

Raising Community Awareness on Climate Change and Health: San Luis Obispo County Public Health Department Case Story



This is one in a series of Climate and Health Case Stories that highlight how public health departments in California are responding to climate change as an emerging public health issue.

Climate Change and Health in San Luis Obispo County

San Luis Obispo County (SLO) is in the Central Coast Region with just under 300,000 residents.

"I take climate change and health personally because I want a hopeful future for my children. My daughter loves riding her scooter to school. We go to SLO's farmer's markets to get the ripest produce as often as possible."

*Dr. Penny Borenstein,
SLO Resident and
County Health Officer*

Climate change is projected to increase the risk of heat waves, air pollution, wildfires, water insecurity, economic pressure from damage to agriculture industry, severe storms, and flooding from sea level rise and storm surges. These effects will have a significant impact on public health and disproportionately affect the area's most vulnerable populations, including children, elders, people with chronic diseases, outdoor workers including the county's farmworker population, people living in poverty and some communities of color.

Improving Strategies to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The county emerged as a state leader on climate change through its early efforts to develop climate action plans and

reduce GHG emissions. SLO Public Health Department (SLO-PHD) actively brings a public health perspective into these planning processes.

Many of the department's initiatives to promote healthy communities and obesity prevention are aligned with local climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. For example, the department developed and promoted SLO's "Buy Local" food ordinance that requires county agencies to prioritize purchasing locally produced agriculture products. The ordinance improves access to nutritious foods, builds economic resilience by supporting local producers, and lowers the food supply chain's carbon impact by reducing transportation miles.

Promoting Climate Change Awareness in the Community

Climate change activities in public health departments are often located in Emergency Management or Environmental Health divisions. At SLO-PHD, the Health Promotion Division leads the climate and health efforts with a strong health education approach.

OUTSIDE IN SLO
WE TAKE HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE PERSONALLY

Campaign Goal

People in San Luis Obispo County view climate change as an important health issue that impacts their life and take actions that can both help reduce the risks of climate change and improve health.

Overall, the division promotes healthy behaviors and encourages community-wide improvements to benefit public health. There are a number of ready connections that are being made between the emerging climate change work and existing healthy community efforts.

An important facet of California's response to climate change is raising public awareness of this complex issue. The Health Promotion Division supports this mission by providing presentations on the relationship between climate change and public health to university students, community groups, and staff from various county departments. This demonstrated interest in climate and health issues led the department, with the support of the County Public Health Officer, to partner with California Department of Public Health's (CDPH) Climate and Health Team to conduct a climate change communications pilot project and become involved in the CDC funded CDPH CalBRACE Project.



The “*OutsideIn SLO: We Take Health and Climate Change Personally*” project was launched in August 2014, to pilot this comprehensive climate and health awareness and education campaign's strategies.

Climate and Health Communications Project

To raise awareness that climate change is an important health issue, the campaign frames climate change as both a personal and community health issue. The campaign audience includes SLO-PHD staff, members of a local chronic disease prevention coalition and the general public.

Research demonstrates that messages focused on the local community where residents live can be effective at spurring action on climate change.

The campaign messages promote action to reduce the risks of climate change and improve people's health. Outreach materials highlight localized climate impacts that directly affect the lives of SLO residents. The key messages are complemented with a call to action. A central campaign theme is that residents can engage in win-win activities to both reduce their carbon impact and improve their health.

Moving Forward

Staff and partner organizations prepared for the campaign with climate and health trainings. CDPH Climate and Health Team and SLO-PHD staff presentations featured climate science, plans to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and how-to respond to common, yet difficult, questions.

Key Communication Tips

- Know your audience and use messages and messengers that work for them.
- Respect and consider what underlying values are important.
- Make climate change local, now and personal (“We take health and climate change personally” is SLO’s tagline).
- Focus on solutions and find win-wins.
- Use stories with a human dimension of climate change more than facts.
- Remind audiences that the people impacted far into the future are our children.

The campaign was implemented in both English and Spanish and leverages multiple media channels, including print, social media, radio, and events like farmer's markets. In one particularly innovative effort, the educational messages were integrated into activities of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program (SNAP-Ed).

The health department provides free nutrition education classes to community members with low incomes through these programs. Staff provides information about how climate change affects health and carbon emission reduction strategies like purchasing low-carbon impact foods and using active modes of transportation such as biking and walking instead of driving. As the campaign rolls out, more local organizations and programs will promote the “*OutsideIn SLO: We Take Health and Climate Change Personally*” message.



Lessons Learned

- Education campaigns need to take a community organizing approach to develop strong personal relationships with community members. Involving community and local partners early in the campaign planning creates a shared mission to promote climate and health awareness, and activities.
- Local public health departments need to have both internal and external relationships to effectively address emerging issues like climate change. With limited funding, climate and health activities can leverage existing resources and enhance existing public health programs.

Resources

[OutsideIn SLO: We Take Health and Climate Change Personally Campaign](http://www.healslo.com/outsidein-slo/)

<http://www.healslo.com/outsidein-slo/>

[Webinar Series 2017: Communicating Climate Change as a Public Health Issue](http://www.healslo.com/webinar/)

<http://www.healslo.com/webinar/>

[Developing Adaptation Strategies for San Luis Obispo County: Preliminary Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment for Social Systems](http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/Departments/Planning-Building/Forms-Documents/Informational/Energy-Climate-Informational-Documents/Climate-Change-Vulnerability-Assessment.aspx)

<http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/Departments/Planning-Building/Forms-Documents/Informational/Energy-Climate-Informational-Documents/Climate-Change-Vulnerability-Assessment.aspx>

[CalBRACE Project - California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/CalBRACE.aspx)

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/CalBRACE.aspx>

[Climate and Health Initiative - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/brace.htm)

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Photograph: “*OutsideIn SLO*” campaign pilot launch/kick-off event in August 2014. From left, Janice Fong Wolf of the Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County and Linda McClure, WIC Program, SLO Public Health Department.

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