

The NRC's Guidelines for External Risk Communication

Quick Reference Guide



As risk analysis becomes an important dimension of public policy, the NRC's need to improve risk communication with its internal and external stakeholders is also increasing. Risk communication provides the essential links between risk analysis, risk management, and the public.

A primary challenge to effective risk communications is the conflict caused by the difference between how the NRC and the public define or perceive risk. The NRC's assessment of risk balances the likelihood of an occurrence against its possible consequences. The public's perception of risk, however, is based on the probability that something bad will happen to them, compounded by aspects of the situation that upset them.

Shared Understanding

Creating a shared understanding through meaningful dialogue can bridge the gap between the NRC's and the public's definitions and perceptions of risk. Skillfully applying consistent, well-planned risk communication practices will help the NRC discuss scientific decisions in a non-threatening manner while conveying the NRC's commitment to public safety.

Strategic Level

- Long-term planning
- Coordinated communication efforts
- Strategic partnerships
- Collaborative problem solving
- Consistent messages
- Appropriate communication tools

Interpersonal Level

- Empathetic listening
- Caring about the health & safety of others
- Building trust and credibility
- Establishing long-term relationships
- Managing conflict
- Effectively delivering NRC messages



Know your stakeholders and their concerns

The foundation of effective risk communication is a working understanding of the people and the issues. In addition to the media, the NRC's external stakeholders are other government agencies, advocacy groups, elected officials, the regulated community, and individual citizens outside the agency. Determining who your stakeholders are and understanding their perspectives are essential steps in making effective use of risk communication resources and developing a risk communication strategy.

Build trust and credibility

Stakeholders' opinions are influenced by whom they trust. Competence and expertise are important for building trust and credibility, but no more than empathy, honesty, and commitment. Be organized and prepared, be open and honest, coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources, and follow through on commitments. It's a mistake to ignore the public's concerns, hide information, or become defensive.

Craft effective messages

When deciding what to say in a report, presentation, e-mail, meeting, or interview, apply these basic steps and strategies:

- Determine your purpose—to educate, change perceptions, gain consensus, raise awareness, etc.
- Settle on three or four key messages, backed by two to four supporting facts
- Provide the context to help the stakeholder(s) evaluate a risk in terms of the big picture
- Highlight the NRC's role in ensuring nuclear safety and the agency's principles of regulation
- Be honest about the inherent uncertainties in risk assessment
- Be brief, accurate, straightforward, easy to understand, and consistent
- Tailor the language to the audience's reading level, education, concerns about the issue, experience with risks, and science understanding

Tame technical information

Even if the public understands the NRC's statistical approach to assessing potential health and safety consequences of a risk, the public may still find the risk unacceptable based on their own stake in the outcome, values, or sense of risk.

- Don't use technical terms that dehumanize people. Distant, abstract, and unfeeling language about death, injury, and illness sends the message that you don't care about people as individuals
- Use familiar units of measure and transform scientific notation
- Use simple and focused graphical materials to reinforce your key message
- Use analogies and stories to illustrate technical information
- Use comparisons to put risks in perspective, but be careful. Comparing the risks of living near a nuclear power plant to lifestyle choices or other risks the public voluntarily assumes may appear manipulative
- If asked a technical question in a public venue, rephrase it in simple terms and provide some context. After providing a brief answer, direct people to specific NRC documents that provide more details. Pointing interested stakeholders in the direction of credible sources of information outside of the NRC can be effective



Get the most out of public meetings

- Communicate with other government agencies before meetings to prevent surprises in front of the public
- Anticipate questions and plan your responses ahead of time
- Clearly define the NRC's role at the beginning and contrast it with those of other government agencies
- Communicate key messages and provide context in brief presentations
- When someone else is speaking, listen, and pay attention to response in the rest of the audience. Their postures, comments, and questions can provide clues on how to communicate with them
- Ask clarifying questions to make sure that you understand a question or that you provided the answer
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," but offer to find the answer and follow through
- Encourage those interested in risk numbers to talk with you after the meeting
- Establish a clear method of future contact, relax, and be available at the end of a meeting

Anticipate and cope with controversy

- Initiate personal contact before and after meetings
- Show willingness to listen to concerns and grievances
- Acknowledge the frustration of people who express high levels of concern, and be sure to remain respectful at all times
- Do not respond to verbal attacks with emotional retorts; remain calm
- Refute misinformation succinctly, without becoming confrontational
- Choose spokespersons carefully
- If necessary, delegate meeting leadership to a third-party facilitator

Responding to Difficult Questions

- Allow ventilation.
- Determine the underlying concern.
- Express empathy.
- Deliver your conclusion.
- Provide supporting facts.
- Repeat conclusion.
- Provide future action.

Interact beyond public venues

- Attend non-NRC community meetings where you can converse and answer questions one-on-one
- Meet with the editorial boards of local newspapers, including critical ones
- Call local officials; let them know who you are and that you are available if they have questions about a facility or the NRC
- Seek out respected individuals or groups in the community who are interested in the process
- Provide contact information and encourage the public to follow up with you
- Set up an e-mail list to consistently communicate to many stakeholders simultaneously