

## ► DirecTalk



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## Big Bend

Flashing red lights delivered a wave of anxiety as I directed my rented sport utility vehicle onto a dusty track adjacent to the road. Two heavily armed border patrol agents disembarked from their white Suburban while a third escorted a lunging dog. I rolled down the driver's side window and greeted one agent, while the second peered into the passenger side of the vehicle. All the while the dog sniffed and snuffled the perimeter of the car. "Good afternoon, sir, are you an American citizen?" I answered in the affirmative. The three men nodded to one another, thanked me for my cooperation, and abruptly vaporized into the mesquite. I remain astonished by the brevity and thoroughness of the interaction.

Big Bend National Park is a leviathan, over 800,000 acres located on the Rio Grande in West Texas, a 6-hr drive from Austin. Magical, sacred, awe inspiring, and evidently well patrolled to detect and interdict individuals who attempt entry into the U.S. sans the proper paperwork. I suppose the heavy coating of off-road dust coupled with my bandana headwrap raised suspicions of law enforcement.

This interaction with the law occurred in October 2022, a couple days before the Texas Environmental Health Association conference in Round Rock, Texas, a suburban enclave adjacent to Austin. Visiting Big Bend was the closest thing I have to a bucket list item and I was pleased by the opportunity to draw down some paid time off to visit the park. The extremes there defy logic. Big Bend is at the northern end of the Chihuahuan Desert, and incongruently is subject to violent floods. My first day there was a brutally dry and sunny 95 °F while the next

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morning the temperature hovered around 55 °F and was accompanied by torrential rain. The quixotic weather provides a signal for plant and animal life to surge into action as the elements become conducive for identifying new homesteads, scouring for food, and exploring for mates. For my part it was a feast for the senses.

Big Bend is the ecological dominant in Texas. A literal oasis in a parched landscape. I wondered at the timing of the seasons and how fine-tuned the natural environment is at extracting the most benefit from the intermittent fecund conditions. There may be a message for us there among the agave, yucca, and ocotillo.

Over the last year there has been considerable attention and investment into data systems. Disturbingly, I feel that much of the public health community doesn't understand our profession, with some exceptions. If they did, why haven't more of us been invited as contributors to the nationwide data modernization initiative or included as beneficiaries of those investment dollars? The ecosystem seems ripe for us to be inserted into this national informatics discussion. I'm not convinced those within our professional environmental health network understand that we

seem to have backed ourselves into an abyss with no clear path forward. Let me explain.

I've observed that our inspection software systems are divorced from public health. That is, our data appear to be largely disconnected from the larger ecosystem of data reporting that is visibly delivered to state and federal aggregators. Exceptions do exist, for example, around reportable vectors and Twitter scraping, among others. But by and large, we seem to be closed off from the rest of the public health universe.

We are good at what we do when it comes to software. We make it easy for customers to apply for a permit, simple to pay for it, and easy to report corrective actions. Likewise, our inspection data have been elegantly designed, again with some exceptions, to hyperfocus on the task at hand—assessing compliance. While that is important and useful, it doesn't lend itself to broader public health discussions and ultimately investments. In short, I feel we have cut ourselves off from the rest of the cosmos that is dedicated to preventive arts and sciences.

Unless we are careful and showcase exceptions, I sense those of us in the governmental environmental public health enterprise are increasingly at risk of being packaged and traded to code enforcement and/or weights and measures. We run the risk of not being valued for our scientific expertise or community insight. We're seen as compliance officers. In the political universe, we might even be seen as a necessary evil and not the valuable, impactful profession that we are.

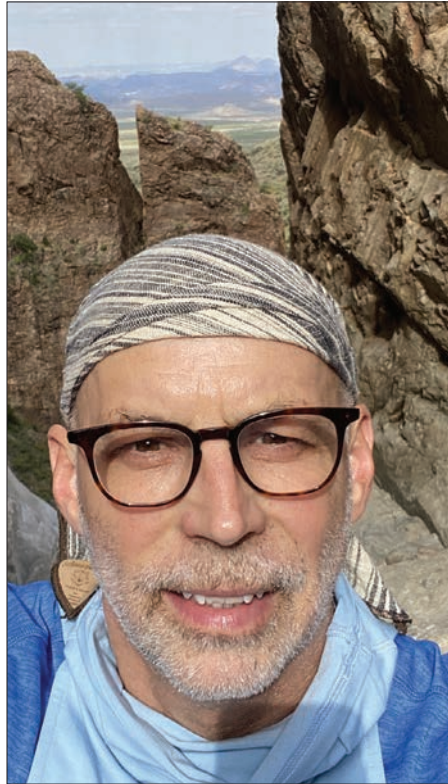
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## DirectTalk

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This situation represents a conundrum for me in my role as executive director of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). I'm an advocate for the efficiency and transparency that our current data collection and assessment systems provide. Yet these things don't seem to create and deliver recognized value to many influential stakeholders such as health officials, boards of health, and the clinical professions. This perception in turn presents an existential question—does NEHA invest its limited resources in ensuring that every governmental environmental health program, independent of size, has and uses software that enhances efficiency and performance at the local level or do we spend our time ensuring that the greater public health system acknowledges and embraces the latent expertise and sophistication within the greater environmental health universe?

My question might be abstract to some readers. They will say, "Do both!" I'm guessing others will judge my quandary with appreciation. Others will question its relevancy. Do we focus on ourselves or do we focus on the system? In a world with limited resources, these are painful zero-sum decisions.



*The Window View Trail at Big Bend National Park: A vast, quixotic landscape imbued with mystery and complexity. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

I am confident we would benefit from telling a better story with our data. A story with a face on it. A story rooted in science, leveraged with environmental health data, and punctuated with emotion. A story that speaks to the public health enterprise, a profession that is literally an offspring of our making. I believe public health is part of environmental health, not the other way around.

I leave you with this riddle. The riddle of the ordinary. We've created the impression, through our humble nature, that we are an ordinary profession, albeit with extraordinary implications for the health, safety, and economic security of communities everywhere. I say I leave you because I plan to communicate my thoughts and struggles, both real and perhaps imaginary, in some other format. Like the Rio Grande, the symbolic abyss separating desperate people in poverty from opportunity, I want to explore other communications vehicles, other ways to bridge ideas. I leave the back pages of the *Journal* to other's imaginations. ✨

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## Did You Know?

The NEHA Government Affairs program advocates for support of environmental health programs and professionals at federal, state, and local levels of government. We function as a liaison between environmental health professionals and government officials to inform decisions that support and fund our workforce. You can stay up-to-date on our work at [www.neha.org/advocacy](http://www.neha.org/advocacy). Check out our blogs, webinars, current policy and position statements, and recent state and federal legislative actions.



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