

Emergency Management: Fire, Heat, and Flood

Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia – 16 through 17 August 2017

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The international course “Emergency Management: Fire, Heat, and Flood” was proudly delivered on August 16-17, 2017 in Wollongong, Australia. This was the second offering of this International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH) endorsed disaster risk reduction initiative and a continuation of the global effort which began in 2012. The course was delivered through an ongoing partnership between IFEH, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) USA, National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) USA, and Environmental Health Australia (EHA), New South Wales. There were 11 environmental health and disaster management professionals who participated from across Australia, including several representatives from local health districts.

The course had a particular focus on strategies for addressing environmental health issues before, during and after specific events like bush fires, extreme heat and floods. This included sessions relating to planning and preparation, response and recovery (short and long term), the effects of climate change on disaster risks in a community, and disaster management systems. The role of environmental health in the responses to recent global disasters was also covered.

As a new and emerging environmental health issue, Dr. Kathleen Beyer discussed climate change and how weather trends must be studied and understood as a critical part of public and environmental health of citizens during and after disasters. Her lecture was timely and pertinent to the overall goals of the course. Other presentations ranged from emergency managers, environmental health officers and staff members from local fire services. All these topics tied together to show what partnerships and working relationships are needed to successfully respond to disasters involving public and environmental health.

The course concluded with an exercise, which focused on the preparation and response activities to a bush fire threatening a nearby community. This allowed participants to identify what was to be undertaken when preparing for and responding to a local flood event. It also allowed participants to understand disaster response frameworks, challenges faced and tools for systematically addressing environmental health risks. The course evaluation found the content met all expectations. All participants indicated they would recommend the training to other professionals. On average the awareness level of environmental health risks associated with a disaster increased by 28%. Also, all participants indicated they would use the concepts covered in their disaster management activities.

This training course could not have been successful the interaction of the participants. A special thank you goes to the New South Wales government for supporting this training through their Office of Environment and Heritage, Ministry of Health, Police Force and Rural Fire Service. The course was delivered by Tim Hatch (IFEH; Alabama Department of Public Health (USA)), David Basso, President EHA (NSW) Inc., and staff from Shoalhaven City Council who provided after action reports from local event responses. As part of continuing to implement its disaster risk reduction initiative, Griffith University plans to work with IFEH, CDC, NEHA, the United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction and its partner organizations to deliver more courses in Australia, Europe, Asia, and Africa in the near future. For further information please visit www.ifeh.org/ehdm.

