

Executive Summary: ECOS and ASTHO PFAS Risk Communication Workshop

Under the guidance of the Risk Communication Team from the US Environmental Protection Agency's Office of the Administrator's Office of Public Affairs, the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS), the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), and EPA Regional Public Affairs Directors (PADs) and PFAS persons of contact (POCs) participated in a risk communication workshop on the 26th of September, 2023. This report summarizes the meeting and its findings.

Introductory Remarks

Janet McCabe opened the meeting by highlighting the great work those in attendance are doing on PFAS and the need for better risk communications to address the public's concern about PFAS. Good risk communication can keep the public informed while also avoiding unnecessary fear and anxiety.

Impacted Citizen

Sandy Wynn-Stelt then shared her experience with PFAS contamination. Her well water was found to be contaminated with high levels of PFAS due to the Wolverine shoe factory dumping PFAS-contaminated water on a neighboring property. This may explain her husband's fatal liver cancer and her own bouts with cancer. Since this discovery, Sandy has been very active in the community's efforts to remediate the site and ensure the safety of those living in the surrounding area.

During a Q&A session, Sandy shared her observations about the best ways for state and federal officials to work with impacted communities. These included:

- Be clear about what you and your agency can and cannot do.
- Build trust by following up when you say you will and validating citizens' concerns.
- If multiple agencies are involved, be clear about each agency's role and responsibilities.
- Explain the reasons why you cannot fulfill the public's wishes.
- Be aware of the optics of a situation- do not appear to have relationships with polluters.
- Diffuse tension by acknowledging the anger or frustration in a meeting.
- Provide multiple sources for accurate information, so citizens can fact check you.
- Provide for the language and accessibility needs of your audience during a meeting.
- Recognize that people under stress are not at their best, and refrain from judgement.

Exemplary State PFAS Responses

Following Sandy's remarks, three representatives from state environmental agencies shared takeaways from their PFAS responses.

Jeff Witte of the New Mexico Department of Agriculture discussed their response to the PFAS contamination of a river used to water cattle on several dairy farms. The main takeaways were:

- PFAS is an emerging issue, so the response needs to evolve alongside the science.
- You may not have control over when and how information is shared.
- Coordination with partners is key to providing consistent risk communication.

Sarah Allison of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services related lessons from a longitudinal study of PFAS exposure in two communities. These include:

- Communication efforts need to begin by rebuilding the trust broken by the contamination.
- Keep people informed of the process to build trust and ease anxiety.
- Provide resources to understand technical information alongside the technical information.

Myra Reece of the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control shared takeaways from her state’s PFAS contamination response:

- Cultivate a relationship with the media, acknowledging their key role in informing the public.
- Hold media briefings with subject matter experts and Q&A
- Provide media personnel with briefing sheets outlining the briefing’s three key takeaways.
- Share date as early as possible to advance understanding and improve transparency and trust.

Discussion of Risk Communication Best Practices

Madeline Beal shared some best practices with the group and introduced the tabletop exercises. Best practices included:

- Know your audience to improve communication.
- Set objectives for each of the following areas and use them to guide your tactics and platforms:
 - Educate/inform
 - Change feelings
 - Change behavior
- Build trust by incorporating the four components of trust into your meetings: Warmth, competence, honesty, and listening.
- Lead messages with the conclusion drawn from data and follow up with the details.
- Address uncertainty by discussing what is known, unknown, and what actions are being taken.
- Build messages that include the hazard (danger), impact (for them), and action (they can take).

Tabletop Exercise #1

The first exercise had small groups of participants consider a fictitious scenario from the perspective of a particular audience member: a journalist, a community association, the mayor, the governor, or a resident. Participants brainstormed about the audience member’s “so what?” for coming to a community meeting, factors that will impact how the audience will interpret information, and their objectives as a messenger to that audience. Then they discussed how to build trust with this audience through establishing shared values.

Tabletop Exercise #2

The second exercise focused on creating messaging to address the effect that aspects of the hazard can have on their audience’s risk perception. Then participants planned messaging to address uncertainty. Finally, they connected an objective to a Hazard/Impact/Action message.

Closing

After each group reported out the conclusions of their tabletop exercises, Madeline Beal closed out the meeting by thanking everyone for their attendance and work to protect the public from PFAS and offered her hope that the meeting would improve their risk communications for PFAS and beyond.