

Linda Engle Introduction: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host Madison Long and today I talked with Ethan Sims, an emergency medicine physician at St. Luke's Emergency Medicine of Idaho. Sims is also the Executive Director of the Idaho Clinicians for Climate and Health, a 501c3 nonprofit organization that unites Idaho healthcare workers across all specialties and professions. The group works to help healthcare communities be less impactful on the climate, largely in areas like waste and energy generation.

Ethan Sims: This all kind of began in the summer of 2021, which in Idaho was a really hot, smoky year. I was out for a bike ride and started feeling short of breath, miserable, just not able to ride like I normally can. I started wondering if it was the heat and the smoke that were making me feel so bad. Then I started to worry about what it was doing to my kids, outside all day in the heat and the smoke.

With no prior training, I started looking at how I could understand this problem better and what I could do to address it. Met with a bunch of experts from around the country and got connected to the Medical Society Consortium for Climate and Health, which is a national organizing group that works with a bunch of different medical specialties and helped me put together this concept for what ICCH was going to be.

ML: Why is it important for climate change to be viewed as a healthcare issue?

ES: At the end of the day, we have one planet that we all live on together. And if we don't keep the air clean, we don't have air to breathe. It affects everyone across the state of Idaho. One thing I've struggled with is this entrenched belief that these climactic changes that we're seeing, people just sort of absorb that as part of natural life and don't recognize that things are changing and then don't take the next step to think about why these things are changing.

We're all going to get negatively impacted by climate change in terms of, I'm not going to be able to go swim at Lake Cascade because there's going to be more toxic algae as the water heats up and drought makes the water levels lower. We're not going to be able to go skiing in the winter because there's no snow. All those things are really impacting yours, your children's health and your grandchildren's health. But the sooner we get working at solutions, the more likely we are to see them in our lifetime.

ML: ICCH has three core strategies: driving innovation and sustainability, expanding the knowledge of health impacts of a changing climate, and advancing climate resilience through community action and advocacy. How do these strategies shape ICCH's work?

ES: Taking sustainable practices and implementing them where you work, these are real ways that you can make an impact that is much bigger than what you can do at your own home. We have formed the Sustainable Health Care Council, and we're trying to bring health care leaders

from around the state of Idaho to talk about how people are doing with their sustainable initiatives, give ideas, and share successes and failures.

In terms of the education division, a lot of that has come through our climate and health learning series, which are monthly lectures that we put on 10 times a year with speakers on various topics to post on the St. Luke's Youtube channel. This is a partnership between ICCH and St. Luke's, and has been really successful at reaching across the community to help people understand how climate change is impacting health.

We also host a one-day symposium at St. Luke's. It'll be Wednesday, September 2nd from 8 to 4:30, bringing together speakers trying to focus on heat, smoke, and water.

Then, advocacy we pair with action because advocacy is a tough thing in a one-party state like Idaho is to get traction. But what I have found coming from a conservative state and speaking on a national platform, sometimes allows your voice to be a little bit more outsized.

ML: ICCH has been taking several steps to reduce waste and promote sustainability in hospitals and clinics. Their work includes saving costs at St. Luke's by switching to anesthetic gases that don't include a greenhouse gas coefficient, and promoting recycling and reusable materials. They've also helped support, redesign, and redevelop a Cathedral of the Rockies Boise community garden to help kids from high school, junior high, elementary, and preschool take their learning outside. ICCH also recently had a big film event in Boise called Climate Change is Snow Joke, teaching about 200 community members about how climate change is impacting recreation.

Is there anything that you would suggest healthcare workers and the community could do right now to start making a difference?

ES: I think the most important first step is to talk about it. If you don't feel comfortable talking about it, then educate yourself. Get some confidence and then start talking to your colleagues and people in your hospital who can make decisions about things. When we talk about these issues as nonpolitical healthcare problems, you can normalize the conversation by acknowledging this is happening. Which is scary to do because it's not just something we can flip the switch and make it go away. It's going to take a concerted community effort to reverse the impacts of climate warming. But everyone has their role to play.

The next steps are to act in your own home. Reduce your food waste, because food waste is a big generator of methane. It's simple steps that you can take. And then once you've figured out what you're going to do with your own home, look at your job and say, "what can I do in my work that is going to make my work a more sustainable place to be? Who do I need to influence when I'm at work to make it so we're saving more money, improving patient care, and protecting the planet that we all live on?"

The third step is to work directly in your community and that's through projects like trying to improve green space, to get outside in a cooler environment , we know is better for people's mental health. It's action at home, action at work, and then action in your community.

ML: With the majority of your work taking place in the Treasure Valley, do you see any potential in the next few years to open up climate work in places like Southeast Idaho?

ES: Our goals really would be from the Healthcare Sustainability Committee, to have partners in northern Idaho and southeast Idaho, because we know those are the two biggest healthcare areas that we haven't reached yet. We would love to talk to people in healthcare communities there to support them and bring them into the fold. In terms of our Education Committee, our goal is to expand the reach of this great climate and health learning series we have, so that we're helping people hear about all the different things that people across healthcare and outside of healthcare are doing to improve community health.

We're trying to take the Climate Health Symposium and turn it into an annual statewide event somewhere like Moscow or Pocatello to get people from all across the state to be in attendance. In terms of advocacy and action, I'd say our goals over the next couple years are to have a proper advocacy platform where we are meeting with people, and depoliticizing the nature of our work, and talking with state leaders about how climate change should be approached as a public health crisis, not as some political hot-button issue.

ML Outro: Thank you to Ethan Sims from the Idaho Clinicians for Climate and Health for teaching anyone and everyone, not just health professionals the steps to climate action. 1. Take action at home. 2. Take action at your workplace and find ways to make the environment more sustainable. And 3. Take action in your community to make the areas where you live safe and healthy. For more information on how to take sustainable climate action, follow the links on our website at [kisu.edu/sustainableidaho](https://kisu.edu/sustainableidaho).

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