

Profile in Public Health Law: Patrick Peck, Environmental Health Manager for the Seminole Tribe of Florida

Public Health Law News (PHLN): Can you please describe your career path?

Peck: I obtained a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences in 1984 and a master's degree in environmental management in 1993. I have worked in environmental health since graduation. I'm licensed nationally as a registered environmental health specialist through the National Environmental Health Association and a certified environmental health professional by the Florida Environmental Health Association. I'm a member of the [International Federation of Environmental Health](#), as well as a diplomat with the [American Academy of Sanitarians](#). And I also hold many credentials in the environmental health field.

PHLN: What drew you to working in environmental health?

Peck: I have always been fascinated with environmental and preventive medicine, and I opted to work as a general public health practitioner. I was drawn to public health early on as a result of my experience living in third-world countries. Several serious bouts with malaria drew me closer to this field.

PHLN: How long have you been working in environmental health with the Seminole Tribe?

Peck: I joined the [Seminole Tribe of Florida Health Department](#) in April 2003 and was promoted to environmental health manager in 2004.

PHLN: What are your day-to-day job responsibilities?



Technician checking a mosquito light trap.

Peck: I oversee 14 environmental health specialists and field experts. My daily responsibilities vary with the several disciplines within the tribe (mosquito control, animal control, food safety, environmental services, infection control, indoor air quality, health facilities, and aquatic/playground safety). My staff performs preventive inspections and also responds to environmental health-related complaints and inquiries on eight reservations. We take a proactive and comprehensive approach and have been given full authority to enforce compliance with tribal laws, ordinances, and policies under our jurisdiction.

PHLN: In what ways might your job be different if you worked for a city health department, rather than for a tribe?

Peck: In some ways, the approach is similar to working for a city, but working for a tribe creates unique challenges. Our staff members need to adhere to the traditional and cultural norms. One advantage of working with the tribe is that we can fully gauge whether our efforts are having positive outcomes. Due to the homogeneity, limited scale, and local nature of our population, we can quickly measure and assess if our goals and objectives are being met and whether our overall program is effective.



Counting mosquitoes from mosquito trap.

PHLN: What is tribal sovereignty? Can you give some specific examples of how tribal sovereignty impacts the work of the Seminole Health Department?

Peck: Tribal sovereignty means that the tribe has the ability to establish its own independent political and operational form of government. It allows the tribe to manage its own affairs without external governmental interference. State agencies have no jurisdiction over how we conduct tribal business and cannot encroach on tribal council decisions. In the case of our environmental health program,

the tribal council sought to establish early on a set of ordinances that would govern what it wanted to enforce at the tribal community level. For our food safety ordinance, the tribe chose to adopt the US Food and Drug Administration's code by reference. This tribal ordinance also includes "tribal-centric" provisions that consider tribal cultural and traditional aspects, such as pow wows and other community-related functions. The food safety ordinance allows our staff to monitor and regulate how food businesses operate on tribal land. We also have a tribal animal care ordinance that regulates how tribal members should own and care for their animals, and it's strictly enforced by our animal control officers.

PHLN: In what kinds of situations would you need to seek council approval? What does this process entail?

Peck: Our tribal health department administrators often attend council meetings and update the tribal council on its overall department activities. The tribal council is also informed about the department's goals and objectives, as well as scope of work, via a bimonthly department activity report. The Tribal Health Administration will routinely approach the tribal council seeking guidance and approval when it's establishing new operational and department policies.

PHLN: How is the Seminole Tribe responding to Zika?

Peck: The Seminole Tribe has had a comprehensive mosquito control program in place since 2004. The program has grown over time to now include ground and aerial spraying, residential inspections, trap counting, vector testing, and educational and reporting services.

In terms of Zika, the tribe has stepped up its efforts. Primarily, we are educating the community about the dangers of Zika. Our health department offers free Zika laboratory testing in accordance with CDC guidelines for its tribal members. We also disseminate electronic health advisories daily through the tribe's Internet portal. We have posted flyers throughout the community and placed the tribe's mosquito control hotline number on electronic billboards. We have attended and offered Zika presentations at tribal community meetings, and we are in the midst of delivering packets door-to-door with Zika and mosquito prevention information, as well as DEET spray. We'll cover our five tribal residential reservations (Hollywood, Big Cypress, Brighton, Immokalee, and Fort Pierce). Lastly, we have partnered with the tribe's [Housing and Public Works Department](#) to promote the removal of bulk items from residential yards, which could be a place where mosquitoes lay eggs. So far, we haven't had a case of Zika on the reservations. We continue to monitor the situation closely and routinely keep up with state and [CDC updates](#).

PHLN: How would the tribe respond if there were a positive case?

Peck: The closest reservation to Miami-Dade County, FL, where local transmission of Zika has been confirmed, is our Hollywood reservation. We have stepped up our monitoring and mosquito spraying activities. If we have a suspect or confirmed case, we will notify the county health department immediately and boost our educational and spraying activities to control further spread of the virus.

PHLN: Do your mosquito control programs interact with programs of the state or other localities?

Peck: Yes, we receive routine electronic updates from the state and county.

PHLN: There has been a lot of discussion about whether using insecticide or genetically modified mosquitoes is the best way to prevent the spread of Zika. As a representative of the Seminole Health Department, what is your stance on the issue?

Peck: We make efficient use of one of the safest and most reliable products on the market. The tribe has a deep concern for its environment, wildlife, and population. In this regard, we use products in a very discerning fashion, resulting in the safe treatment of our tribal lands for Zika and other potential mosquito borne viruses.

PHLN: How are your Zika response and your mosquito control program related to law?

Peck: We are in compliance with state and federal guidelines as it relates to our mosquito spraying activities. Our mosquito personnel are state-licensed and well-trained. We meet and exceed industry standards when it comes to safety and operational measures.

PHLN: What advice would you give other jurisdictions that have less experience or fewer resources to dedicate to large-scale mosquito control?

Peck: There is no substitute for experience. I would advise other jurisdictions to partner with other local and county mosquito control agencies if they have shortcomings in terms of experience, funding, or personnel. If these jurisdictions lack the necessary resources to take on a large-scale mosquito control program, they can always look into an interagency agreement with their county mosquito control programs. State universities are also a potential source for free educational and consultation services through their extension services.

PHLN: What is your favorite part of your job?

Peck: I truly enjoy working with my colleagues at the tribal health department. My job is full of challenges and leaves little room for boredom. I believe that we have had a positive effect on the health and safety of the community. For that I am grateful and privileged to be working with the tribe.

PHLN: What are the greatest challenges you face in your position?

Peck: The greatest challenge is to try to remain ahead of any potential public health outbreak on the reservations. Last year we dealt with chikungunya and previously with dengue, West Nile virus, rabies, Eastern equine encephalitis, TB, shigella, and foodborne cases. We are constantly on the lookout for possible epidemics, outbreaks, or public health cases. We know we've done our job if we stay clear or minimize these public health challenges on our reservations.

PHLN: What would you be doing if you weren't working in tribal environmental health?

Peck: I would enjoy serving in an international setting in the same work capacity. I would welcome the opportunity and experience to work in an underserved region of the world, such as in India or Africa (even for a few years).

PHLN: If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and what would you do?

Peck: I have extensively traveled throughout Europe, the Caribbean, Central Africa, and the Americas, but would like to visit Egypt and China. Those two countries are on my "to do" list. I'm fascinated by the grand architecture of the Great Wall and the pyramids.

PHLN: Have you read any good books lately?

Peck: I routinely read and keep up on subjects related to public health by reading books, journals, articles, and studies. I also enjoy reading nonfiction, especially biographies.

PHLN: Do you have any hobbies?

Peck: I have a fascination for artisanal work (paintings, pottery, art sculptures). I also dabble a bit in the kitchen. I enjoy cooking for family and friends. I recently invested in a piano and guitar and look forward to learning how to play those.

PHLN: Is there anything you would like to add?

Peck: I have been blessed to work with the Seminole Tribe. It has given me a platform to perfect and practice my chosen career in a very satisfying way. I thank CDC for the opportunity to share the good work that is taking place at the Seminole Tribe of Florida.