

Rainbow Family Gathering, Wyoming, July 2008

The Rainbow Family had their 2008 annual gathering near the area known as Big Sandy, Wyoming, in Sublette County (see included map). The official dates of the gathering were July 1 through July 7; however attendees began accumulating around mid-June. The peak attendance at the event in 2008 was estimated at ~7,000.

Public Health Intervention and Surveillance Activities

Disease surveillance at medical clinics – The medical clinics in Sublette County (Pinedale Clinic and Big Piney Clinic) kept logs of visits by persons associated with the Rainbow gathering. The logs provided a brief description of the nature of illness or injury. From June 15 through July 8 the clinics reported seeing 16 patients associated with the gathering. The conditions seemed to reflect what would be seen in most acute care settings, being composed of a mixture of chronic and acute conditions. The nature of the conditions reported did not suggest a public health problem.

Health Alert Notice – On June 23 a HAN was sent from WDH to all WY hospitals, ERs, urgent care centers, licensed HCPs, and PHN offices alerting them of the Rainbow gathering and the potential for public health concerns to arise. The HAN directed the entities to notify WDH of any illnesses of potential public health concern that could be linked to this gathering. WDH did not receive any reports of such illnesses from these entities.

Real Time Outbreak Detection System (RODS syndromic surveillance) – This system was in place at St. John's Hospital in Jackson and Lander Valley Medical Center in Lander. RODS was not yet in place at the hospital in Rock Springs. No aberrations were detected around this gathering.

Environmental health - WY Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) sampled streams/ivers in the vicinity of the gathering assessing coliform counts. Samples were collected and tested on dates shortly before and during the gathering. Coliform counts (E. coli) were not found to be elevated to a level of public health concern.

Sublette County Environmental Health (SCEH) visited the site multiple times to assess the food preparation areas and sample water for coliform testing (report attached). The water used for food preparation comes from natural springs. Most samples were coliform negative, with some samples total coliform positive. SCEH also received some reports from attendees while on site that there was a short-lived GI illness going around. Attendees could not relate the illness to any particular food preparation site or water source.

WDH on-site observations - On July 2, 2008, Tracy Murphy, MD, Clay Van Houten, and Tim Ryan of WDH visited and toured the site accompanied by Robert Beckley, US Forest Service (USFS) Safety Officer. Two EMS providers and 2 public health nurses from Fremont County also were present. During the visit on July 2 USFS officials estimated the gathering to be ~6,000.

The layout of the gathering was predominately composed of numerous campsite units that tended to be centered around food preparation sites referred to as "kitchens". There were also numerous singly dispersed campsites. The campsites covered an area of approximately 4 miles by 1 mile (rough estimate).

During the visit WDH staff observed the general food preparation activities and water systems. The main water system intended to be used for food prep and drinking came from a natural spring at the periphery of the campsites. The water was disseminated to numerous points throughout the camp by ~ 2 inch (estimated) black plastic tubing. There were numerous branches off the main tube ending in spigots.

The kitchens were mostly tent covered areas with open sides. Attendees would approach the kitchens bringing their own dishes and utensils and food would be dished out. The kitchens observed had dishwashing stations used by persons involved in food preparation and also by others who had finished eating. Most of the kitchens were run by people affiliated with a particular group who was operating that particular kitchen. However some appeared to accept any attendee who wished to participate in food preparation. The SCEH report provides more detail on the specifics of food preparation hygiene.

WDH staff visited the first-aid stations, which Rainbow gatherers refer to CALM units (Centers of Alternative Living Medicine). The attendees manning these stations with whom WDH spoke referred to themselves as "herbalists" or "alternative healers". The stations were supplied with herbal remedies, general first-aid supplies (cleansing supplies, bandages, etc.), and some had conventional medical treatment aids such as antibiotic ointment, and over-the-counter pain relievers and fever reducers. The stations see a variety of complaints, but lacerations, scrapes, and bone/joint injuries appear to make up the majority of the visits.

CALM staff reported to WDH staff that they had been seeing several attendees complaining of a GI disturbance comprised of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. This illness was described as lasting only 1 to 2 days, and devoid of fever or bloody stools. Attendees reported to USFS and WDH that something similar happens nearly every year and was referred to some as the "Rainbow runs". Main CALM unit staff estimated that they had seen up to 30 persons complaining of a GI illness in previous days, but the frequency was decreasing to about one-half that in more recent days. WDH staff spoke with one attendee who was suffering from this GI illness and her illness was similar to the general description above.

In addition, WDH staff heard reports from CALM staff and other attendees that some persons were experiencing a GI illness consisting of diarrhea without vomiting and more severe abdominal cramps.

WDH staff gave the above described ill person a stool collection kit and she stated she would voluntarily collect a sample for laboratory testing. In addition a stool collection kit was left with the "leader" of the main CALM unit to be used for future acutely ill attendees. WDH staff also left multiple kits with USFS personnel on the morning of July 3 to be used by attendees as needed. However no samples were received for testing.

Other than the one person described above, WDH staff did not encounter other attendees with an acute GI illness. CALM staff were educated on the importance of hygiene and simple infection control measures. CALM staff were also asked to report to USFS or WDH (cards with contact information were given out) if they observed increasing numbers of persons with GI illness or if the nature became more severe (bloody stools, fever, etc.). WDH did not receive any future notifications from CALM staff or attendees.

Miscellaneous

On July 3 several attendees interfered with law enforcement action by encircling law enforcement and throwing rocks and sticks at law enforcement. Law enforcement reportedly responded with riot control tactics including pepper spray.

Toward the end of the main week of the gathering an ~ 4 acre forest fire occurred at the gathering site. The cause of the fire was determined to be arson.