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8-6-2003

UNH Develops System to Track Hazardous Materials

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Recommended Citation

Gula, Lori, "UNH Develops System to Track Hazardous Materials" (2003). *UNH Today*. 1959.
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UNH Develops System to Track Hazardous Materials

New Online System is Available to Universities Nationwide

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August 6, 2003

DURHAM, N.H. -- With concern about chemical, biological and radiological hazards still on the minds of many Americans, the University of New Hampshire has developed a comprehensive online system that research universities nationwide can use to manage their stores of some of the world's most dangerous substances.

The UNH Chemical Environmental Management System (UNHCEMS) was developed by the UNH Research Computing Center (RCC) in consultation with the UNH Department of Environmental Health and Safety. The Web-based system allows public and private institutions to manage hazardous chemicals stored at multiple locations on their campuses. State and federal guidelines mandate that such institutions meet hazardous materials safety and compliance laws.

Soon it will be able to track thousands of biological agents and radioactive materials, such as anthrax and the plague.

What sets UNH's system apart from commercial products is it is designed for educational institutions and is easily accessible via the Web. Data and software is securely stored at UNH.

"Most universities do not maintain comprehensive, online inventories of their hazardous materials. Most universities simply don't have that information available or up to date," says Brad Manning, director of UNH Environmental Health and Safety.

UNHCEMS was developed as part of a settlement agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency following an EPA inspection at UNH five years ago. At the time, UNH was found to have violated the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act regarding waste disposal in laboratories.

“This online chemical management system holds great potential to help universities and colleges improve tracking and management of chemicals and wastes,” says Robert W. Varney, regional administrator of EPA's New England Office, which initiated the enforcement case against UNH and negotiated the settlement that included the project. “We've found in our inspections that many colleges are wasting significant amounts of chemicals because they do not have systems in place for accurately recording the identity, quantity and location of materials. This system holds great promise to reverse this problem, resulting in campuses that are safer and better for the environment.”

Two universities, Brown University and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, are using UNHCEMS. More universities are expected to be using the system by the summer's end, according to Manning.

The need for such a comprehensive system was proven all too real earlier this year when a faculty researcher at Texas Tech reported 30 vials of the bacteria that causes the plague were missing. Although the vials had been destroyed, the interim period when officials were unsure of what had happened to the vials caused concern nationwide. Had Texas Tech been effectively using a system such as UNHCEMS, the university could have known within minutes exactly if, how and when those vials had been destroyed.

“From the standpoint of Homeland Security and the U.S. Patriot Act, this system dramatically increases the ability of universities to track certain hazardous chemicals. For example, if we need to determine if we have a particular hazard on campus, we can query the system and find out within a minute if that substance is on campus and exactly where it is located,” Manning says.

“We can ensure we have the necessary security measures in place to prevent unauthorized access to these chemicals and ensure that the faculty member is following all of the required procedures regarding that particular substance,” he says. “My counterparts at other universities have had to hire people to go out and look in every laboratory – hundreds of laboratories – to find these hazards.”

Manning's office and RCC worked closely in the development of the system over the last three years. “I have not found any of the competition coming close to offering what our system provides for higher education,” says Patrick Messer, associate director of the UNH Research Computing Center. Institutions wanting to learn more about UNHCEMS can visit www.cems-info.sr.unh.edu or contact Messer at 603-862-2889.

Editors: Brad Manning, director of UNH Environmental Health

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