

May 1, 2007

**Proposal to the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada**

**For the Development of the  
First Nations Environmental Health Innovation Network**

**Submitted by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health in partnership with the  
BC Leadership Chair in Aboriginal Environmental Health**

**CONTEXT**

Studies have shown that the health status of First Nations (FN) peoples throughout Canada differs than the Canadian average, in areas such as lower life expectancy and higher rates of diseases. In addition, because of their dependence on the natural resources at the community level, their health is also adversely affected by changing environments.

There is still an insufficient integration and synthesis of research information and a lack of a consistent and coordinated approach to FN environmental health research across government, private sector and academic communities to fully understand and investigate the factors that lead to the lower health status. As a result, data from research results is often not available or not used effectively for policy decision-making, education and intervention action. More importantly, FN communities often do not have the opportunity to participate in the development, implementation and interpretation of the research.

FN peoples are important stewards of the environment, and although they represent a small percentage of the general population, their environmental health status is of vital interest to all of Canada. Because of the intimate relationship between the FN peoples and the environment, the impact of the environment on their overall health status is an excellent indicator for the overall status of the global environment on general populations. By taking a closer look at environmental health through integrated knowledge, science and policies for a sustainable environment, it is expected that the overall health and wellbeing of FN communities could be improved significantly.

**BACKGROUND**

The First Nations Environmental Health Innovation Network (FN-EHIN) is a timely new initiative that provides a unique opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in the development of the research projects. FN-EHIN will address critical environmental health issues in Canada through innovative and inter-disciplinary research and networking that contributes to effective solutions for a clean and healthy environment, to community health, and to building capacity through training of highly qualified personnel with inter-disciplinary expertise.

Through partnership and collaboration, FN-EHIN will contribute to the general understanding of, and responsiveness to, changes in the environment and their relationship with the water quality and health risks in FN communities. FN-EHIN will enable environmental health researchers, FN communities, their leaders, their organizations, and others to address pressing health problems by making available, through research, the data and knowledge required to address these health issues. This will facilitate the transfer of research results and knowledge into policy by the representatives of the regional, territorial, provincial and federal governments.

The idea of the FN-EHIN was first developed in a workshop that was held in 2005. (Workshop Report included in Appendix 1). The initiative was further developed and an action plan was drafted in a second workshop held in March 23, 2007 in Ottawa (Report included in Appendix 2).

## **THE PROPOSAL**

### **Goal:**

To build capacity within FN communities to participate in environmental health research and to make use of data and knowledge regarding environmental health issues and concerns for decision making that will lead to health improvements.

### **Mandate:**

There are three major dimensions to FN-EHIN's role: access point (where communities can obtain information and support), synthesis of knowledge, and mobilization of knowledge.

- To focus on knowledge translation, and adapting information for relevancy to communities, funders and practitioners at the community level.
- To focus on the human health impacts of environmental conditions, not general ecosystem or plant or animal health impacts.
- To facilitate exchange between researchers and communities: researchers bring information from the literature, and communities bring information from their own experience, and the exchange and interaction will bring forth the appropriate research questions and needs.
- To leave a legacy, a platform that will provide FN with the knowledge they may require to address their environmental health issues.
- To build trust and interest more researchers to work with FN on environmental health issues.
- To develop a code of ethics and standards for environmental health research in FN communities.
- To support new researchers – facilitate career development, appreciate the importance of community buy-in, and influence the current academic system to accept ways beyond publication in primary journals to advance research careers.
- To identify knowledge gaps and develop research agenda.
- To accept the qualifications of traditional knowledge holders.

### **Specific objectives of the FNEHIN:**

- To provide a forum for FN organizations, governments, industry and researchers to discuss research needs and to develop a research agenda.
- To develop new modalities of research that are multidisciplinary, multicultural, and inter-jurisdictional for effective investigation, intervention and decision-making.
- To develop a culturally relevant framework and a holistic policy and planning model.
- To adopt an environmental health approach to research, data collection and interpretation to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal communities (i.e. small population sizes, cultural and ethical considerations), and the requirement to include traditional knowledge
- To facilitate the acquisition or compilation of accurate, reliable, consistent and comparable environmental health research data to identify trends and baseline conditions, both nationally and regionally
- To contribute to the definition of specific indicators for FN environmental health based on research outcomes
- To promote the understanding of relationships between health status, health determinants and health outcomes, within an environmental context

- To assist FN communities in making informed decisions enabled by environmental health research i.e. acquire and translate research data into intervention strategies
- To promote FN involvement in environmental health research and in the use of data obtained in their communities
- To inform researchers of appropriate and sensitive data collection and how data can be used to create information for positive intervention and improved health outcomes in FN communities (proactive decision-making).

The FNEHIN will be community based/centered, transparent, and inclusive of the strengths that the partners and stakeholders bring to the Network. It will facilitate partnerships, and will ensure access to research results for effective decision-making by individuals, the communities, and governments. It will build connections between existing networks, centres and organizations that share common objectives.

### **Priorities for Year 1:**

This proposal is to support the development of FN-EHIN. This one-year initiative will include the following activities:

- Set up the FNEHIN structure – set up the governance structure, identify a champion or champion(s), find funding, hire a coordinator, set up a website, communicate with key stakeholder groups and get community approval and engagement;
- Identify potential collaborators and partners for the network;
- Conduct a needs assessment – identify research priorities, as well as best practice priorities;
- Identify existing databases in environmental health;
- Compile a list of all research undertaken: sources would include FN communities, researchers, government departments and agencies; and
- Plan and prepare a national conference for year 2, to showcase the results of the work done in year 1

### **Collaborators and Partners for Year 1:**

The Environmental Research Division of Health Canada will provide \$100,000 cash contribution for the development of the Network and compile a list of research projects that have been conducted/funded by FNIHB.

The Canadian Water Network will provide \$45,000 for the organization of a workshop on water issues and share experience with the establishment of network infrastructure.

The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health will provide in-kind support of \$15,000 for housing the secretariat of the Network and \$35,000 for knowledge synthesis of a specific topic in First Nation Environmental Health.

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The Assembly of First Nation will provide in-kind support of \$20,000 to facilitate community consultation for the establishment of Network.

The First Nation Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization will provide \$20,000 in-kind support for knowledge synthesis of a specific topic in First Nation Environmental Health.

The Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources will provide \$20,000 in kind support to share their databases and references on First Nation Environmental Health issues.

BC Leadership Chair in Aboriginal Environmental Chair will provide in-kind support of \$10,000 for Dr. Laurie Chan's participation in the Network.

The Public Health Agency Canada will provide in-kind support of \$10,000 for knowledge synthesis in water issues.

### **Deliverables for Year 1 (Planning)**

- Establishment of a virtual network with a secretariat based at NCCAH/UNBC
- Develop a Web portal for FN communities to access environmental health information and expertise
- Provide a email and toll-free number for FN communities to contact the Network for questions or input
- A report on the results of consultations with key stakeholders
- A proposed governance structure and a road map for the incorporation of the network as a NGO
- A plan for securing long term funding
- A report for the needs assessment that identify research priorities, as well as best practice priorities
- A list of relevant databases
- A list of relevant researchers and their past and current projects
- A plan for a national conference for year 2

## Timeline

When	Activity
May 2007	Prepare contribution agreement Recruit Project Coordinator Identify a Champion Establish Steering Committee
Jun 2007	Set up virtual network
Oct 2007	Meeting of the Steering Committee
Feb 2008	Deliverables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• List of relevant researchers and their past and current projects</li><li>• List of relevant databases</li><li>• Report on the results of consultations with key stakeholders</li><li>• Plan for a national conference for year 2</li></ul>
Mar 2008	Deliverables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs assessment that identifies research and best practice priorities</li><li>• Plan for securing long term funding</li><li>• Draft governance structure and a road map for the incorporation of the network as an NGO</li></ul>



