



THE SUMMIT



ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SECTION NEWSLETTER

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services | Division of Public Health

In this Newsletter

On The Job

Section Highlights

EPA's Ban on Asbestos

HHCU's Update on the ARPA Lead & Asbestos Reimbursement Program in Child Care Centers and Public Schools

Children's Environmental Health to Publish Report on Applesauce Outbreak in MMWR

ARPA Update: Lead & Asbestos Inspection and Mitigation in Child Care Centers and Public Schools Programs Reach 1 Year Milestone

The Inspector's Gadget

A "SWIFT" Approach to Training

Food Protection Plan Review Program

"We Didn't Know We Were a Network, But Everyone Else Did"



The Times They Are a-Changin'

Larry Michael

The great poet laureate of the rock era and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Bob Dylan, wrote his anthem of change in 1963. The lyrics advise that wherever you roam, the waters around you have grown, "and you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times they are a-changin'." While change has always occurred within the field of environmental health, it has become more accelerated in recent times and it's so important to continually look to the future, prepare, and be part of the change.

One of the things I love about environmental health is the fact that it's a dynamic field that constantly evolves to address emerging challenges and scientific advances. Navigating these changes effectively requires a multifaceted approach that involves policymakers, public health professionals and researchers. Here are a few key aspects to managing change in environmental public health:

- 1. Policy and regulation:** Whether it's a rule amendment, legislative change or policy initiative, the volume and speed at which some of these changes occur can be overwhelming. It's critical that we take notice and stay up to date on these changes and provide input whenever possible to ensure public health protection.
- 2. Partnership and collaboration:** Developing and maintaining partnerships is critical to our survival. Wherever you are, you can benefit from working with other entities. Within our Section, we've benefitted from partnerships with universities such as UNC, NC State, WCU, ECU and Northeastern. And we continually collaborate with our sister agencies (e.g., DEQ, NCDA&CS) as well as the NC Association of Local Health Directors, NC Environmental Health Supervisors, Home Builders, Septic Tank, Retail Merchants, and NC Restaurant and Lodging Associations.
- 3. Resilience planning:** Develop plans to enhance resilience to environmental changes, such as climate adaptation strategies and disaster preparedness. North Carolina is no stranger to hurricanes and flooding, but every part of environmental health is affected by climate change, and you will see on p. 2 that we have made this a priority for our new Deputy Section Chief.
- 4. Technology:** With some exceptions, our technology infrastructure for environmental health is subpar. Data is often fragmented, has poor/no shareability, lacks standard definitions and has no flexibility/scalability. Yet, the use of data analytics, trend analysis and modeling has significant implications for every EH program and for future resource requirements. Stay tuned, as this is an area we're working on improving.
- 5. Innovation:** Utilizing new approaches to improve public health practice and modernize our training methods is critical to our growth and survival. Read about "A SWIFT Approach to Training" on p. 5.
- 6. Equity and Justice:** We need to ensure that our efforts address the needs of all populations, particularly those who are most vulnerable and disproportionately affected by environmental public health issues. This is another charge for our new Deputy EH Section Chief (p. 2).

It's imperative that we collectively focus on the above and more to better manage the mountain of changes facing our profession.

On the Job...

Introducing the New Deputy
Environmental Health Section
Chief: Jon Fowlkes

Get to know Jon and this new role

- *Previously served as the Onsite Water Protection Branch Head for approximately 4.5 years before beginning his new role in February.*



- *This new role directly oversees all three Branches (Food Protection & Facilities, Lead & Asbestos, and Onsite Water Protection).*
- *The role oversees the training and delegation of authority for local Registered Environmental Health Specialists.*
- *Jon will play a critical role in rule readoptions for the Section.*
- *Jon will lead the Section in the areas of climate change and Environmental Justice.*

Section Highlights

Children's Environmental Health (CEH):

- **Retirement:** Robert Hunt, Regional Environmental Health Specialist, will be retiring on August 1 after more than 28 years of service in Environmental Health. Robert began his career in Edgecombe County and worked in Nash and Pitt Counties before taking his current position as a Regional EHS with CEH.
- **New hire:** Ashley Stacy-Boddapati, Public Health Nurse Consultant, started employment with CEH on March 1, 2024. She has been eagerly learning about lead poisoning laws and policies to help CEH improve clinical follow-up of our elevated lead cases.

Health Hazards Control Unit (HHCU):

- The HHCU is pleased to announce our newest employee, Mr. Zach Green. Zach joined us as an Industrial Hygiene Consultant in December 2023. He brings a wealth of environmental knowledge and expertise to our team, and we are excited to welcome him back. He began as an Industrial Hygiene (IH) Technician and later an IH Inspector for our unit over a decade ago. He left to pursue his law degree and practiced law in Oregon before recently returning to the HHCU.

Onsite Water Protection Branch (OSWP):

- Senate Bill 166 is being tracked as it has many changes to the new 18E rules, and other changes that affect the Onsite Wastewater Industry. This bill moved quickly through the House of Representatives but has since stalled in the Senate. We will continue tracking this bill and provide guidance on its impacts.
- We are pleased to announce Andrew "Andy" Blethen has accepted the position of Team Leader for the Onsite Water Protection Branch (OSWP) Specialty Wastewater Improvement & Field Training (SWIFT) Team, effective November 5, 2024. With 30 years of experience in Environmental Health, Andy is currently the Environmental Health Director for AppHealthCare. Andy is also the Vice-Chair of the NC EH State-of-Practice Committee.

Food Protection and Facilities Branch (FP&F):

- **SPIT:** On March 1, 2024, after over 30 years of service in Environmental Health, Alice Isley retired as Program Manager for the Pools, Tattoos, and State Institutions program (PTSI). On May 1, 2024, the PTSI team welcomed Chad Gambill as the new PTSI Program Manager. Chad began his EH career in 2004 in Wilkes County and was an EH Supervisor in Caldwell County for seven years. He has been a FLI Regional REHS with the FP&F Branch for three years.
- **Regulatory Update:** Rules .2539 (Suction Hazard Reduction) and .2518 (Circulation System) have been revised and met final approval from the Rules Review Commission on March 27, will become effective November 1, 2024.
- **ISF:** 34,704 facilities billed at present for FY23-24; Plan review has processed 855 plans this FY.
- **FLI:** Regulatory Update: Summer Camp Rules, 15A NCAC 18A .1000 and Residential Care Rules, 15A NCAC 18A .1600 were approved by the Rules Review Commission and became effective April 1. Staff just completed assistance with the US Open in coordination with Moore County EH. Terri Ritter, Regional Field Supervisor, worked with Moore County and with many County and State volunteers to help with permitting and monitoring the many Temporary Food Establishments.

EPA's Ban on Asbestos

Zach Green

On March 18, 2024, the EPA announced a final rule prohibiting ongoing uses of Chrysotile asbestos, the only known form of asbestos currently used by and imported into the United States. The rule is the first to be finalized as a result of the 2016 amendments to the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), which set forth clear requirements and a mandate to comprehensively prioritize and evaluate chemicals and strengthen the protections against unreasonable risks from those chemicals.



The EPA previously issued a final rule in 1989 banning most asbestos-containing products because of the associated severe health risks. However, in 1991, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned that rule, and the EPA was only able to ban the use of asbestos in a few existing products as well as new products introduced after 1989. The importation of chrysotile asbestos found in products, such as asbestos diaphragms, sheet gaskets, brake blocks, aftermarket automotive brakes/linings, other vehicle friction products and other gaskets, continues to this day.

Under the final rule, the EPA has set compliance deadlines to transition away from Chrysotile asbestos use as soon as is practical while providing a reasonable transition period to alternative products. On May 28,

2024, the final rule became effective. This rule is a major step forward in protecting the public from exposure to asbestos, a known carcinogen that is linked to over 40,000 deaths annually in the United States alone. Access to the final rule can be found here: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/28/2024-05972/asbestos-part-1-chrysotile-asbestos-regulation-of-certain-conditions-of-use-under-the-toxic>.

HHCU's Update on the ARPA Lead & Asbestos Reimbursement Program in Child Care Centers and Public Schools

Jeff Dellinger

It has been one year since the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Reimbursement program began. During that time the ARPA team has received 50 reimbursement requests. These requests have totaled \$1,954,060 in federal funds. The ARPA team continues to provide consultation and to reimburse both licensed child care facilities and public schools. The latest program updates include a memo from Ed Norman (Program Manager) extending the enrollment in the Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids until November 1, 2024, DCDEE's letter dated May 3, 2024, clarifying that auxiliary spaces may be reimbursed with proper documentation, and specific frequently asked questions for licensed child care facilities and public schools, which are now available on the ARPA reimbursement webpage.

Children's Environmental Health to Publish Report on Applesauce Outbreak in MMWR

Melanie Napier



In the fall of 2023, the routine environmental investigation efforts of NC LHD Registered Environmental Health Specialists (EHS) and Regional EHS led to the national recall of WanaBana apple cinnamon puree pouches because of lead

and chromium contamination and launched an international investigation by the FDA. The successful coordination and collaboration of state and federal agencies put North Carolina and lead poisoning prevention in the nation's spotlight. On July 4, the summary of how those investigations led to the recall will be published in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). The accepted title is **Outbreak of Lead Poisoning in Children Linked to Apple Cinnamon Purée Pouches — North Carolina, 2023.**

ARPA Update: Lead & Asbestos Inspection and Mitigation in Child Care Centers and Public Schools Programs Reach 1 Year Milestone

Melanie Napier

Last year, as a result of legislative appropriation of \$150 million from federal infrastructure funding (American Rescue Plan Act/ARPA), CEH and interagency partners launched programs to test for lead in water at every public school, inspect every public school and licensed child care facility for lead-based paint and asbestos and provide funding to mitigate hazards that are identified (Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids). The effort involves over 8,000 facilities.

As allowed by the legislative Session Law, DPH Environmental Health Section staff passed permanent administrative rules [10A NCAC 41A .1001-.1007](#) to the Commission for Public Health to support those



objectives, and those rules went into effect April 1, 2023, giving facilities until May 1, 2024 to sign up for testing/inspection. In the past months, CEH has held periodic updates for local health department staff on November 2, 2023, March 7, 2024, and May 21, 2024. The LHD updates will continue monthly on the third Tuesday of every month at 9:30 a.m. for the foreseeable future. While we did not reach the ambitious goal of enrolling all facilities by the May 1 Administrative Rule deadline, more than 60% of child care centers have enrolled and about one-third of schools have enrolled. Now that that deadline has passed, we still encourage all facilities to enroll if they haven't already and complete the process to take advantage of this historic opportunity to take inventory of our schools and child care

facilities. The programs are funded through December 31, 2026. There is much more to be done, but we celebrate our progress on this monumental effort!

The Inspector's Gadget

Foodborne Illness Outbreak Tabletop Exercise at the NC Food Safety and Defense Task Force, May 8, 2024

During the 2024 NC Food Safety and Defense Task Force Conference, a tabletop exercise was held where industry, federal, state and local regulatory partners, as well as academia and non-profit groups came together to simulate a foodborne illness response.



Almost 100 participants worked together during this exercise to work through the steps of initial notification, investigation, state and federal notification, product sampling, public notification and more.

The main objectives of the tabletop were to identify each agency's role in an outbreak and collaborate with a diverse group of responders.

The NC Food Safety and Defense Task Force hopes to be able to support more collaborative exercises in the future. For more information about the Task Force or to join, please visit the website: www.ncfoodsafetytaskforce.com



A "SWIFT" Approach to Training

Anthony "Tony" Williams, MPA, REHS

What do you think of when you hear the term "swift?" Until the past few years, most people would probably have thought about someone who moves fast, like a runner, or even something that is happening fast like a rapidly moving storm. Due to popular culture, most of us now are most likely to think of Taylor Swift and all her loyal fans known as "Swifties." Regardless of what you think of, there is now another use of the term SWIFT in the form of an acronym that has a new meaning to us in the On-site Wastewater Protection (OSWP) Branch. SWIFT stands for Specialty Wastewater Improvement & Field Training Team and was born out of an idea of bringing our intern training to the counties by adding staff members to our team with this goal. For the past few years, local health directors supported the idea of these positions to reduce the time from hire to authorization and hopefully bring quicker relief to the backlogs for OSWP services. However, budget requests for six new positions had never seen the light of day until last year, when the state budget was passed, and three of the six positions requested were granted. This was a huge breakthrough for the OSWP Branch and one that allows us to reimagine how we administer our training!

So, you may be asking, what is the vision and purpose for the SWIFT team? The SWIFT team is a way to enhance our training program by spending more time in the field conducting training, not only with interns, but also with the mid-career professionals that may need "refresher" training or more advanced instruction and development. The SWIFT team is also tasked with private well training along with program reviews for accreditation. Since Wilson Mize has taken over as the OSWP Branch Head, some of the current positions have morphed into other roles and responsibilities. Most recently, we hired a new SWIFT Team Leader to replace Wilson in his former role as the Regional Environmental Health Specialist in the Private Well program. Our next order of business is to fill the three new positions (currently posted) so that we can all work together to create our new team. The current staff, with their valuable experience, and the new SWIFT team members, with their new ideas and enthusiasm, will be working hard in the upcoming months to make this vision a reality!

Moving forward, our hopeful expectation is that the SWIFT team will have an immense impact on environmental health training that will reverberate throughout the state. An impact that increases the knowledge base within the profession, reduces the time to authorization, improves the quality of our work and, most importantly, continues the excellence of protecting public health and the environment for the citizens of North Carolina! Ultimately, whether you call them the SWIFT team or "SWIFTY's," our chief aim is for them to be called successful!

Food Protection Plan Review Program



Reviewing food service plans, educating others and assuring compliance with the NC Food Code are key elements to assure our food protection program is contributing to the success of a food establishment. Evaluating kitchen designs, menus and SOP's are a few aspects that go into a thorough plan review process. Our program educates and assists others not only in adhering to the NC Food Code, but strives educate, inform and contribute to providing a safe consumer experience.

There are several trending topics our program is beginning to see more often in 2024. Robotic applications are certainly a hot topic in food prep operations that we are learning more about as we see them proposed in commercial chain facilities. While this technology is in its infancy stage, restaurants applications are growing steadily.

Robots can perform a variety of food service tasks, such as mixing, chopping, cooking and serving customers. More sophisticated automation is now available to make noodles, pancakes and sushi. Their integration into food service is expected to provide more consistency and increase productivity, while lowering labor costs estimated today at 30%. This is in comparison to their downside: high initial investment, scarcity of servicing experts and the layoffs created when using robots.

Our section is also seeing a rising trend with hotel coffee cafes. These types of bars and coffee counters serve a variety of food along with a plethora of coffee beverages. With specialty coffee and "dessert beverages" on the rise, many of these facilities are evolving right along with it. Many of these expanding into existing dining spaces, installing automated coffee beverage systems and more!

From fast food chains to large restaurants, raw poultry breasting stations are rapidly moving into grocery store delis. We certainly know groceries have much more than packaged and pre-cooked food. From sushi to fried chicken, there are many food choices for every type of palate. Our plan review team is reviewing several design concepts in grocery delis. They are jumping on board with the addition of poultry breasting stations and new food processes to their SOP's. By understanding the handling and preparation of complex foods, this knowledge can be beneficial and help contribute to safe food handling and consumption.

With the increase in new dishwasher technology, and equipment manufacturers proposing new ideas for foodservice equipment, we are expecting to see an increase in equipment variances being proposed. Our department, in conjunction with Regional staff, will handle these on a one-on-one basis.

We enjoy assisting the public as well as other departments with plan review training. The child day care plan review training was recently accomplished at the request of the Regional Daycare staff and the Branch to support plan review activities for chain and franchise daycare facilities.

We have an upcoming plan review training for Fall 2024, early Spring 2025 and Fall 2025 are currently being created by Regional staff and State Plan review. This most requested training topic by field staff is expected to roll out as early as September. Be on the look out for it!

By maintaining daily correspondence with the local jurisdictions in all 100 counties, our team strives to ensure we provide all our plan review approval documents to the local Environmental Health Specialists. This effective line of communication assures the submitter, regulatory agencies and operators are informed, and creates a safe and successful food service establishment!

“We Didn’t Know We Were a Network, but Everyone Else Did”

Melissa Ham

The NC Retail Program Standards Network and its members have seen much progress throughout 2023 and 2024.

Mecklenburg County achieved conformance with Standard 2 in 2023. This year, Wake County was able to build on that success through a mentorship with Mecklenburg, allowing Wake to standardize its entire staff. Previously, it was said that a jurisdiction this size could never standardize its staff and maintain the credential. Both Mecklenburg and Wake counties have now achieved this. Because of their large inventories and growing populations, this means that nearly 44% of North Carolina’s retail food establishments are being inspected by trained, standardized staff.

In addition to this Standard 2 achievement, Network workgroups have worked on several projects that will benefit counties throughout the state in their efforts to meet Standards 3, 4, 5 and 6.

The NC Compliance and Enforcement Manual has been updated and improved. The Manual will aid conformance with Standard 3: HACCP Based Inspection Program and Standard 4: Uniform Inspection Program, as well as serving as the required written procedure for Standard 6: Compliance and Enforcement.

To assist counties in meeting Standard 4, a weighted QA workbook calculating Quality Elements was created. This tool utilizes already-required NCDHHS field assessments to help determine if programs are operating uniformly under Standard 4 as well.

A new workgroup is being established to address Standard 5: Foodborne Illness and Food Defense Preparedness and Response. This group will include members from county programs, NCDHHS, NCDPH and the NCFSDTF. These stakeholders will work together to ensure all policies, MOUs and guidance are in place and maintained. These resources will be available to counties working to meet the Standards as well as any county experiencing an outbreak.

In 2023 and 2024, Network members have found success in obtaining grant funding for their efforts. In a recent survey, at least 12 Network member jurisdictions reported receiving FDA or NACCHO grant funding, with many receiving awards more than \$10,000.

As Standards enrollment in North Carolina surpasses 50%, the Network is developing by-laws and a charter. Taking these steps will formalize the Network’s role in fostering further statewide Standards conformance.

It will also facilitate applications for funding for in-Network and national travel to continue the Network’s vital role in fostering collaboration among Standards enrollees throughout the state.

All this collaboration, dedication and hard work culminates in one final success story. Richmond County has recently achieved conformance with all 9 Standards! Only one other jurisdiction in the country shared this spotlight. As a result of this high achievement, Richmond County will be receiving the Samuel Crumbine Award at the NEHA AEC in July. Richmond has been a strong contributor to the Network and its workgroups and has helped its fellow Network members with their own conformance efforts.

North Carolina’s state and local progress in conformance with the Standards is getting recognized and receiving accolades. Nationally, the North Carolina RPS Network has been recognized by the National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO) as well as the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). There have been speaking engagements, podcasts and presentations done by members of the Network, including significant contributions to the Program Standards Symposium. Looking forward, the Network will be hosting its own SAVA course this December.

NC Retail Program Network The Legacy of a Legend

As NC’s FDA Retail Food Specialist, Donna Wanucha had vision. We were just following her lead. She set up quarterly calls and two semiannual meetings for counties enrolled in the FDA Retail Program Standards. The meetings had a structured agenda and offered CEUs. Each attendee was expected to have skin in the game, sharing what they were working on and committing to progress by the next meeting. This structure and dialogue built momentum and, in no small part, led to the creation of the Network.

In retirement, Donna left us better than she found us. The Network she helped create offers a safe place to get comfortable and learn about how to make a retail food program better. Each enrollee has a voice, and egos are left at the door.

We can sustain our achievements, improve our programs and build capacity all because of this Network. We encourage you to find out what it is all about. Ask questions, attend a meeting or reach out to an enrolled county. This is how legends are made.