Tracking Public Health Within Communities

Improving public health by reducing exposure to air pollutants in highly impacted communities is the foundation of the Community Air Protection Program (Program). Reducing emissions is critical to improving air quality in overburdened communities and lessening the cumulative impacts that air pollution has on public health. As part of this effort, community emissions reduction programs are the cornerstone of the Program. The purpose of the community-emissions reduction programs is to focus and accelerate new actions to provide direct reductions in emissions and exposure within impacted communities. Each community emissions reduction program must include specific emission reduction targets for applicable pollutants. As such, tracking emission reductions is the core metric for evaluating progress and the effectiveness of each community emissions reduction program.

However, this community-focused approach presents new opportunities to collect, track, and analyze air pollution-related health data, and the importance of public health data is incorporated throughout the Program. For example, air pollution-related health indicators are an important factor in the community assessment and selection process. CARB staff are also coordinating with public health departments and will provide links to publically available health data through an online Resource Center, as well as provide links to past, current, and proposed community health projects. CARB, air districts, and members of the community can use this information when working with various agencies to enhance consideration of public health impacts in the decision-making process of State, regional, and local agencies. CARB is also recommending that representatives from local health departments be included on community steering committees to provide their expertise regarding the unique public health challenges in communities in their jurisdictions. Finally, collection of more granular community-level air quality data can support improved assessments of the connections between air pollution and specific health outcomes.

While reductions in air pollution are strongly linked to improved public health, health studies have generally focused on large populations and involving multiple cities. Evaluating health outcomes at the community level poses a number of challenges as there are many determinants of public health in addition to air pollution. AB 617 provides an opportunity to underscore the need for improved data to support tracking air pollution-related health indicators that can support inclusion of additional health-related program elements over time.

The attached slides provide an overview of sources of health data that are currently available and pros and cons associated with their current ability to support community-level health assessments.