Climate Services for Health Improving public health decision making in a new climate

CASE STUDY

Enabling environment Research Product and service development

Application

ITERATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING OF A HEAT WARNING AND INFORMATION SYSTEM IN ALBERTA, CANADA

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CONTEXT

Climate change is anticipated to increase the frequency and intensity of extreme heat events in northern latitudes, including in Canada (11-13). Such heat events can lead to increases in hospital admissions, morbidity and premature mortality, particularly among the most vulnerable groups (14, 15). The western Canadian province of Alberta had relatively little experience with severe heat waves of long duration. In 2012, consistent with Alberta's climate change adaption framework (16), Alberta Health, the Provincial Government Department of Health, initiated a high-level vulnerability assessment that led to the development of a Heat Warning and Information System (HWIS) involving collaboration between several agencies with expertise outside of public health.

NEW APPROACHES

Starting in 2012, Alberta Health initiated a process to develop a HWIS based on two core principles:

- Leveraging existing partnerships and networks: Alberta Health partnered with the Meteorological Service of Canada (MSC) and Health Canada (two federal departments), the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry (AF), and Alberta Health Services (local community level). Through these strategic partnerships, Alberta Health was able to access advice (e.g. epidemiological analyses) and infrastructure (e.g. climate forecasting systems) to design the roll-out of the HWIS.
- 2. Building on existing best practices and lessons learned: Alberta Health completed a survey, with the assistance of Health Canada and the MSC, of best practices and lessons learned relevant to the provincial context. The results of this survey fed directly into the development of both the structure of the HWIS (e.g. the thresholds), as well as the corresponding communication plan.

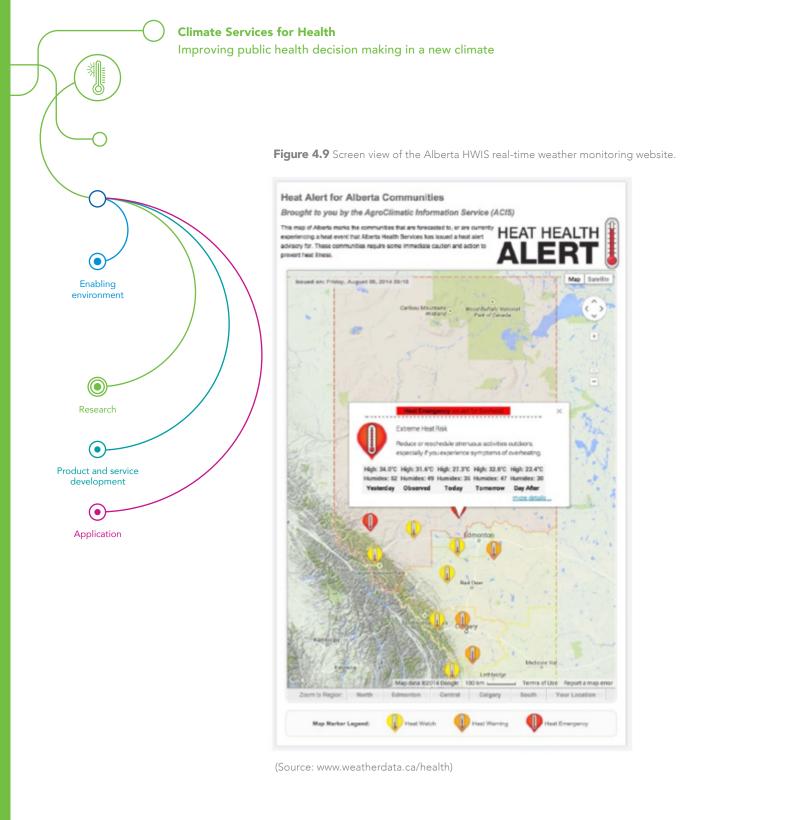
After approximately 24 months of development, Alberta Health initiated a pilot of its provincial HWIS during the summers of 2014/15. The goals of the pilot were threefold. The first was to test the effectiveness of the proposed thresholds and associated responses (see Figure 4.7). The thresholds were determined by evaluating historical summertime meteorological conditions alongside emergency room department visits and mortality statistics. During the pilot season, the final decision on initiating a response action was the responsibility of the local medical officer in the ministry of health. The second goal was to promote awareness among key decision-makers and the general public through a targeted communication initiative. The third goal was to test the web-based infrastructure that AF developed in collaboration with Alberta Health. Using an existing information systems platform, the AgroClimatic Information Service of AF developed a web-based mapping application that monitored communities and their corresponding threshold level, as well as an information content feed for local ministries of health so that they could be notified when thresholds were exceeded (see Figure 4.8).

There were three heat events during the summers of 2014 and 2015 for which public health actions were taken. The events were short duration (2 to 3 days), and involved several communities. The pilot will be evaluated to further develop the system for future years.

Figure 4.8 Criteria to trigger different levels of heat warnings.

DESCRIPTION	CRITERIA
Heat warning MSC provides early notification to ministries of health that a heat event is building, and provides guidance on duration, severity and geography of the event. MSC issues a heat warning to the public. The local ministry of health monitors the local situation and adjusts the public health response.	When the weather forecast is for two or more consecutive days above the 95th percentile of maximum and minimum temperatures.
Extended heat warning MSC maintains the heat warning, notifies the ministries of health and provides guidance on severity, duration and geography of the event.	Observed maximum and minimum temperatures are above the 95th percentile for for three consecutive days and are forecast to continue.
The local ministry of health may contact municipalities, vulnerable population organizations to implement response measures.	
The local ministry of health may notify emergency management services and hospitals to be prepared for surge during and after the event.	

2





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BENEFITS AND LESSONS

The Alberta HWIS project can be characterized as a success story. Before the initiation of this work, Alberta did not have a coordinated approach or shared understanding of the potential health threat of heat events, mitigation plans or an effective heat information system. Collaboration among agencies at the local, provincial and federal levels enabled sharing of expertise, skills and resources to allow for the rapid development and deployment of a province-wide HWIS pilot. Since this was an initial pilot, the health benefits have not been quantified.

Expertise and resources developed by Health Canada, such as the McMaster University Extreme Heat Events website provided the basis for the development of the HWIS and tools used in communications and public messaging. Forecast support for heat events and expertise/data provided by the MSC allowed for historical analyses to develop meteorological thresholds. AF had unique technical expertise. Having local ministries of health champion the project helped create credibility and encouraged other local organizations to participate. The genuine passion and goodwill exhibited from agencies working on the project contributed to the successful development and execution of the pilot within its two-year time frame.

Figure 4.10 Alberta Health Service'a Online Heat Warning Information Portal.



When a Heat Warning is in Effect:

ake precautions to protect yourself and your loved ones

- Consider rescheduling outdoor activities to cooler hours of the day
- . Take frequent breaks from heat, spending time indoors at cooled public buildings (including mails or indoor pools).
- on moor pools. Drink planty of water and other non-alcoholic, non-califerated beverages to stay hydrated. 6 Oa not leave any person or pet inside a closed whicle. A poly a summere of at least sup pontection totech (\$FT) 30, at least 20 minutes before headin outdoors. Be sure the SPF 30 acreans out both UVA and UVIS rays, and reapply tregumity (as
- directed on product labely. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses (with a UVA/UVB CSA certified seat).
- · Wear light-coloured long-sleeved shirts and pants that cover skin

Monitor for symptoms of heat stroke, including:

- high body ten
 lack of sweat
- fainting

While awaiting medical attention:

- move the individual to a shaded area.
- remove his or her outer clothing and shoes wrap the person in a wet towel until medical care is being provided

Heat Warnings

Effective 2016, Heat Warnings are issued by Environment Canada. To find out whether there are only heat warnings in place for your area of Alberta, visit http://v eather.gc.ca/ Andex e.htm??prov-at

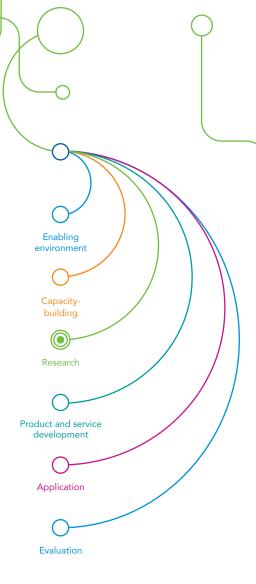
You can also receive Environment Canada's weather alorts by Twitter, for your region of Alberts. Find the twitter handle for your area, here: http://www.ec.go.ca/meteo-weather /defauit.asp?lang=En&n=BFIIC15EC-1#tab2

Learn more about Heat on:

 MyHealth Alberta If you start to feel overheated, stop your activity immediately, seek shade and driv fluids.

Seek medical attention immediately for any individual feeling faint.

4



5

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