

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

May marked my two-year anniversary at NEHA's helm. It's been an amazing 24-month sojourn. Our association developments and progress are well described in our Annual Report available at [www.neha.org](http://www.neha.org). Therefore, I'd rather use this column to advance thought around a more sobering and provocative issue, my perception of the fragmented state of the environmental health profession.

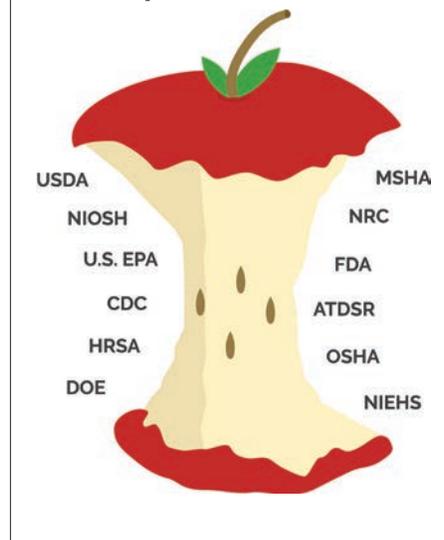
Figure 1 is derived from one of my stock PowerPoint presentations. The agency names are not as important as what they symbolize in aggregate—a profession that is a classic example of the tragedy of the commons. There are at least 16 federal agencies with a bite of the environmental health apple. Collaboration and cooperation among the various players is intermittent at best and often occur as a function of the latest crisis that dominates the headlines. Think Flint, Zika, or fracking for recent examples of agency shotgun weddings, often courtesy of public outrage.

Professional and subject matter heterogeneity is also a contributing factor to the state of confusion regarding who we are and what we do. Please peruse Table 1 (see page 53). The left column presents content provided by Dr. Tom Burke, the widely respected and admired Johns Hopkins University professor. I have taken some liberties with the material he described at a recent National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine workshop in Washington, DC. At that meeting, Dr. Burke characterized his list as wicked environmental health problems that desperately need attention. These challenges are, among

## Professional (dis) Association

FIGURE 1

### Select Federal Players in the Environmental Health Landscape



other things, 1) socially complex, 2) difficult to define, 3) complex on spatial and temporal scales, and 4) affected by many interacting factors. I happen to agree with Tom and his list.

I happen to also agree with my colleagues from California and their list. Please digest the right column of Table 1, which was presented by my friends Josh Dugas and Steve Van Stockum at a recent California Environmental Health Association meeting in Anaheim. The Californians described emerging professional issues in California that will

increasingly need attention. For the record, I also agree with Josh and Steve and their list.

Upon careful examination and comparisons of the two lists, you'll observe overlap, maybe even a significant portion, though the overlap is described using dissimilar terminology. There is also a large disconnect between the content of the two lists. Both of my observations are troubling. Where the two lists align, they use different nomenclature to describe the challenges at hand. On the other end of the spectrum, there seems to be a chasm between the priorities articulated by those inside the beltway and those reported by local practitioners. This issue is a symptom of a larger problem that we need to overcome—simplicity in describing priorities and messaging within and outside the profession. I trust you see the merit in my observations.

In *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, Dr. Frank Luntz suggests that consistency matters in all things related to communications. My friends, our next cosmic journey is to harmonize our messaging and priorities, and to ensure they are packaged and presented in a manner that resonate with society's values and beliefs. Let me be clear: federal, state, local, private sector, and academic environmental health professionals should use similar words to describe similar conditions, and we should generally agree on national priorities, taking into consideration some local variation.

Second, to be effective, we need to take into consider what people hear, not what we are saying. I suggest society hears wildly

*continued on page 53*

# NEHA NEWS

created nearly any kind of branding collateral imaginable, from chap stick labels, logos, and commercial brochures to full-scale, interactive web destinations. But as freelancing gradually became a financial feast or famine situation each month, I began to search for a more secure position.

As an artist, I was satisfying my hunger for ideas, but not my hunger for meaning. In a perfect world, I could develop fantastic work that could contribute toward positive change in the world and in my own community. I not only wanted to create but also wanted to make a difference and feel good about the day's work. I applied to various nonprofit organizations and specific educa-

tional design positions—any destination I felt I could add value and enjoy the work. In a series of fortunate events, I was eventually hired by NEHA as its graphic designer.

Working at NEHA has been a dream realized. I get my feet wet working in many design facets such as illustration, infographics, advertising, typography, photography, interactive design, and even animation, which means that the work is engaging. Considering the political climate, the public is in dire need of organizations such as NEHA, and being a part of that is rewarding. NEHA has provided a platform for me to development as a designer and the future is bright with many exciting projects on the horizon. 🐼

## Did You Know?

NEHA offers different membership options to suit your professional needs. From students and those just starting the profession all the way up to those retiring, NEHA has a membership for everyone. And you can select multiple year options and how you want to receive the *Journal*. Visit [www.neha.org/membership-communities/join](http://www.neha.org/membership-communities/join) for more information.

### DiracTalk

*continued from page 54*

different things about what we do. How could they not? NEHA member Ken Runkle recently penned a blog on LinkedIn titled “What’s Wrong With Environmental Health?” I encourage you to read his short article. Ken describes how many of us don’t prioritize using the term environmental health as our primary skill set, even among ourselves.

NEHA has retained an ad agency, 3 Advertising ([www.3advertising.com](http://www.3advertising.com)), to assist us in thinking through these and other related issues as we aim to promote, protect, and enhance the profession. We hope their preliminary efforts will be complete by the time of our 2017 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, and that we might possess the intellectual embryo that will give rise to new approaches to consistently communicate among ourselves and the world around us.

If you want to weigh-in or learn more about the state of the profession, I encourage you to attend our 2017 AEC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on July 10–13. The theme this year—Local Solutions. National Influence—will explore the profoundly local nature of the profession and how we might use our collective influence to improve the health of the

TABLE 1  
**Emerged or Emerging Environmental Health Challenges**

Dr. Tom Burke: Wicked National Environmental Health Problems	Josh Dugas and Steve Van Stockum: California Environmental Health Challenges
Fracking	Assisted living facilities
Infectious diseases (Ebola, <i>Legionella</i> )	Sustainability
Pesticides	Day camps
Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA)	Graywater/blackwater
Environmental justice	Marijuana edibles
Air pollution	Home restaurants
Water resources	Groundwater
Agriculture	Organics management (waste food)
Climate	Climate
Wastewater infrastructure	Septic systems

nation. NEHA staff has assembled thought leaders, influencers, and subject matter experts in Grand Rapids, a town known for its walkability, accessibility, and family-friendly environment. Our opening and closing panel sessions will showcase fresh faces and have been designed to address some of the most important issues of our time: environmental health equity and sustainability.

I look forward to seeing you there, in part to discuss how we might begin the journey of reassembling the fragmented state of the environmental health profession. 🐼



ddyjack@neha.org  
Twitter: @DTDyjack