

Northwest PUBLIC HEALTH

From the Dean

The Health of the Environment Is Important to Us All



Once again, *Northwest Public Health* has chosen a timely and very appropriate theme. Environmental matters are on the minds of many in our region, and this edition of *Northwest Public Health* examines a number of significant issues.

Perhaps because we are blessed with particularly wonderful surroundings, the Pacific Northwest serves as a kind of environmental bellwether. The public's awareness of environmental concerns, combined with an activist culture in much of the region, has brought attention to many issues that have gone on to become rallying cries for environmentalists and others nationwide.

Environmental health is basic public health—studying how environmental factors can affect human health and how to identify, prevent, and control those effects. The field focuses on issues such as the safety of our food and water supplies, toxic waste disposal, pollution of all types, workplace hazards, and environment-related diseases. You can find more information at our Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences (formerly the Department of Environmental Health) Web site, <http://depts.washington.edu/envhlth/index.html>.

Environmental health issues in the Northwest often involve competing interests and have national and even international implications. They range from the fate of endangered species, such as the spotted owl, to asbestos contamination in Libby, Montana. Measuring the effect of pesticides on our crops and our children is an ongoing priority, as are the many concerns arising from our nuclear age, many of which have centered on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in eastern Washington.

The pros and cons of drilling for Alaska oil have been in the news for some time and will undoubtedly continue to be debated no matter what the outcome of the current controversy. And the icon of the Pacific Northwest—salmon—is highly dependent on a healthy environment.


Ways in which the food chain, especially fish, is affected by the environment are attracting much interest, as demonstrated by last fall's five-part series in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* entitled "Our Troubled Sound." Researchers at our School are working with the Shoalwater Bay Tribe to determine the safety of consuming shellfish from the bays. Fish and other food products favored by immigrant groups often are not yet regulated and may pose as yet unknown health risks.

Nationally, public health professionals have issued warnings to pregnant women and children to limit intake of several types of fish containing levels of toxic mercury that can cause developmental and learning

problems in children.

Finally, the war in Iraq and our nation's shifting priorities are obvious reasons for concern. Regardless of one's politics and stance on the war, there is no doubt that war has devastating consequences on the environment and human health-and will do so in Iraq. We are also witnessing a redirection of our limited resources, which is likely to result in decreased spending on critical environmental health issues in this country, some of which are discussed in the spring 2003 issue.

I trust you will find this issue of *Northwest Public Health* to be interesting and thought-provoking reading.

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