CDC Updates NACWA Staff on COVID-19 Surveillance Efforts; Congress Requests Information

NACWA held an initial call with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) lead COVID-19 watershed-based epidemiological (WBE) surveillance team on Friday, August 14. Over the summer, CDC held informational webinars notifying the water sector and others of their intention to launch a National Wastewater Surveillance System (NWSS) identifying “sentinel” POTWs and their efforts to surveil wastewater for COVID-19 RNA trends and occurrence.

We learned from CDC that because state health departments will be the end users of surveillance data and ultimately responsible for making local public health decisions based on such data, states are highly involved in selecting POTWs to participate in the initial roll out of the NWSS. To help states in this effort, CDC informed us that a dedicated CDC website containing guidance is expected any day.

It became clear on our call that “too much” or the “wrong” data can be problematic for a variety of reasons, and CDC is highlighting the importance of the NWSS is to drill down on the data that will be most useful for states making public health decisions (*e.g.*, sampling frequency every 3 days as opposed to weekly). CDC’s views the NWSS as part of building a sustainable platform for WBE surveillance for future diseases and public health issues and having a robust standard of practice set in place will be helpful.

CDC continues to appreciate the active surveillance work individual utilities are doing and recognized there are needed associated costs to continue collecting samples and analyzing data. Having added vocal support will help CDC continue their efforts for active disease surveillance as well as advocate for ongoing research. One of the significant research hurdles continues to be the lack of understanding of the concentration of viral shedding (RNA concentration) from an individual (asymptomatic or symptomatic) and how this concentration changes over time and space.

In addition, the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Republican minority is interested in learning more from the CDC about their COVID-19 wastewater surveillance efforts and sent a letter on August 12 to CDC Director Robert Redfield. Specifically, committee Republicans are interested in “how, CDC is examining, developing, and utilizing wastewater as a surveillance tool for COVID-19 to improve the U.S.’ COVID-19 surveillance efforts, including CDC’s efforts to work with other agencies, private companies, academia, or other researchers already doing similar work on wastewater surveillance” and is seeking a briefing before August 26. A similar letter (link) was sent to US EPA Administrator, Andrew Wheeler, requesting information about the actions the Agency has taken to help the CDC improve surveillance of COVID-19 in the United States.

From the call with CDC there is a consensus in greater financial support, training, and communication. As NACWA continues its advocacy on COVID19, we will continue to engage with CDC, as well as Congress, and will be setting up an informal call later in September with federal and state stakeholders along with NACWA members. For more information please contact Emily Remmel, NACWA’s Director of Regulatory Affairs.