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## **US EPA's Tom Kelly Highlights Role of Science and Communication in IAQ Policy**

The opening plenary speaker on the fourth day of the Ninth International Healthy Buildings Conference, hosted by the Syracuse Center of Excellence, was Tom Kelly, Director of the Indoor Environments Division (IED), a non-regulatory body of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA). Kelly has been director of this division for six years, supervising groundbreaking scientific studies and publishing guidance handbooks aimed at protecting indoor air quality.

Introduced by Dr. Cornelius B. Murphy, President, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Kelly began by gently amending the introduction offered by Dr. Murphy, who described him as “a scientist...even a good one” – a comment that drew chuckles from the crowd. Instead, Kelly classified himself as a sociologist who has spent a lot of time working around policy and scientists who help make good, effective policy possible. Throughout his talk, Kelly highlighted the critical role that science plays in crafting not only policy, but in creating non-regulatory guidelines that alter behavior through incentives rather than penalization. This differentiation is central to the role of the Indoor Environments Division within the EPA.

“If regulation is the jet engine that drives change, then [the IED] is a hang glider – trying to catch the wind,” said Kelly.

As director, he promotes the use of what he calls “social contagion,” borrowing a medical metaphor to describe the way he hopes to bring about change. Through effective communication, if his division can convince enough people (and industries) that it is in their best interest economically to improve indoor air quality, then that is what brings about change, and that power of persuasion relies squarely on the inquiry and research of scientists – scientists just like the more than 1,000 delegates and attendees at HB2009.

Within his speech, Kelly touched on a few of the specific programs that the IED has fostered to help do just that. Their radon program, which has been around for 25 years, has traditionally been a “hard sell” when it comes to convincing contractors for instance to prevent indoor radon contamination – radon is invisible and therefore not as pressing in some people’s minds. However, through the efforts of their radon program and the IED’s partnering with other scientific bodies such as the National Academy of Sciences and European scientific research teams, the World Health Organization has granted that indoor radon exposure, even at small levels is a global matter of concern. On Monday, the WHO will release an international handbook on controlling radon indoors, according to Kelly.

IED also has an extensive program aimed at changing the way that asthma is viewed and dealt with in this country – merging research from the EPA’s scientists with the medical community – and showing that asthma is not purely a medical concern and oftentimes is predicated by poor indoor air quality.

Perhaps of the most interest to those who are following the “green-building” movement, the IED’s “Indoor Air Plus” program is partnering with Energy Star – the folks who are working to advance energy efficient homes – and crafting guidelines that will help prevent bad air from getting trapped inside our newly weatherized, airtight homes. According to Kelly, this was the case back in the 1970’s when the energy crisis led to our homes and offices becoming “locked boxes,” causing the nation to

suffer from a “sick building syndrome.” As the president’s economic stimulus package rolls out two billion dollars in a weatherization program, IED’s Indoor Air Plus is working hard to make sure that won’t happen again.

In a post-talk interview, Dr. Murphy noted that American’s spend as much as 80 percent of their time indoors, and while we have legislation in the form of the Clean Air Act to regulate what goes into our outdoor air, we as yet have no comprehensive regulation governing indoor air quality. When asked if this regulation might be down the road, or whether the IED and the US EPA should be pushing it, Dr. Murphy was quick to point out that regulation only establishes minimum standards, when in fact we should be focusing on how we can incentivize through free market tools companies and builders actually exceeding these standards. Through the power of persuasion, relying on the work of scientists and “catching the wind,” that is exactly what Tom Kelly and the Indoor Environments Division are trying to do.

**-Liz Miller, HB2009 Ground Reporter**

*Syracuse Center of Excellence (syracusecoe.org) is a collaborative organization of more than 200 businesses and institutions that creates innovations for sustainable built and urban environments. SyracuseCoE members work on research, development, and educational projects relating to clean and renewable energy, indoor environmental quality, and water resources.*

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