Communicating the Risks of PFAS and HABs: State Case Studies and Risk Communications Hub
2019 Update

Background: Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and harmful algal blooms (HABs) are priority environmental issues for states. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and US EPA have been supporting state and public water systems in their efforts to reduce exposure to PFAS in drinking water, and exposure to HABs—particularly cyanotoxins—in recreational and drinking waters. Proper risk communication is needed to inform the public of PFAS- and HABs-related issues without causing panic. There is also the balance of communicating what different health departments, environmental agencies, and water systems can and cannot do to address the issues. Since 2018, US EPA has partnered with the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS) on a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) project to highlight state-level risk communication of PFAS and HABs.

In early 2018, ASTHO and ECOS interviewed health and environmental agency staff from 13 states about their risk communication strategies and lessons learned for either PFAS contamination or HABs. ASTHO and ECOS collected information on how selected states' health and environmental agencies have been addressing PFAS and HABs, including the wording of accompanying risk communication/health advisories and the methods used to communicate them to the public. ASTHO and ECOS compiled the findings to share with other states who are looking to update or create new advisories and supporting risk communication materials for their own jurisdictions. The participating state environmental and/or health agencies included:

PFAS

- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
- Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy
- Minnesota Department of Health
- New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services
- New York State Department of Health
- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection

HABs

- Indiana State Department of Health
- Missouri Department of Natural Resources
- North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality
- Ohio Environmental Protection Agency
- Oregon Health Authority
- Utah Department of Environmental Quality
- Vermont Department of Health

The case studies outline the states' overall efforts, risk communication efforts, relevant resources, key messages for the public, and challenges in the states' programs or communications. Case Studies available at:
https://www.ecos.org/documents/state-level-risk-communication-of-pfas-and-habs/
https://www.astho.org/Programs/Environmental-Health/Water-Safety/#RiskComWaterCont

In 2019, using lessons learned from the previous year's effort, ASTHO and ECOS compiled existing tools, materials and strategies for PFAS risk communication. Known as the PFAS Risk Communications Hub, the goals were (1) to increase collaboration between state environmental and health managers, (2) increase accessibility of risk communication models for states and communities, and (3) improve public health through awareness of potential risks of contaminants of emerging concern.

Specifically, the PFAS Risk Communications Hub contains:

- Guidance materials for risk communication (toolkits, fact sheets, templates)
- Collection of state and federal resources (state case studies and state/federal PFAS websites)

Outcomes:

- Improved public health due to a greater awareness of PFAS and HABs risks
- Increased understanding of state practices and experiences regarding PFAS and cyanotoxin risk communication strategies

The PFAS Risk Communication Clearinghouse can be found here:
https://www.ecos.org/pfas-risk-communications-hub/
http://www.astho.org/PFAS/