

# Reducing Your Carbon Footprint:

## Health Departments Lead by Example

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**G**overnment has taken a leadership role in reducing its contribution to climate change. Idaho, Oregon, and Montana are among the states where agencies and local health departments are finding creative ways to reduce their carbon footprints:

- Idaho's governor directed state agencies to complete statewide emissions inventories, implement Greenhouse Gas (GHG) reduction strategies, and decrease the amount of gasoline and diesel used by state employees. Out of a fleet of 95 vehicles, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) now owns 21 hybrids and is considering purchasing some fully electric cars.
- Oregon state employees exceeded the governor's carbon reduction goal by 19 percent and saved more than \$125,000 on gas in response to the governor's commuter challenge. The state estimates that it saved 593,000 pounds of carbon dioxide from June 1 through August 29, 2008.
- A small rural Oregon health department in Curry County is piloting a demonstration project using 10–12 hour shifts and a shorter workweek in order to reduce travel and associated costs. The county reports that every eliminated commute saves \$30 and an hour of staff travel time.

- Montana's Climate Change Advisory Committee has issued 54 policy recommendations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2020.

These are just a sampling of the state and local health department efforts underway to minimize the effects of climate change in our region.

The health sector—including hospitals, clinics, and health departments—faces greater challenges than other sectors due to a number of factors including the need for frequent patient contact, travel, and delivery of critical

supplies. Especially in rural parts of our states, nurses and patients travel great distances. The total health sector carbon footprint, which includes indirect emissions through visitor, patient, and staff travel and the procurement of goods and services, is probably two or three times higher than direct emissions alone, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Public health agencies will need to change the way we do business if we are to reach the US Department of Energy recommendation that all sectors reduce their carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions.

### What can be done?

There are a number of ways to reduce emissions including calculating a carbon footprint, assessing opportunities for reductions, and structuring an action plan. There are also ways to calculate an organization's direct and indirect emissions. Some simple spreadsheets are provided at [www.ghgprotocol.org](http://www.ghgprotocol.org).

Direct emissions can include furnace heating systems, electricity by generators, and business travel in company cars. Indirect emissions include purchased electricity or heat; employee commuting in private cars; production of materials such as furniture, paper, equipment, toner cartridges and office products; and outsourced activities like shipping, courier services, and printing.

Areas to consider in reducing a carbon footprint include initial building design, procurement activities, transportation, waste management, capital improvements, energy saving tips, and small-scale measures such as lighting, incentives, and awareness.

### Leaders in Government

In Oregon, leadership for decreasing emissions came from the top. Governor Ted Kulongoski has proposed and implemented a number of climate change measures statewide. The governor's goal for energy use in state-operated facilities is to reduce energy to the levels used in 2000. In 2007, the Portland State Office Building, the home of the Oregon Public Health Division, used 28 percent more energy than it did in 2000. By 2008, during a six-month period alone—January to July—the building's energy use was cut 13 percent below 2000 levels, and 41 percent below 2007 levels.



Photo: Kelly James

Dr. Mel Kohn bicycles to work in Portland, Oregon.

In Idaho, Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter issued an executive order in 2007 that directed the Department of Environmental Quality to be the point of contact on climate change. That set into motion a number of actions including establishing Idaho’s GHG Working Group, identifying state agency GHG emissions, adopting changes to state vehicle fuel use and emissions, encouraging telecommuting, and offering incentives to state employees who use mass transportation.

Jess Byrne, Idaho DEQ, said the state has tried to focus primarily on common-sense practices. “We don’t have a large industrial base in Idaho and nearly all of our in-state electrical generation is hydro [hydroelectric power]. But one of our largest sources of greenhouse gases is transportation,” Byrne said. “We decided what made the most sense for us (state government) is getting our own house in order and leading by example.”

So far, 15 state agencies have completed GHG emissions inventories. Of the 87,500 metric tons of carbon dioxide emitted every fiscal year, Idaho found the top two producers were the Corrections and Health and Welfare programs. All 15 agencies that completed emissions inventories have also developed GHG Emissions Reduction Action Plans and are now implementing them.

### Public Health Best Practices

In Oregon, energy efficiency in the public health sector is guided by the Climate Change Committee of Public Health Oregon, otherwise known as C<sup>3</sup>PO. It encourages making double-sided printing the default setting for printers; requesting auto shut-off lighting in unused spaces; taking the stairs instead of elevators; and promoting alternative means of travel to work, including subsidizing public transportation, carpooling, and providing safe and convenient bicycle parking. Other efficiencies include increasing video conferencing capabilities to reduce travel; promoting telecommuting, varied workweeks, and other distance-working opportunities; and composting food waste to reduce methane gas.

### Leading by Example

The consequences of inaction would make the role of public health even more challenging.

“Those of us working in public health should recognize that climate disruption affects promoting good health for us all,” said Dr. Mel Kohn, Acting Director of the Oregon Public Health Division, Department of Human Services, and State Health Officer. He brings the public health perspective to his work on the Oregon Global Warming Commission. “There is an opportunity now for us to lead by example and take some responsibility for the impact on the Earth’s climate,” he said. ■

## 10 Tips to Reduce Your Health Agency’s Carbon Footprint Today

- **Carpool or find ways to reduce commutes at least one day per week:** Burning just one gallon of gasoline produces about 20 pounds of carbon emissions. When doing community work, team up with other health department staff traveling in the same direction.
- **Unplug electric items when not in use:** The equivalent of two large power plants run continuously to power America’s televisions when they are turned off. To eliminate your “phantom loads,” plug electronics, computer, and chargers into a power cords that you can unplug or switch off when not using.
- **Have a “waste-free” lunch at least once per week:** Bring your lunch in reusable containers, including reusable silverware, napkin, etc.
- **Turn off the lights:** Turn off lights when not in use. Light sensors can be added to automatically power down lights in vacant rooms.
- **Break the throwaway coffee cup habit:** Using a reusable mug twice a day instead of disposable cups can save 135 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions per person per year.
- **Drink your water from a reusable cup:** This will save you money and reduce the number of water bottles thrown away. The Northwest region has clean, potable water.
- **Eliminate your office’s junk mail:** According to Cornell’s Green Living Guide, ([www.campuslife.cornell.edu/campuslife/housing/green-living-guide.cfm](http://www.campuslife.cornell.edu/campuslife/housing/green-living-guide.cfm)) the average American receives 1.5 trees worth of junk mail each year. Leave trees standing, cut carbon emissions from paper production, and lighten the load on landfills by getting your office’s name off junk-mail lists.
- **Reduce your office’s paper consumption by about 20 percent this month:** You can do this by reviewing and editing drafts on screen, expanding margins when you print, printing double-sided copies, and collecting paper printed on one side and using the blank side as scrap paper.
- **Arrange to telecommute one day per week, if possible:** While this may not be feasible for all staff, consider looking into the possibility. By avoiding the average 22-mile commute to the office, telecommuting saves about 840 million gallons of gas nationally—the equivalent to taking two million cars off the road for a year.
- **Refill your ink cartridges:** Your office can order ink in bulk online or send your cartridges out to be refilled. By one estimate, it takes about a gallon of oil to make a new laser cartridge. ■

*Adapted from Oregon State University’s “50 things you can do” campus carbon challenge.*

### Authors

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