I was first introduced to Cardno ChemRisk at the CSU Career Fair. This was one of the few companies who offered an internship specifically for Environmental Health students, so I was eager to approach the recruiting representatives. I met briefly with Health Scientists Tyler Ferracini and Kristen Fedak (who would later become my supervisor) and received some general information about what ChemRisk does.

The Health Scientists at ChemRisk hold several degrees and certificates in a wide variety of public health disciplines including toxicology, epidemiology, industrial hygiene, and risk assessment. In short, ChemRisk is a scientific consulting firm working primarily in asbestos-exposure-related personal injury litigation support for the defense. Specifically, ChemRisk’s client list includes companies that historically produced, manufactured, distributed, and/or used chrysotile asbestos-containing products such as pump gaskets/packing, automobile brake components, and others (chrysotile is a variety of asbestos which is generally perceived by the scientific community to be benign and unable to contribute significantly to the risk for developing the cancer mesothelioma, even in airborne concentrations far above background). ChemRisk’s other areas of litigation support typically involve benzene, and diacetyl exposures. Outside of litigation support, ChemRisk also regularly publishes scientific research related to a wide variety of public health topics including defective medical devices, dietary supplements, food packaging safety, consumer product safety, oil and gas issues, chemical deselection, risk perception, and many others.

After meeting with Tyler and Kristen, I immediately decided to submit an application which included a letter of interest and writing samples. I was later offered a phone interview and spoke with two other Boulder office Health Scientists, Mat and Megan, about my academic interests and work experiences. Shortly after the phone interview, I was offered an in-office interview. The in-office interview was very conversational and relaxed, which made a good impression on me. I conveyed to my interviewers that I possess strong analytical writing skills, which they seemed to especially appreciate. It took a couple of weeks to receive an offer for a paid Environmental Health Internship position, but when I did I gratefully accepted.
Much of my time at the ChemRisk Boulder office was spent completing training exercises with the other interns. These exercises included an online ChemRisk Risk Assessment Training course, asbestos article summaries, and various brown bag tutorials on litigation basics, asbestos-related products/diseases, medical devices, and various public-health related research topics. Each of the interns also took the opportunity to sit in on a couple of active case depositions and complete a mock case summary based on a past mesothelioma case. A case summary distills the pertinent information contained within the entire volume of case-related materials and documents. Examples of case-related materials/documents are submitted complaints, answers to interrogatories, deposition transcripts, as well as military, social security, work history, and medical records/reports. Maximizing the quality of the case summary is crucial as this serves as the quick reference document and lifeline for the retained expert during deposition and trial. Much of the work done by entry-level Health Scientists at ChemRisk is heavily focused on case summaries, so I appreciated the opportunity to gain specialized skills that are absolutely necessary in this line of work.

The majority of my time at ChemRisk was spent researching current public health issues related to unconventional natural gas development (UNGD), or ‘fracking’. Kristen Fedak was my internship supervisor as well as my project manager for the fracking research. Kristen’s main interest in this research revolves around factors which influence public perceptions of health risks related to fracking. At first, I familiarized myself with the topic of fracking and its associated processes and issues by summarizing peer-reviewed articles. I even had the opportunity to attend a Public Health Symposium on oil & gas hosted by the Colorado School of Public Health. Once I established a foundational understanding of fracking, I drafted a survey which measures overall public support/opposition as well as risk perceptions of specific health effects broken down by well development stage (i.e., drilling, hydraulic fracturing, flowback, and production). The hope is that this survey could eventually be incorporated into a pilot study of public health risk perceptions in Greeley, Colorado. Because fracking took up the majority of my working time, I decided to give an office-wide presentation on the research I had done. Lastly, I drafted a blog entry for the ChemRisk website which summarized recent legislative developments related to fracking in Colorado.

A natural gas well pad near a Weld County elementary school
When I wasn’t working on fracking research, I worked primarily on two other projects related to food-packaging migration and Boulder office business development. ChemRisk has been increasingly receiving queries related to food packaging safety issues, and so I was charged with the task of pulling/summarizing review articles on the phenomenon of food packaging migration. Other new areas of increasing interest to ChemRisk include dietary supplements, California Prop. 65 regulations, consumer products, medical devices, and others. In order to more effectively branch out into these areas, I was tasked to track down and develop contacts with law firms in the Front Range that specialize in one or more of these topics.

There are many reasons why I would recommend this internship experience:

1) The Boulder office ‘ChemRiskers’ are all professional, intelligent, and friendly people; the office demographics are also highly suited to young and developing scientists fresh out of college as the company-wide average age hovers somewhere around 29.

2) Interns get to focus their time on ‘non-billable’ research tasks (a.k.a. the fun stuff) and don’t get constantly stuck with menial or monotonous tasks; what’s more, supervisors allow interns to educate themselves and take the lead on their own projects.

3) The Environmental Health Internship Program is continuously improving and benefiting from honest feedback. Recent additions to the program such as mock case summary and a required office-wide presentation are a couple of examples. This program truly puts your foundational scientific knowledge and analytical skills to the test while leaving room for unique personal development.

4) The internship program opens up direct pathways to career opportunities at Cardno ChemRisk; the high proportion of past interns on the payroll is a testament to this.