

Environmental Health and Disaster Management Course – Townsville, Australia (22-30 August)

Ben Ryan, Director Disaster Risk Reduction, Asia-Pacific, International Federation of Environmental Health

Dr Peter Davey, President, International Federation of Environmental Health

Melissa McKeown, Manager Environmental Health, Townsville City Council; Director Environmental Health Australia

Angela Lawson, Supervisor Environmental Health, Townsville City Council

The Australian Environmental Health and Disaster Management course was held from 25 to 30 August 2013 in Townsville. The course was delivered in a partnership between the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), Environmental Health Australia (EHA) and Townsville City Council (TCC). The course attracted 23 environmental health academics and professionals from across Australia. The course provided an opportunity for IFEH and EHA to test a modified version of the four-day Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Course, run by the CDC across the USA, in Australia.

The teaching team was led by Tim Hatch from the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) who has delivered over 40 EHTER courses across the USA. The course identified and discussed disaster management systems, environmental health risks and mitigation strategies. This included discussion on the risks relating to drinking water, shelters, overcrowding, food safety, wastewater, disease-causing vectors, solid waste and hazardous materials. Presentations were also provided on the role of environmental health in the responses to Hurricane Katrina, Gulf Oil Spill, Alabama Tornadoes, Pakistan Floods and Cyclone's Larry and Yasi.

There were group discussions and exercises throughout week. The course concluded with an exercise facilitated by Angela Lawson (TCC), which focused on the preparation and response to a cyclone. The aim was to test and determine what needed to be undertaken when preparing for and responding to a cyclone. This included an overview and discussion of possible disaster response strategies and tools that can mitigate environmental health risks in the disaster setting.

An evaluation of the feedback found the course to be very successful with all participants indicating it met expectations. Also, all participants indicated they would recommend the course to other professionals.

On average the awareness level of environmental health risks associated with a disaster increased by 15% for each participant. All participants indicated they would use the concepts covered in their disaster management activities.

The course could not have been successful without this partnership approach and the interaction of the participants. The course presenters included Dr Peter Davey (IFEH), Kiah Granata (TCC), Bob Handby (Australian Red Cross), Gavin Hammond (TCC), Daryl Hanger (Australian Red Cross), Ian Kuhl (Kuhl-Meadows), Angela Lawson (TCC), Alexandra Marsh (Australian Red Cross), Chelsea McLennan (TCC), Melissa McKeown (TCC; EHA) and Ben Ryan (IFEH).



Townsville City Council Mayor Jenny Hill and Ben Ryan



Tim Hatch discussing the Gulf Oil Spill

A special thank you goes to Tim Hatch, ADPH, for leading and facilitating the training along with Gavin Hammond, Melissa McKeown and Angela Lawson from TCC for organising the course.

As part of continuing to build environmental health disaster management capacity IFEH, CDC, NEHA, EHA and TCC have agreed to deliver the course again next year in Townsville, Australia. The dates for the course are 24 to 29 August 2014. For further please visit www.ifeh.org or www.eh.org.au.

