

Workshop explores ways to protect workers from climate change

By Tara Failey

The NIEHS Worker Training Program held a workshop Oct. 7–8 focused on the health risks workers face as consequences of climate change become more prominent. [Workshop](#) (<http://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/events.cfm?id=2538>) participants explored lessons learned and best practices to prepare workers for climate change effects. Participants also discussed curricula that can be developed to build a more resilient and sustainable workforce and community.

The workshop, held at NIEHS headquarters in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, followed the semiannual Worker Training Program Awardee Meeting Oct. 6 in the same location. The awardees include a strong network of nonprofit organizations, universities, and unions, which provide occupational safety and health education to workers.

The framework for the workshop was the program's draft Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment [Report](#) (https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/public/hasl_get_blob.cfm?ID=10201), which reviews the available literature on worker health and climate change, and assesses available training and resources.

Unique vulnerabilities of workers

“Workers are the climate canaries in the coal mine,” said Cora Roelofs, Sc.D., of Tufts University, during a panel discussion. “But occupational health and safety concerns have been largely ignored in climate change discussions.”

Speaking to this concept, NIEHS Senior Advisor for Public Health John Balbus, M.D., cited research showing that climate change will have a severe impact on human health and that workers are among those who will be most impacted. Underscoring key messages in the third [National Climate Assessment](#) (<http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/>), Balbus discussed how workers may be exposed to conditions that the general public can more easily avoid, such as severe heat, increased UV radiation, and heavy rain.

Possible paths forward

David Foster, of the Department of Energy Office of the Secretary, endorsed a multi-tiered approach to addressing problems facing workers. His approach includes recommending that each workplace conduct a climate risk assessment, and developing climate adaptation plans at the state and federal level that also consider employee training.

Foster highlighted how any approach must involve a coordinated shift toward use of renewable energy technologies, such as those being improved and developed by the [National Renewable Energy Laboratory](#) (<http://www.nrel.gov/>). “We have to improve technologies to reduce greenhouse gases, and in doing so, we will also reap economic and societal benefits,” Foster said.

His recommendations were complemented by discussions on how to maximize existing resources, and develop new resources. For instance, the [National Clearinghouse for Worker Safety and Health Training](#) (<http://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/>) has a series of curricula on climate change-related topics, such as flood response and hurricane preparedness, which could be more widely distributed and shared.

Further, WTP awardees could connect with organizations like the Climate Change



Roelofs discussed new frameworks for considering climate change and occupational safety and health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Balbus shared findings of the Third National Climate Assessment, released earlier this year, emphasizing that climate change is already impacting both the health of workers and the general public. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Foster shared insights on how the U.S. Department of Energy and other employers can actively engage in assessing and protecting workers from the impacts of climate change. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Occupational Safety and Health [Work Group](#)

(<http://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2014/09/22/climate-change/>)

of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. Participants also raised the need for improved sharing of resources, and highlighted use of materials developed by other organizations, such as the American Chemical Society's Climate Science [Toolkit](#)

(<http://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/climatescience.html>)

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Roelof issued a final challenge to the WTP awardee community. “[We] are the planning and response vanguard for climate change...and need to push for worker training in a more audacious way,” she said.

(Tara Failey is a communication specialist with MDB Inc., contractor for the NIEHS Division of Extramural Research and Training.)

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