told our story. Join me in imagining a time when everyone in your community knows what environmental health is and why it is important ... because you and I told them. 🐸

*Bob Custard*

NEHA.Prez@comcast.net



NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

**ADVANCE YOUR CAREER WITH A CREDENTIAL**

**Registered Environmental Health Specialist (REHS)/ Registered Sanitarian (RS)**

From climate change and food protection to water quality and zoonoses, REHS/RS credential holders have the training and qualifications to protect our communities and the people in it—from A to Z. Attaining this prestigious credential sets you apart and recognizes your intent to stay at the top of your game.

Learn more at [neha.org/credential/rehs.html](http://neha.org/credential/rehs.html)

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION