



# Extension Shedding Light on Environmental Health Issues

## Impact Statement

### The Problem/Issue:

Most people spend over 90 percent of their time indoors. Some of the most serious health problems for children occur in the home environment. Children often have greater exposures to environmental toxins than adults because their bodies are still developing and pound per pound of body weight, children drink more water, breathe more air and eat more food than adults.

Extension has addressed two environmental health issues in particular: childhood asthma and lead poisoning prevention directed at remodelers of older housing. In Alabama, 6 percent of the population has been diagnosed with asthma. This disease disproportionately affects low income and African-American populations. The direct and indirect costs of asthma total more than \$8 billion a year and asthma is the leading cause of hospital stays and missed school days..

Lead is a poison that is especially toxic to pregnant women and to children under the age of 6. The main source of lead poisoning in the home environment is contaminated dust from peeling lead-based paint. Lead was banned from paint used in residential homes in 1978; therefore, older housing is most likely to contain lead-based paint. Alabama's project particularly targets remodelers, sellers and landlords of older housing to make them aware of federal disclosure laws about the presence of lead-based paint. These laws are most often disregarded in rural areas and by remodelers, sellers and landlords not affiliated with larger property management organizations.

### What's Been Done:

A two-day training session provided more than 40 Extension agents in 34 counties with intensive instruction and materials. A key partner in this program is the grant-sponsored Children's Environmental Health Project, which is a partnership between USDA/CSREES and EPA Region 4. The mission of this multistate partnership is to provide educational outreach on environmental health risks to children by emphasizing partnering with other land-grant universities in the South and with other state health agencies. An annual meeting is held for this partnership project. The sharing of materials and programs developed in each state extends grant dollars for this project.

Extension agents are encouraged to carry out environmental health programs in their communities. These local

programs have taken many forms, including environmental health conferences with local health professionals, school and community health fairs, newsletter columns and public service announcements.

Walker County is one county that implemented these conferences. Held in conjunction with the Children's Health Circus (a children's health fair), the Walker County Children's Environmental Health Conference educated 35 parents, teachers, childcare providers, social workers, and health care professionals. The conference covered childhood poisoning, asthma and allergens and the health effects of mold and mildew. Participants also visited approximately 25 booths and exhibitors at the Children's Health Circus.

## **Why We Care:**

Long-term goals are to increase awareness of Alabama citizens of environmental health issues and to increase contacts within local communities regarding access to health care information about environmental health. An emphasis of this project is to create low-literacy publications that can be understood by a wide segment of the population of Alabama.

More than 1,100 professionals have been trained in the last two years through the county environmental conferences. These professionals have included school nurses, pediatric nurses, child care providers, public health officials, social workers and parents. Those attending the environmental conferences were able to obtain CEU's (Continuing Education Units) from Auburn University and other institutions for credit hours earned through training.

Evaluations from Walker County's conference offer insight into participants' response to the program.

Evaluations indicated that the Saturday morning session allowed participants to receive vital training at a low cost without having to travel out of the county and without having to take time away from work. This seemed to be particularly important to those who were self-employed. All attendees indicated that they would make at least one change in their home environment in order to reduce the risks of harmful effects on the health of their families.