

# **Risk Communication: An Overview**

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# What is Risk Communication?

- Risk communication is a process – not an event!
- It is **NOT**
  - “Educating and informing the public...”
  - “Developing messages...”
  - “Communicating scientific and technical information to non-technical audiences...”
  - “Writing a press release...”
  - “Information sharing...”

# What is Risk Communication?

## ■ It IS

- Strategic planning
- Strategic partnership development
- Collaborative problem-solving
- Teamwork!

# Why is Risk Communication Important?

- Technical solutions do not address all needs
- Must be integrated with “risk plus” factors
  - Social
  - Economic
  - Political
- Level of stakeholder interest
- Establish credibility

# Why is it Difficult?

- Lack of public trust in government
- Lack of past efforts to build and maintain strategic partnerships for effective dialogue
- Scientific uncertainty and debate
  - Research vs. research
  - Experts vs. experts
  - Internet access
- Risk perceptions

# Risk Perceptions

- “Perception is reality”
- Human behavior factors
  - Unknown vs known
  - Voluntary vs involuntary
  - Familiar vs unfamiliar
  - Control vs no control
  - Fair vs unfair

# Technical vs Cultural Rationality

Trust in scientific methods	Trust in democratic process
Appeal to expertise	Appeal to folk wisdom and peer groups
Depersonalized	Personalized risks
Emphasis on probability	Emphasis on impact to self, family, community

# Event vs Process

Informing and educating	Strategic planning
Developing messages	Collaborative problem-solving
Communicating technical information to non-technical audience	Developing strategic partnerships for discussion, dialogue and debate
Information sharing	Jointly identifying issues and solutions
Press release	Systematically identifying appropriate tools

# Risk Communication REQUIRES

- Integration of risk communication processes into technical planning and resourcing
- Flexibility
  - Anticipate
  - Analyze
  - Adjust
- A foundation of respect and trust

# Strategic Planning

- Gain additional knowledge of stakeholder concerns and interests - what are the underlying issues?
- Develop a comprehensive strategy for collaboratively addressing the issues
  - In consultation and coordination with other programs, strategic partners, key stakeholders
  - Meets needs of all interests
  - Requires time, resources, and patience!
- Work towards building and maintaining mutual respect and credibility

# Effective Risk Management

- Know your audience
- Understand the “real” issues driving behavior
- Collaborate on problem identification and determining appropriate resolution
- Balance good science with social, economic and political realities of the situation
- Devote adequate resources to the effort

# Risk Communication Tools

- Need to fit the situation
- Based on homework
  - » Research files, media reports, past interactions
  - » Interviews with key stakeholders to identify diverse interests, issues, concerns, involvement and communication needs
- Are multiple to meet diverse needs
  - No “silver bullet”
  - One size does not fit all

# Summary



- Risk communication is:
  - a strategic planning process, not an event
  - collaborative problem-solving, not developing “messages” or putting out a press release
  - a team effort among strategic partners
- Risk communication requires:
  - commitment
  - resources
  - expertise

# For more information:

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