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## Arizona's Children Deserve a Healthy Environment

By Steve Owens, Director, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality

Children today face enough challenges; breathing shouldn't be one of them.

With that principle in mind, Governor Janet Napolitano has directed the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to lead her Children's Environmental Health Project, which focuses on environmental issues affecting the health of Arizona's children.

The project, which will coordinate statewide efforts to reduce environmental pollutants that adversely affect our children's health, represents a new way of thinking for ADEQ and other agencies – one that causes us to look beyond our traditional permitting, inspection and enforcement activity and evaluate decisions and actions based on their effects on children. By protecting the environmental health of children, our most vulnerable population, we will improve the quality of life for all Arizona citizens and get our children started toward healthy and happy lives.

The need for this new approach is evident. Healthy children stand a better chance of growing into the educated, productive citizens that will lead Arizona in the 21st century. To help our kids succeed, we must provide a safe and healthy environment.

It is a sad fact that the toxins that pollute our environment often hit children the hardest. Pound-for-pound, children breathe more air, drink more water, and eat more food than adults.

Children play outdoors, close to the ground – and as any parent (including me) will attest, they constantly put things in their mouths. And while our children's behavior increases their potential for exposure to pollutants, they are less able than adults to metabolize and process any toxins in their systems, because they are still developing.

The skyrocketing rate of environmentally linked respiratory problems among children in this state is particularly disturbing. Arizona has the second highest rate of asthma in the nation, and our young people are especially hard-hit. Forty-two percent of the Arizonans hospitalized for asthma in 1998 were under age 21, and nearly \$12 million was spent that year on hospital care for them, with the state bearing much of those costs. Almost 8 percent of the children attending school in Arizona have asthma, and asthma is the most prevalent condition among children who have special health care needs in our state.

Although we do not know precisely what causes childhood asthma, we do know that air pollution makes it worse. That's why ADEQ has set the initial focus of the Children's Environmental Health Project on addressing air quality problems in this state and attempting to reduce the incidence of asthma and other childhood respiratory illnesses.

Toward that goal, ADEQ hosted a unique forum in May that brought together children's health experts from Arizona and across the country to help chart a course for the project. A gathering of this kind had never been held before in Arizona. These experts told us that many cases of asthma and other respiratory diseases in children could be eliminated by improving the environment around them, particularly by reducing the level of air borne contaminants, such as ozone and particulates, to which these kids are exposed. The message from the forum was clear and simple: cleaner air means healthier children.

As the Children's Environmental Health Project moves forward, ADEQ also will lead an effort to accurately assess and measure the environmental factors that impact children in Arizona in other ways as well. For example, mercury is a concern in many of Arizona's lakes, while pesticides, lead and household hazardous wastes pose an ever-present danger if not stored and disposed of properly.

In leading Governor Napolitano's Children's Environmental Health Project, ADEQ is taking a straightforward strategy that CAREs about children who are adversely affected by environmental pollutants. It's a strategy that Coordinates, Assesses, Reduces and Educates.

First, ADEQ will coordinate with people, groups and agencies involved with children's environmental health in Arizona to chart a path to address the environmental issues affecting children, with our initial focus on air quality and asthma.

Second, ADEQ and its partners will assess and prioritize the environmental factors that affect children's health in Arizona. This process will take time, but it is the key to the third and most important step, which is to develop strategies to reduce the number and types of contaminants that adversely affect the health of Arizona children.

Finally, and throughout this process, ADEQ will educate the public and parents about environmental hazards and the steps that can be taken to lessen children's exposure to pollution and minimize their effects on the lives of children.

Working together with organizations such as the American Lung Association, Phoenix Children's Hospital and other groups and agencies, we can and will find ways to safeguard our children's health by reducing their exposure to harmful substances.

Our children deserve nothing less.