



Environmental Health Key Words

The Environmental Health & Climate Workgroup compiled a list of key environmental health and climate-related words and definitions. This curated list of definitions, reviewed by subject matter experts, for the public health workforce, begins laying the foundation for common climate-related language in public health.

Adaptation: activities undertaken to cope with changing climate conditions.¹

Adaptive capacity: the ability to mobilize health-promoting resources and thereby cope with changing climate circumstances (eg, the ability to travel to and/or access a cool location during prolonged periods of extreme heat). Adaptive capacity therefore consists of the presence or absence of key adaptive resources and/or behaviors at the individual or population level.²

Adaptive governance: which refers to processes of self-organization in complex systems whereby diverse interactions between networks of actors and institutions pursue a desired social-ecological.^{3,4}

Adaptive management: is a term that originated from the resource management discipline in the face of increasing system complexity. It refers to a structured process for managing incomplete information to anticipate, plan and respond to climate-related health risks.⁵⁻⁷

Brownfields: is a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.⁸

Built environment: man-made or modified structures that provide people with living, working, and recreational spaces.⁹

Carbon neutrality: annual zero net anthropogenic (human-caused or influenced) CO₂ emissions by a certain date.¹⁰

Climate change: long-term changes to climate variability driven by both natural (eg, the angle of the planet in relation to the sun, and the planet's surface reflectivity) and anthropogenic (ie, human) factors (eg, greenhouse gas emissions)

Climate change and health vulnerability assessments: a form of rapid health impact assessment (HIA) specifically oriented to the health impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations—have been leveraged by the public health sector as a means to develop baseline assessments of local/regional populations whose health may be impacted under a variety of future warming scenarios.¹¹⁻¹³

Climate gentrification: the ways that climate impacts and adaptations may contribute to changes in community characteristics and potential displacement of vulnerable residents through changes in property values.¹⁴

Climate justice: disproportionate burden of health effects of climate change. Some populations are less responsible for climate change than others and policies intended to mitigate or adapt to climate change should generate co-benefits for vulnerable populations and not further increase or entrench inequities. Climate justice stresses that (1) the imbalances between responsibilities and harms are acknowledged; (2) interventions should be implemented to correct them; and (3) solutions to climate change should be designed to advance human rights and empower individuals while promoting community agency, self-reliance and generating improvements for health and well-being.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Climate migration: the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border.¹⁸

Climate security: represents the physical, economic, or societal impacts associated with climate change that substantially alter political stability, human security, or national security infrastructure.¹⁹

Climate Sensitivity: to climate-related harms refers to groups and subgroups that have certain traits that make them more likely to be impacted by a particular climate-related health issue (eg, seniors have reduced physiology, reduced physical sensitivity to heat, reduction in the ability to sweat and may be on certain medications that make them more sensitive to extreme heat).²⁰

Community health assessment: refers to a state, tribal, local or territorial health assessment that identifies key health needs and issues through systemic, comprehensive data collection and analysis.²¹

Decarbonization: decreasing the ratio of carbon dioxide (CO₂) or all greenhouse gas emissions related to primary energy production.¹⁰

Ecology: Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them.²²

Ecosystem: The interacting system of a particular biological community and its non-living environmental surroundings, or a class of such systems (e.g., forests or wetlands).²³

Energy justice: refers to the goal of achieving equity in both the social and economic participation in the energy system, while also remediating social, economic, and health burdens on those disproportionately harmed by the energy system.²⁴

Energy insecurity: inability of a household to meet its basic heating, cooling and energy needs overtime.²⁵

Energy poverty: lack of adequate, affordable, reliable, quality, safe, and environmentally sound energy services to support development.²⁶

Environmental justice: The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.²⁷

Global warming: general warming trend being observed globally.²⁸

Greenhouse: Any gas that absorbs infrared radiation in the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases include water vapor, carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), ozone (O₃), perfluorinated compounds (PFCs), and hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs).²³

Health co-benefits: health benefits of adaptation strategies that can be either intended or unintended.^{29,30}

Health equity: Striving for the highest possible standard of health for all people and giving special attention to the needs of those at greatest risk of poor health based on social conditions. Ensuring that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthy by eliminating disparities and improving the health of all groups. Health equity is necessary to ensure equitable access to care, resources, and services to those who are most in need.²³

Health disparities: Differences in health outcomes and their determinants among segments of the population as defined by social, demographic, environmental, or geographic category.²⁷

Health in All Policies: a collaborative approach that integrates and articulates health considerations into policymaking across sectors to improve the health of all communities and people.³¹

Infrastructure: the systems and services, such as transportation and power supplies, that a country or organization uses in order to work effectively.³²

Interim Remedial Measure: An action taken at a contaminated site to reduce the chances of human or environmental exposure to site contaminants. Interim remedial measures are planned and carried out before comprehensive remedial studies. They can prevent additional damage during the study phase, but don't interfere in any way with the need to develop a complete remedial program. An example of an interim remedial measure is removing drums of chemicals to a storage facility from a site that has drums sitting in an empty field.³³

Intersectionality: the intersecting facets of identity which can compound and magnify inequalities.³⁴

Land use: the human use of land. It represents the economic and cultural activities (e.g., agricultural, residential, industrial, mining, and recreational uses) that are practiced at a given place.³⁵

Low-carbon resilience: the dual challenge of developing a low-carbon society to limit climate change (ie, mitigation), while also supporting adaptation strategies to cope with warming that is already expected given historical.³⁶

Managed retreat: voluntary movement and transition of people and ecosystems away from vulnerable areas.³⁷

Mitigation: activities that limit greenhouse gas emissions or remove them from the atmosphere.^{38, 39}

Natural resource conflict: a social or political conflict where natural resources contribute to the onset, aggravation, or sustaining of the conflict, due to disagreements or competition over the access to and management of natural resources, and the unequal burdens and benefits, profits, or power generated thereof.⁴⁰

Preparedness: a state of readiness to respond to a disaster, crisis or any other type of emergency situation.⁴¹

Recovery: Recover through a focus on the timely restoration, strengthening and revitalization of infrastructure, housing and a sustainable economy, as well as the health, social, cultural, historic and environmental fabric of communities affected by a catastrophic incident.⁴¹

Resilience: the ability of a system to ‘bounce back’ to a functional state in the face of some form of stress, or the ability of the system to learn and ‘bounce forward’ or transform into a new functional state.⁴²

Response: actions taken after an emergency or disaster to help minimize the negative effects.

Social-ecological systems: complex arrays of social and ecological systems working in tandem.⁴³

Super fund: A program, operated under the legislative authority of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, that funds and carries out EPA solid waste emergency and long-term removal and remedial activities. These activities include establishing the National Priorities List, investigating sites for inclusion on the list, determining their priority, and conducting and/or supervising cleanup and other remedial actions.²⁷

Regenerative agriculture: describes farming and grazing practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity – resulting in both carbon drawdown and improving the water cycle.⁴⁴

Remedial Investigation: An in-depth study (including sampling of air, soil, water and waste) of a contaminated site needing remediation to determine the nature and extent of contamination. The remedial investigation (RI) is usually combined with a feasibility study (FS).³³

Remediation: Correction or improvement of a problem, such as work that is done to clean up or stop the release of chemicals from a contaminated site. After investigation of a site, remedial work may include removing soil and/or drums, capping the site or collecting and treating the contaminated fluids.³³

Urbanization: The concentration of development in relatively small areas (cities and suburbs). The U.S. Census Bureau defines an “urbanized area” as a densely developed territory that contains 50,000 or more people. The Census Bureau uses the term “urban cluster” to refer to territory that has at least 2,500 people, but fewer than 50,000 people.²⁷

Vulnerability: to climate change is a function of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity, and is broadly defined as the degree to which a person, population or system can cope with the adverse (health) effects of a changing climate.⁴⁵

Resources:

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