

Friends of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)

March 23, 2023

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chair, Interior-Env. Subcm.
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Rank. Mem, Interior-Env. Subcm.
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Merkley and Ranking Member Murkowski:

As you prepare the Fiscal Year 2024 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill, the undersigned members of the Friends of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) would like to call your attention to the vital work being carried out by the NIH/NIEHS as a result of the annual appropriation provided for this work in the Subcommittee's bill. We ask you to provide \$89 million for the Superfund Research Program in FY2024.

Within the Interior-Environment Appropriations bill, the NIEHS's Superfund Research Program (SRP) supports research to address the health impacts from hazardous substances in the environment, develop clean-up technologies for hazardous waste, and train future generations of scientists to work in interdisciplinary research teams to address environmental hazards. The SRP provides the scientific research used by the Worker Training Program (WTP) to train and empower hazardous waste workers to safely mitigate hazardous releases, accelerate remediation efforts, and prevent health consequences for communities due to toxicant exposure.

These programs have immediate real-world impact during disasters. In fact, SRP programs and WTP resources are being used to help address the dangers posed by environmental release of hazardous chemicals for workers and the community in East Palestine, Ohio, following from the recent train derailment disaster. Their involvement is informed by a 2019 workshop convened by NIEHS and other organizations involving responders, health care providers, academic researchers, students, community members, and government representatives, where they dealt with a mock scenario involving a train derailment with chemical releases into a community¹.

Researchers funded by the SRP are committed to discoveries that address important national issues:

- **Understanding PFAS and COVID-19:** The North Carolina State University SRP Center assess how exposure to chemicals such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) may affect health outcomes related to COVID-19 and to determine how PFAS exposure alters COVID-19 symptoms and susceptibility. The University of Rhode Island SRP Center's research on the effects of PFAS on the developing immune system of children was used by the U.S. EPA to suggest strict lifetime health advisories. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill SRP has developed a web-based tool² that enables its state health department and communities to track COVID-19 risk in relation to other stressors in the environment.
- **Establishing Safe Drinking Water for Communities:** New Hampshire recently signed a law to lower the maximum contaminant level for arsenic in drinking water, anticipated to reduce arsenic-related illnesses and deaths in New Hampshire, following from research at the Dartmouth

¹ <https://factor.niehs.nih.gov/2019/4/community-impact/disaster>

² <https://enviroscan.org>

College SRP Center. Columbia University has established a partnership with Northern Plains Indigenous communities to develop new technology locally to protect the water resources and communities from hazardous metal exposures derived from uranium mining. And the University of New Mexico has a long history of identifying sources of contaminated water related to legacy mine waste, documenting sources used by communities, and the associated health effects from exposures to mixtures of toxic metals.

- **Reducing Pregnancy Complications:** Researchers at Wayne State University's SRP are studying the link between volatile organic chemicals (VOCs) and adverse birth outcomes in Detroit MI, which has among the highest preterm birth rates in the country. The SRP recently demonstrated that exposure to one of the most common VOCs, benzene, impacts male and female offspring differently.
- **Recovering from Natural Disasters:** Researchers at the Texas A&M University SRP are developing tools to predict exposure during environmental emergencies, such as the aftermath of Hurricanes Harvey and Florence and to produce applied solutions to mitigate the negative effects of environmental disasters on human health. They also responded to the man-made disasters such as ITC fires in Houston in 2019 and the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio in 2023. Researchers from the Northeastern University SRP are providing water filtration kits and other support to its study participants in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The researchers are investigating links between the high preterm birth rate on the island, and the extent of hazardous contamination there.
- **Helping communities protect themselves.** Louisiana State University SRP researchers characterized toxic pollutants released from a hazardous waste thermal treatment facility and characterized potential migration to nearby residents. Some of these data were presented at a public hearing convened by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. The University of New Mexico has also worked closely with Laguna Pueblo to verify the safety of agricultural production (soil, irrigation water, and plant material) to ensure safety relative to the largest abandoned open-pit uranium mine in the country and test a nutritional clinical trial intervention with Navajo communities to reduce the impacts of exposures to uranium and arsenic in legacy mine waste. Likewise, investigators at the Michigan State University SRP Center have been assisting communities along the Tittabawassee River in the state of Michigan, which is contaminated with dioxin-like compounds, to understand the adverse health effects these compounds can produce, develop novel remediations strategies, and provide information to the affected communities on how they can minimize their exposure.
- **Partnering with multiple stakeholders.** University of Kentucky Superfund Research Center (UKSRC) researchers are developing partnerships with Kentuckians in several communities as well as state and federal regulatory agencies to assess needs, broker knowledge and to respond to growing concern about PFAS exposures in Kentucky. UKSRC promotes health equity in communities through an intervention and prevention paradigm that reduces the disease risks associated with exposure to environmental pollutants by investigating the benefits of healthy lifestyles and by developing innovative engineered solutions to prevent and reduce current and future exposures.

Finally, with some examples noted above, we note that SRP initiatives are committed to working with communities so that research findings serve communities and local civic organizations in a useful way. Specifically, the SRP's Community Engagement Cores serve to enhance knowledge exchange and to support the needs of communities impacted by hazardous-waste sites.

We ask for your leadership in ensuring that the NIH/NIEHS Superfund-related activities receive an increase in the Fiscal Year 2024 bill to a total of \$89 million, which will help to keep our ecosystems safe, while creating private sector jobs and bolstering the economy. If the opportunity to meet the current

investment needs of the NIEHS Superfund Research Program and Worker Training Program is passed by, we risk reversing a variety of public health, environmental, and economic gains of the past 25 years. Representatives from this diverse coalition would welcome the opportunity to speak with you further about the very important work being carried out by NIEHS.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Geophysical Union
American Thoracic Society
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
Autoimmune Association
Breast Cancer Prevention Partners
Children's Environmental Health Network
Endocrine Society
Healthy Schools Network
Kids for Saving Earth
March of Dimes
National Eczema Association
Society for Birth Defects Research and Prevention
Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine
Society of Toxicology
The Foundation for Sarcoidosis Research
The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research