

WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DAY 2026

CONCEPT NOTE

Theme:
“Standing with Science to Protect Communities”

1. BACKGROUND

Environmental health is the foundation upon which public health, human well-being, and sustainable development are built. As our world changes, through urbanization, climate change, industrial growth, and evolving lifestyles, so too must our strategies for safeguarding the environments in which we live, work, and thrive.

Environmental Health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially impact human health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments.

The discipline of Environmental Health is a vital component of primary healthcare, playing a crucial role in supporting and enhancing other health disciplines to strengthen the overall health system. It involves the assessment and management of external factors that impact human health, such as air, water, and soil pollution, climate change, and occupational hazards.

Environmental risks such as air pollution, inadequate housing, contaminated water, poor sanitation, and exposure to hazardous substances, including pesticides are key drivers of respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, and poisonings. These issues disproportionately affect our most vulnerable populations, with the environment silently but powerfully shaping health outcomes across the nation.

Globally, over 13 million deaths each year are attributed to preventable environmental factors. In our country, the burden of disease linked to poor sanitation, unsafe drinking water, air pollution, chemical exposures, and vector-borne diseases continues to place immense pressure on the healthcare system and on many communities.

The commemoration of Environmental Health ensures the strengthening of our national response in all spheres and sectors. Refining our strategies, tools, and systems to protect and prevent public health from disease enables us to promote an environment that is not harmful to health and well-being for South Africans.

2. THEME

The theme for this year's World Environmental Health Day 2026 is under “**Standing with Science to Protect Communities**” as adopted by the International Federation of Environmental Health. The theme directly aligns with World Health Organisation's science-based decision-making narrative and highlights the role of Environmental Health professionals as applied public health scientists translating research into policy, regulation and community protection.

The theme will explore forward-thinking solutions, innovations, and collaborations that shape the future of Environmental Health in a rapidly changing world. Building resilient and sustainable communities through science means addressing all Environmental Health risks, integrating these risks, and potential opportunities, into development planning and budgeting, research, data to information, scientifically based policy decision making, research and policy translation into impactful implementation.

3. PURPOSE

The 26th of September 2026, marks the 16th annual World Environmental Health Day (WEHD), established by the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH), during its Council Meeting in Bali, Indonesia. South Africa has proudly celebrated this day every year since 2012, an inaugural event which has been held by rotating in all nine (9) provinces.

The World Environmental Health Day is a prestigious event, dedicated to promoting Environmental Health Services and improving environmental health risk factors to which communities are exposed. The day also serves to recognise the invaluable contribution and dedication of Environmental Health Practitioners, professionals, researchers, policymakers, and institutions, educators, and key stakeholders in advancing public health.

4. COMMEMORATION OF THE WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DAY 2026

The National Department of Health in collaboration with the Kwa Zulu-Natal Provincial Department of Health and iLembe District Municipality will hold a two-day event on 29-30 September 2026 in commemoration of World Environmental Health Day.

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE EVENT

The commemoration seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- **Raise Awareness:** Highlight the significance of environmental health in maintaining public health and preventing diseases associated with environmental risk factors.
- **Promote Collaboration:** Bring together key stakeholders from government, the private sector, academia, and civil society to develop innovative strategies for strengthening environmental health systems.
- **Strengthen Policy Frameworks:** Facilitate discussions and recommend policy interventions aimed at reducing the burden of environmentally related diseases.
- **Capacity Building:** Empower Environmental Health Practitioners and relevant professionals with knowledge and tools to enhance environmental health monitoring, compliance, and intervention strategies.
- **Community Engagement:** Encourage active participation by local communities in environmental health initiatives and advocacy programmes.

6. EXPECTED OUTCOME

- Establishment of an Environmental Health Research Repository.
- Strengthened partnerships amongst Policy Makers, Academia, Research Institutions and Implementers.
- Generate Key Recommendations

7. TARGET AUDIENCE

Approximately 450 delegates are expected to attend the event. The delegates will be drawn from the environmental health fraternity, i.e. environmental health officials from all the three spheres of government, political leaders, relevant government entities, including other identified key stakeholders such as Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), South African Local Government Association (SALGA), other sector departments, institutions of higher learning, research institutions, amongst others.

8. PROGRAMME OUTLINE

The event will comprise of a technical session (plenary and breakaway sessions). The opening and closing will be plenary fora, with the bulk of the conference programme consisting of breakaway commissions and report-back sessions. The event will also provide an opportunity for provincial, district and metropolitan municipalities to display poster presentations to showcase their successes in the various areas in service delivery. Programme space will also be provided for presentations and input from organisations in other sectors on innovative approaches that can add value to environmental health interventions through collaboration and cooperation.

DAY 1

- A two-part programme which starts with a Political Session and the followed by a Technical Session.

DINNER

- A Dinner will be held to celebrate Environmental Health as a discipline and a profession, recognising its resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. The event will also serve as a platform for networking, bringing together stakeholders and colleagues to foster collaboration and strengthen professional relationships.

DAY 2

- Technical Session continuation

COMMISSIONS:

- 1) **Research:** Environmental Health Research on Public Health Action.
- 2) **Implementation:** Environmental Health Interventions for Community Protection.
- 3) **Policy:** Analysing the gaps from Research to Policy to Practice.

9. BUILD UP ACTIVITIES

September is dedicated as Environmental Health month, provinces and their municipalities are urged to engage in various build up activities aligned to 2026 WEHD theme, within the communities and areas of operations to raise awareness on Environmental Health as a profession and service.

Provinces are requested to ensure that build up activities incorporate activities conducted at the points of entry by Border Management Authority (BMA) officials, within their respective provinces. Contributions of the institutions of higher learning and their students should also be acknowledged and appreciated during this time.

Therefore, provinces are encouraged to liaise with institutions of higher learning and other stakeholders rendering Environmental Health services within their various provinces to ensure that provincial plans also consolidate activities that will be undertaken by these stakeholders. Provincial plans for the commemoration of “World Environmental Health Day 2026” will be consolidated into a national plan that can be communicated nationwide and experiences shared during the main event.

9.1. PROPOSED COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVITIES

Various activities can be undertaken at a community level to raise awareness on environmental health, including but not limited to the following:

- Community outreach education drives: Community campaigns and education on environmental health, including in public gathering spaces, using information, education and communication material.
- School competitions and school talks: Launch of poster competitions in schools on various environmental health topics or target school assemblies to promote environmental health awareness topics.
- Blitz activities: Targeting taxi ranks, churches and shopping malls to educate and distribute information.
- Door-to-door education campaigns: For hard to reach, and sparsely populated areas such as farming areas, to educate and distribute information on environmental health.
- Career guidance activities: EHPs targeting grade 9 to 12 learners to promote environmental health as a career of choice.
- Clean up campaigns: Arranging for clean-ups of areas and promoting the re-use, recycle and recovery of waste material.
- Webinar series: **“Environmental Health Science in Practice”**
- Publication of case studies demonstrating **evidence based EH interventions**

9.2. KEY CAMPAIGN MESSAGES:

Policy Messages	Community Messages
Environmental health practice is evidence-based public health action	Science protects communities from environmental risks
Preparedness and response are critical	Do not burn waste, Polluted air knows no boundaries. Act now!
Environmental Health starts with the Healthier people behaviour.	Protect our environment, Protect our future Health.
Prevention is better than cure	A clean environment is a healthy environment
Environmental health professionals are the bridge between science and implementation	Save earth today to survive tomorrow

10. WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DAY COMMUNICATION PLAN

- Website, social media campaigns (#WEHD2026), media outreach, press releases, branding materials, and partner channels.

11. KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Environmental health functions are fragmented between various government departments in the country, therefore cooperation and collaboration with various stakeholders is key in achieving policy objectives and positive health outcomes.

- Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA).
- World Health Organization (WHO).
- International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH)
- Border Management Authority (BMA)
- South African Military Health Services (SAMHS)