The Environmental Health Paradox: How Combining Public Health with Environmental Protection may Tip the Balance in Favor of Public Health Programming

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Abstract

Each of the 50 states has at least one bureaucratic agency dedicated to environmental protection. However, some states have chosen a multi-function structure, in which they combine environmental protection with public health. These combined agencies are expected to meet public health and environmental protection goals and mandates; however, the combination of functions may make agency goals less clear, allowing agencies to disproportionately focus on one function over the other. Relying on theories of organizational structure and goal ambiguity, this paper performs a content analysis on the annual reports of five states that combine public health and environmental protection, in order to determine if environmental protection receives less focus than public health by agencies that combine environmental protection and public health. The study finds that environmental protection/public health combined agencies devote significantly more time and resources to public health goals and programming. It is possible that this disproportionate distribution of agency time and resources to public health may lead to less effective environmental protection.