



U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Office of Public Affairs

Guidelines for Conducting Public Meetings



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Public meetings play a significant role in fulfilling the mission of the NRC. They not only provide an opportunity to thoroughly address public concerns about health, safety and the environment, but build credibility that the NRC is vigilantly performing its regulatory role. In turn, such meetings provide useful insights to the NRC on the community's attitudes, apprehensions and priorities.

This pamphlet provides guidelines and helpful hints designed to help you prepare for and conduct an effective public meeting.

Preparing for the Meeting

The following suggestions are intended to help you understand the viewpoint of the public and know what information you might need to bring to the meeting. A key point is to take complex, technical information and put it into non-technical, lay terms.

- ***Set the objectives:*** Communication at the meeting will be most effective if the planned objectives are limited to two or three.
- ***Tie public participation to the objectives:*** If the meeting is only to inform the public about an NRC action or program, allow about two-thirds of the time for NRC

speakers and one-third for questions afterwards. However, if the meeting's primary objective is to obtain information from the public, then the allotment of time should be reversed — NRC's introduction should be brief and the remainder should be allowed for a question/answer dialogue.

- **Match** NRC speakers to the subject and audience, if possible, rather than selecting from staff available within the project organization.
- **Review recent documents** that may be discussed (e.g., latest inspection report, study, petition, correspondence with licensee) to become familiar with their contents and the pertinent issues.
- **Ask a Public Affairs Officer** or another appropriate staff person to help develop questions that could typically be asked by a member of the public. For example:
 - What does NRC mean by elevated radiation levels at 15 locations?
 - How much more radiation is reaching my home based on what your samples indicate?
 - Is it safe? Does the contamination pose a risk? How big is that risk and how does it compare with ordinary risks from other hazards?
 - When will the locations be totally decontaminated?
 - Why did NRC take so long to tell us about this contamination?

- If the locations are not considered to be an immediate health and safety hazard, will they become dangerous in five days, five years, fifty years?
- What will NRC do if the actions proposed by the licensee are not acceptable or followed?
- What will NRC do with my comments? Who will make the decision at NRC? What is the decision-making process?
- ***Seek out public concerns in advance:*** Ask Public Affairs for recent news coverage on the issue. Read the news coverage to get a feel for local concerns. If the meeting is about a contaminated site, the public will want to know how they will be personally affected (e.g., whether the radiation could extend to their homes, property, water supply). Come into the meeting ready with information to address such concerns.
- ***Prepare an introduction and key talking points*** that you want emphasized at the meeting. Use non-technical language that is understandable to the lay person.
- ***Anticipate follow-up actions:*** Effective meetings do not end when the lights are turned off and everyone leaves. Plan on requests for information or concerns expressed that will require evaluation and follow-up. Caucus immediately after the public meeting to evaluate the meeting's effectiveness and to delegate actions and set deadlines on follow-up responses.
- ***Make a list and check it twice:*** Identify the audio/visual equipment you will need as part of your presentation

(overhead projectors, screen, microphone). Make sure the facility where the meeting will take place can provide the necessary equipment.

- **Rehearse** the meeting with other technical staff and a Public Affairs Officer who can ask questions as if they were the audience. This way you can tell immediately whether you are effectively communicating the message and if the meeting format is facilitating communication. Several dry runs may be needed to refine your remarks and to organize a meeting format.

Setting Up the Meeting

- **Schedule the meeting:** Schedule the meeting so it is compatible with public participation. Generally meetings held during the evening will avoid conflicts with normal work schedules and are better attended. Try to select a meeting location close to transportation centers and mass transit systems to minimize travel time.
- **Strategize:** If the meeting is formal and includes numerous speakers from outside NRC, consider having a strategy session prior to the meeting so that everyone is familiar with the issues and “cross communication” is minimized. This provides an opportunity to become acquainted with each other and will help make the meeting more cohesive.
- **Get the word out:** Meeting announcements need to be issued as early as possible to meet media deadlines and allow those participating and attending to schedule their time. Normally aim for two weeks prior to the meeting but no less than one week notice. Advertisements on local cable TV, radio and in newspapers are typically used to reach the public. Weekly

newspapers generally publish on Wednesdays or Thursdays and a week is needed before the actual ad date to book the ad.

- ***Get there early:*** Arrive at the public meeting location one hour early. Get accustomed to the surroundings. Check the sound system and lighting and make sure the room set-up is appropriate. This helps you to be more comfortable in a public forum and minimizes surprises.

- ***Convey neutrality and facilitate clarity:*** Facilitation of communication is the primary thing to keep in mind for the physical room set-up. Try to avoid a room set-up that places the NRC staff in a position of appearing remote or “above it all” which is not typically conducive to an open exchange of information between the members of the public and the NRC staff. The meeting place is the neutral zone where communication takes place. To achieve this, general ground rules are:
 - Set up a separate table for NRC staff to show a clear separation from the licensee and other agencies represented;

 - Face the audience so they can see and hear you clearly;

 - Arrange seating in a wide “U” shape with the open end facing the audience on the same floor level to create a “community of interest” between the audience and the participants; and

 - Use a public address system and microphones to ensure that speakers can be heard by everyone and to assist in maintaining order (i.e., one person speaking at a time).

- ***Limit the number of NRC staff:*** You don't want to create the impression that it is NRC against the world by having so many NRC people that it looks like an entire football team. It's probably a good idea to have no more than three in the speaking area at once. Other NRC staff may be seated in the audience with the understanding that they can be called upon to respond to a specific question if necessary.

One exception to limiting the staff would be special exit meetings open to the public such as Augmented Inspection Team (AIT) or Diagnostic Evaluation Team Inspections (DET) and others where the team, leaders and participants would individually address their specific areas.

Communicating the Information

Good communication gets to the heart of an issue and thereby creates constructive dialogue. When good communication takes place, a bridge between the NRC and the public is created that allows for a candid exchange.

TIP: *Tell the audience what you plan to tell them, then tell them and finally review what you told them.*

- ***Keep the introduction brief and to the point:*** The introduction establishes the credibility and tone of the meeting. It should also identify the extent of public involvement that is expected – observation only, questions at the end, discussions throughout.

There are four main components to achieve a strong presentation:

- 1) A **simply stated** purpose of the meeting and why the NRC is involved;

2) **Action statements** on what has been done and will be done by the NRC;

3) **Identification** of community and public concerns; and

4) **Response** to concerns in **non-technical terms**.

- **Identify the issue and agency involvement:** In your opening statement simply tell why the NRC is involved.

For example:

“Tonight’s meeting is to discuss with you the results of the NRC’s inspection findings and sample results regarding [name of facility]. The NRC’s mission is to protect the public health and safety and the environment in the commercial uses of nuclear energy. To help assure adequate protection, the NRC regularly inspects facilities.”

- **Summarize information using action statements:** Provide a brief background before describing what action NRC has taken and is considering — present it directly and up front.

For example:

“Over the last four months, the NRC staff has conducted an inspection of the facility and taken samples from five different locations near the facility. Based on the inspection and samples, the NRC has concluded the public is safe. The information from the samples and inspection can be found in the inspection report, which is a public document.”

- **Respond in their terms:** Respond to the fears, concerns or issues in terms to which your audience can readily relate as you would with your family or friends or someone new to the topic. Be specific as to the level of danger and importance in the daily lives of community members. Even

if your audience includes a licensee or reporter who is familiar with the topic, address the issues and concerns in a simple and clear manner that provides easy comprehension and avoids misunderstandings. **DO NOT USE TECHNICAL JARGON, ACRONYMS, OR ABBREVIATIONS. SPEAK IN LAY TERMS, AND NEVER TALK DOWN TO YOUR AUDIENCE.**

- ***Enhance communication in numerous ways:***
 - **Comparative examples from everyday life** (e.g., radiation received from a coast-to-coast round trip by plane);
 - **Straight action facts** (e.g., “NRC staff conducted an inspection and there was not enough contamination to be detectable by the instruments”); and
 - **Diagrams and charts** (e.g., handouts depicting safety barriers or emergency systems of a power plant, simple graphs and charts showing the number of inspections done and sample results).
- ***Provide handouts:*** Material that the audience can read and study is an important tool in helping them understand the issues. Provide copies of NRC’s presentation and background documents such as reports, memoranda, letters, and appropriate brochures that would contribute to the public’s understanding of the issues. Providing this material up front helps convey that NRC is open and forthcoming.
- ***Recognize personal impact:*** Often what hinders communication between the regulator and the public is the perception that the NRC does not recognize the personal impact of the issues or empathize with public anxiety and

concerns. To prevent such a communication block, be open to the concerns expressed and provide a direct response using the same terms in which the concerns were expressed to you. This helps to develop a good communication link between you and the audience and conveys that you care about their welfare. If you don't have an answer to a question, you should say that and offer to follow up. Responding back at a later date is essential to maintaining credibility and assists in lessening anxiety.

Managing the Meeting

- ***Less is more:*** Limit slides/overheads to a handful that focus on the topic. Do not read verbatim and avoid repetitive information. Use handouts with detailed information or background on key points rather than an excessive number of overheads.
- ***Keep focused:*** Stick to the topic at hand. If members of the public want to discuss other issues unrelated to the topic, inform them that you will be available after the meeting to discuss that subject if it is within your area of expertise.
- ***Time awareness:*** Keep to the schedule. Respect the time of those at the meeting by maintaining control so that the meeting does not drag on. Observe the time allotted in your introduction. If a point is continually raised that is lengthening the meeting unnecessarily, inform the audience and speakers that they need to move on to be fair to the others present, and that NRC staff will be available briefly after the meeting to further clarify the point.

- ***Handle distractions:*** If there are distractions such as a noisy group of people arriving late or engaging in loud talking, wait a few minutes for the distraction to end. If the distraction is a disruptive person who continues too long, inform him that he is welcome to talk to NRC staff at the end of the meeting but he is holding the meeting up for others.
- ***Patience is a virtue:*** Be patient with questioners and commentators and listen politely. Beware of reacting to questions or comments in a manner that is demeaning such as shifting in your seat with impatience, or shaking your head negatively. Keep in mind that your body language will reflect your impatience.
- ***Stay after:*** Plan to stay after the meeting for a short time to meet with members of the public and media to answer questions in more detail and to respond to those who may be intimidated bringing up an issue in front of a large group.

Focusing on the Audience

- ***Thanks:*** Always start your introduction and end the meeting with a thank you to the audience for taking the time to come to the meeting and showing interest.
- ***Protocol:*** Always acknowledge other public officials and government representatives who are present at the meeting in your introduction.
- ***Eye Contact:*** Look at the audience while speaking as much as possible. Direct eye contact helps you build credibility and a good rapport with the audience.

- **Speech:** When you speak, articulate and project your voice so that you can be heard clearly. If there is a sound system, speak into the microphone (but don't speak too close or your voice will sound muffled). Slow down your speech so that each word is clear. This prevents misunderstandings of the message.
- **Listening:** Be sure to listen carefully to a question or comment. Part of listening is to be attentive to what is being said. A mistake is to mentally form an answer to a question before you have heard the entire question or remark. Wait until the entire question or remark is completed before answering. If you don't understand a question, feel free to repeat it to the questioner for verification or ask that the question be rephrased.
- **Honesty:** Be honest, concise, and direct in your answers. It is fine to respond to a question with, "I don't know, but I'll check and get back to you." Remember, if that is the response, you will need to keep a list of questions with the questioner's name and address or telephone number so that you can follow up promptly.
- **Focusing on Information:** Respect the feelings expressed by members of the audience. Don't debate the validity of the feelings but instead focus on the information or potential misconceptions that fuel feelings.
- **Responsiveness:** Be specific about NRC actions on the issue. Explain the planned follow-up actions as well as the previous actions taken. If a public meeting is one of a series, discuss the NRC's responses to comments and questions that arose in previous meetings.

Assistance from the Office of Public Affairs

The OPA staff can offer assistance in many ways. OPA has a unique perspective to offer through their direct daily contact with the public and monitoring of media coverage. OPA can assist you when you are working on a public meeting to:

- Focus on relevant public concerns in putting together an agenda for the meeting;
- Identify issues recently covered by the media and concerns expressed by the public;
- Provide questions that may be asked by the media and public;
- Organize and edit your introduction; and
- Provide feedback by sitting through a dry run of the meeting.

Feel free to contact OPA staff in headquarters or in the regions for guidance in making your meeting one that will facilitate communication between NRC and the public.

Headquarters	301/415-8200
Region I	610/337-5330
Region II	404/562-4416
Region III	630/829-9663
Region IV	817/860-8128

