The Pew Environmental Health Commission was launched on May 11-12, 1999, with a meeting of the Commissioners and staff. The Commission took several important steps.

Definition of “Environmental Health.” As it is not a well established field, there is no universally accepted definition for environmental health. After reviewing over 30 different environmental health definitions, the Commissioners developed the following, based on the draft 1993 World Health Organization version:

> Environmental health comprises those aspects of human health, including quality of life, that are determined by interactions with physical, chemical, biological and social factors in the environment. It also refers to the theory and practice of assessing, correcting, controlling and preventing those factors in the environment that may adversely affect the health of present and future generations.

Commission’s Mission. The Commission’s charge is to develop recommendations designed to bolster America’s ability to track and prevent health problems linked to environmental conditions.

Commission Investigations. Over the next 18 months, the Commission will produce several high-profile reports that identify key health threats – and provide policy-makers, health and environmental organizations and the public with a blueprint for upgrading the federal government’s public health system. Three broad investigative areas were approved by the Commission – and all will explore the need for better surveillance and monitoring of human health as related to environmental threats:

- Children’s Environmental Health. Focusing predominantly on children and led by former EPA Assistant Administrator Lynn Goldman, MD, MPH, this investigation will generate three reports over the next nine months:
  - Birth defects. Highlighting birth defects as the leading cause of infant mortality and a significant cause of...
childhood morbidity, this will examine the link to environmental hazards and provide new findings on trends in this country.

—**Asthma.** In the past 20 years, there has been an increase of epidemic proportions in asthma-caused morbidity and mortality for Americans under 35. The Commission will probe its connection with environmental hazards.

—**Childhood cancer.** The Commission will focus on specific childhood cancers particularly those with increasing rates over the past 15 years as well as the etiology of these diseases.

- **Environmental Health Right-to-Know.** Former New Jersey Deputy Commissioner of Health Tom Burke, PhD, MPH will lead the investigative team, looking at ways to bolster our nation’s ability to track health outcomes associated with environmental hazards in particular communities, recognize emerging environmental hazards and respond to the public questions about the environment and their health.

- **Scientific and Policy-Making Capacity.** Building on the previous reports, this series will focus on the scientific and technical resources available – and offer a blueprint to help federal public health agencies improve their environmental decision-making. Executive Director Shelley Hearne, DrPH and Deputy Director Paul Locke, DrPH are the Principal Investigators.

To ensure that these efforts have the greatest impact over the long run, the investigators and Commissioners will work closely with government agencies and with the health, environment, and business communities. In addition, panels of leading policy, health, environmental and scientific experts will peer review each report before release.

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**Poll Finds Significant Public Support for a Better Public Health System.**

The Pew Charitable Trusts commissioned a comprehensive national survey exploring Americans’ worries about environmentally-related health problems — and the public health systems’ inability to protect them. These results were publicly released at the Pew Environmental Health Commission press event on May 11, 1999. Some of the highlights include the following:

![Poll Results](image)

**Americans believe our country is devoting insufficient resources to public health and want more spending and more effort.** Two-thirds want more done, while only a quarter think that we’re doing enough.
Two-thirds of the public believes that preventing disease is more important or as important as treating sickness.

The public overwhelmingly believes that environmental factors are a major cause of health problems and disease.

Overwhelming numbers favor greater spending on public health than on other priorities.

They favor public health spending over:

- Building public (by nine to one)
- The missile defense system (by four to one).
- Cutting taxes (by over two to one).
- Fighting crime (with 40% wanting more for public health).

Only education spending enjoys greater support (yet even here one-in-four want more for public health).
By near unanimous numbers, voters believe that we need to learn more about the health effects of environmental problems. For almost every disease, significant numbers believe that environmental factors are a cause. Asthma and birth defects are particularly high.

Party affiliation makes no difference. Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike think environmental factors are an important cause of disease/health problems.