

Information **Experts**

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GAUGING PUBLIC PERCEPTION: EXTERNAL FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS,
ANALYSIS AND COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

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**OBJECTIVES /
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OBJECTIVES OF THIS DOCUMENT

- Propose recommendations for future communication strategies.
- Clarify points presented at the recommendations presentation.
- Demonstrate sample communications to demonstrate tactical recommendations points and possibly to serve as conceptual directions for future outreach materials.
- Describe research methodology.
- Present focus group findings.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is aware that earning the public's confidence is a vital factor in enabling the organization to fulfill its mission. The NRC expects that today's level of trust in the work of the NRC will be tested over the next several years. The NRC is anticipating an increase in applications for new facilities, license renewals, and upgrades over the next several years.

Therefore, the NRC seeks to know what the overall level of public interest is, how aware the public is of the work of the NRC, and how the public feels about this work. With this data, the NRC has a firm baseline for outreach communications that assure citizens of the safety and security of nuclear facilities and waste transportation and, subsequently, to improve its outreach communications to the public during this critical period of nuclear growth and discussion.

The NRC contracted Information Experts (IE) to conduct research using external focus groups to "take the pulse of the American public" and to provide communications recommendations based on this research. The project, "Focus Group Research: Gauging Public Perception," was based on a fundamental, central question: "How does the American public perceive the work of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)?"

Ten focus groups were conducted, eight in-person sessions in four locations and two teleconference sessions: one composed of the population at large and the other of nuclear energy activists. In total, eighty-two people participated in this study between November 2006 and January 2007.

Key findings were presented on January 31, 2007, detailing the following:

- There is a general consistency of response across the groups, excluding the nuclear energy activists, which had significantly different views than the majority.
- The majority of the respondents were somewhat familiar with the work of the NRC.
- This majority were not overly concerned to have more information unless there is an accident in their local area.
- However, when asked to examine materials more closely, the majority found the additional information interesting.
- Specific publications and materials generated negative comments on quality of photographs, overly technical language, and the abundance of perceived "insider" information.

- A minority of the focus group attendees expressed skepticism toward the NRC, doubting that the NRC discloses all pertinent information to the public and wondering if the NRC is aligned with industry interests.

Based on these findings and its own review of NRC communications materials, Information Experts presented recommendations on February 20, 2007 that included the following high-level, strategic recommendations:

- Adopt a proactive approach to the communications to clarify the NRC's non-partisan role, and showcase the safety and protection it provides citizens.
- Depict the breadth of responsibility—for instance, incorporating the NRC role within the regulation of healthcare (nuclear medicine)
- Pay attention to the minority viewpoint that expressed doubts about the NRC's impartiality and openness.
- Update and upgrade the Web site to reflect 2007 Web technology and style. We recommend that the site be both official looking and warm and inviting.
- Revise publications to be citizen-centric, clear on the intended audience, with appealing graphics and visuals.

Deeper-level, tactical recommendations for next steps of action are as follows:

- Develop/revise a communications plan to:
 - Set the recommendations in motion across all NRC materials.
 - Capture messaging and image changes
 - Document and prioritize materials for change
 - Identify owners/stakeholders and develop timelines
 - Ensure materials get updated and are visually and textually consistent over time
- Prioritize a re-design of the Web site to be official yet warm and inviting, focused on citizens (with specialized sub-sites for other target groups— media, professionals, teachers) to quickly find “bundled information” on their specific interests.
- Create a new brochure to capture new messaging and design and to serve as a conceptual reference point and structural template for messaging and design.
- Codify understandings and visual recommendations in a Style Guide to be used throughout the NRC for all communications.
- Create an internal communications initiative to enable all staff to embody new approaches, leveraging current communications vehicles such as the *EDO Update*, NRC Reporter newsletter, and commissioner briefings.

The adoption of these recommendations will be a change for the NRC. Therefore it will be essential to manage this change through an internal communications initiative, where NRC employees throughout the US have an understanding of the importance of these changes and how to implement them. Finally, and very importantly, the NRC should establish methods for evaluating the effectiveness of these changes.

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS

ABOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made in this report are based on the focus group research and include our considered thinking on strategic approaches, messaging, and visual cues. In large part, these recommendations are made based on key, actionable research findings as reasonably and practically interpreted. We augment this standard approach with the intuitions and counsel of senior communications professionals.

FOCUSING ON THE NRC'S COMMUNICATIONS, NOT THE NRC

People generally form *brand impressions*—most deeply and significantly through personal experience; secondly through reliable media reports; and thirdly through nothing more than prejudice, arising from such a multiplicity of factors that it would be impossible to research, especially since the subjects would not *know* where their ideas originated.

The audiences' aggregated brand impression of the NRC represents the existing landscape in which the NRC communicates. This impression is subjective, but immediately dismissing it would be unwise. The NRC can use tone, messaging, and visual cues to counter any negative brand impressions, while still maintaining consistent content and objectives.

Our recommendations for the NRC, therefore, must be understood within the context of *communications*. Internal employees have their own paradigms and mental models of what the NRC does and how the NRC works. These recommendations don't change what the NRC does, but do change how the NRC presents itself to the citizenry. The communications materials must start with the citizen in terms that the public understands.

ABOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS *cont'd*

LEVERAGING EXISTING RESEARCH AND SUCCESS

While the forthcoming recommendations may indicate much to change about the NRC's communications, this change has an auspicious beginning. The NRC has already completed what few organizations effectively accomplish: asking the audience what they think and how they feel. Such direct research is the foundation for change.

Audience responses were consistent throughout locations and demographics. They rang true for our communications team. These findings and their associated recommendations can significantly impact an improved future state of NRC communication. Such public perception improvements are achievable and worth the effort.

AN ASSUMPTION

A key assumption in these recommendations is that the NRC is interested in proactively changing public perception, for the better, based on the research findings. We feel the need to explicitly state this assumption because the research indicates that the NRC is fairly well regarded and understood. That is, citizens understand that the NRC does some form of regulation in the nuclear area. Further, many are not compelled to learn more, that "no news is good news."

The majority of citizens recognize NRC as a regulatory agency in the nuclear arena and, assuming there are no local power plant safety issues, do not feel compelled to learn more.

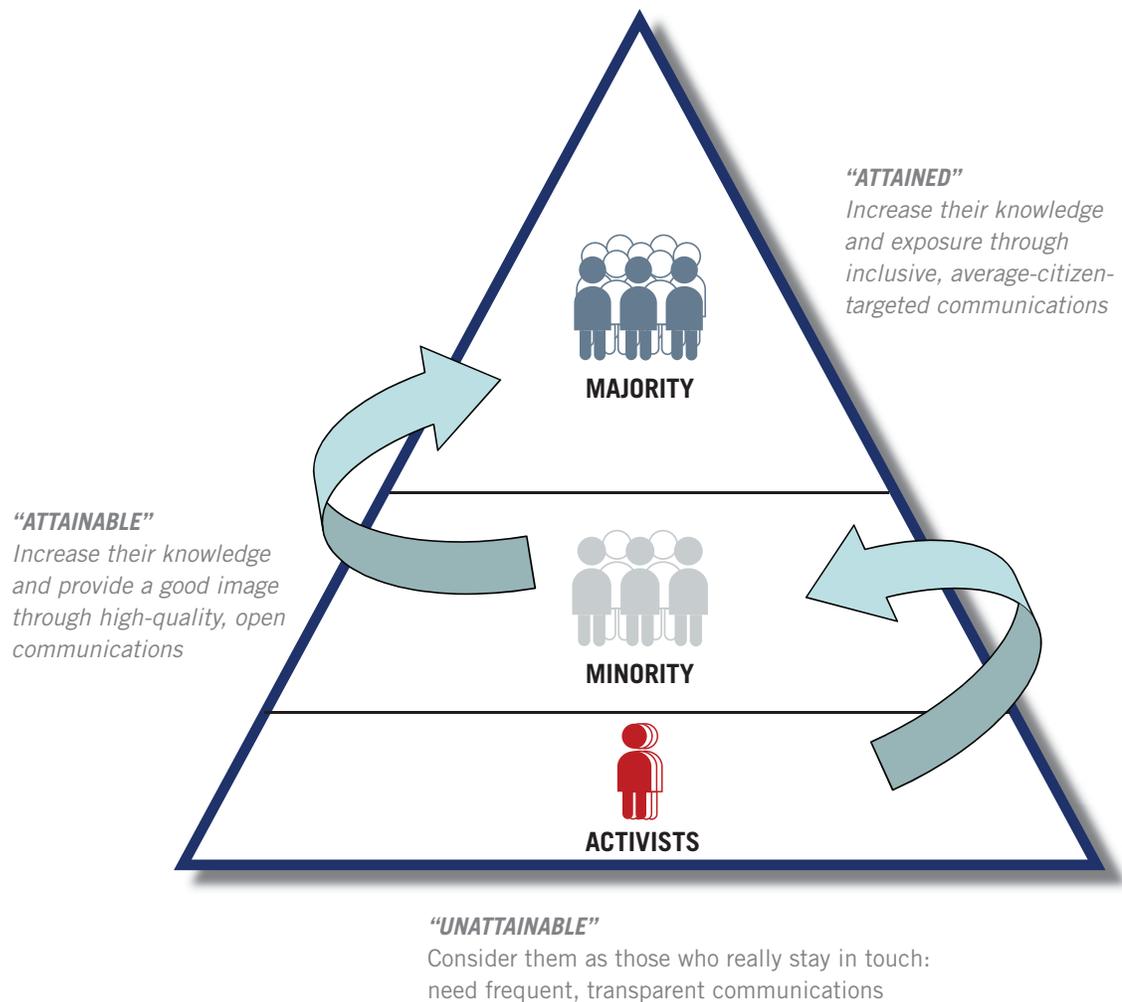
If that is a result of the NRC not reaching everyone, this would appear to be an acceptable default attitude for citizens to have. However, the NRC is doing vital work, offers much to citizens, and is embarking upon a critical period of reactor growth. Good communications can increase the number of people with positive viewpoints, improve the understandings and level of respect for all, and otherwise improve public perception.

Therefore, given that the neutral audiences *can* be converted into positive audiences, the NRC is poised to proactively improve public perception to:

- Clarify its non-partisan role;
- Showcase the safety and protection it provides citizens;
- Demonstrate its breadth of services;
- Facilitate its mission; and
- Improve internal understandings of its role.

**STRATEGIC
RECOMMENDATIONS**

TARGET AUDIENCE



The pyramid above sorts the NRC audiences into three categories: Attained, Attainable, and Unattainable — corresponding, respectively, to their designations in the Findings: Majority, Minority, and Activists.

Theoretically — and ideally — each audience can be moved up the pyramid (from low understanding/regard/acceptance to high understanding/regard/acceptance) through improved communications. More realistically, however, the majority can be looked at as already “Attained” and the activists can be viewed as “Unattainable.” The minority is an excellent audience to whom to appeal; this “Attainable” group includes those cynical and/or honest focus group attendees that provided iconoclastic views. They have done the NRC a favor with their critical feedback, and they make an excellent target audience for NRC communications.

**STRATEGIC
RECOMMENDATIONS**
cont'd

ACTIONABLE FINDINGS

The research identified four actionable findings. These four distinct ideas were voiced repeatedly by multiple audiences. Our interpretations logically follow or are educated deductions.. There was enough unanimity in the findings such that these interpretations largely suggest themselves.

What We Heard	Interpretation
<i>"The only time you hear about them is when something bad happens."</i>	Reactive; not engaged with the public.
<i>"... never looked for information on nor received information from the NRC."</i>	
<i>"They're supposed to work on behalf of the public, but that doesn't always work out."</i>	Distrust.
<i>"... unequivocally pro-nuclear power."</i>	Perception of bias.
<i>"[The publications are] vastly more interesting than expected."</i>	Opportunity!

CHALLENGE: OVERCOMING THREE BAD WORDS

Many prejudicial feelings or associations can arise from the name "Nuclear Regulatory Commission." In no way do these associations suggest that the NRC is improperly named. However, understanding these prejudices can help the NRC overcome these attitudes through effective visuals and messaging, helping people better understand how the NRC protects the public.

The negative connotations of the components of the NRC name are listed below.

"Nuclear"	"Regulatory"	"Commission"
Scary	Big, elitist word	Ad hoc
Death	Control	Political
Invisible	Lobbyist	Investigation
Bomb	Political	After-the-fact
Cancer	Power	Reactive
War	Behind-the-scenes	DC only

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS *cont'd*



*LEVERAGE
these assets.
They're good;
make them
even better.*

WHAT SHOULD BE LEVERAGED

The following are NRC communications assets, positive qualities that NRC communications currently possess that can be employed in greater priority, prominence, or consistency. The more the public understands these qualities, the more respect they will have for the NRC.



The broadness of the NRC's role. The NRC is too closely associated with one image, one area of concern: nuclear reactors. To broaden that image show workplace, environmental, and healthcare images and content.



The prevalence of nuclear energy. Because nuclear energy is so prevalent, many will take comfort knowing that its ubiquity implies safety and NRC effectiveness. Why aren't there more problems? Because the NRC is doing its job. Nuclear power is everywhere, already a part of our lives, and is safely regulated.



Parallels with other energy sources. Nuclear energy may be thought of as the effective but scary energy source, as opposed to alternatives such as wind power. The more people understand how nuclear power processes parallel processes associated with other energy sources, the better they can feel about it.



The objectivity of science. More people trust science and scientists than they do bureaucrats. The look of science will show the expertise and integrated team the NRC possesses. In addition, scientists are often out in the field; NRC should show they are out in communities, learning, monitoring, and protecting.



Science made simple. The NRC performs scientific work. A warm scientific look will show you know it well enough to communicate it in a thorough but approachable manner.



Push communications. The NRC should increase the frequency and variety of communications. "Push" communications are those that are proactively implemented where audiences will be sure to find them, like radio or non-industry print media advertising. "Pull" communications — referring to materials that citizens need to seek out, such as a brochure that would be mailed to all who request it — are not as effective in reaching large and/or new audiences.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS *cont'd*

WHAT SHOULD BE TRANSFORMED

The following are external, negative perceptions of the NRC that need to be transformed through effective communications.



TRANSFORM these perceptions into something more communicative to citizens.



The public's anxiety pertaining to nuclear power. Anxiety prevents understanding. The NRC must help people relax about the idea of nuclear power before these people can approach the issue with a calm, fresh mind—the kind of mind capable of learning something new, thinking new ways, and understanding complex situations.



Skeptical views of the “minority” audience. The minority audience (see Findings) needs more assurance and better information to remove their doubts. There is a healthy skepticism that should be targeted for transformation. This audience is the key that turns the lock.



Perceived lack of warmth. It is possible to be official and warm, but to be both requires a conscious strategic decision and very thoughtful execution. To achieve this dual tone, the NRC should establish its official qualities first, then find small points where warmth can be injected into its communications.



The overall quality of communications is low. The existing NRC communications materials are very outdated. Visual conventions, wording, and many other signifiers indicate very clearly to NRC audiences that something is not current. Readers/visitors will not always know how to pinpoint what is old, but they will feel it right away and have a negative perception. More contemporary-appearing materials convey that the NRC takes pride in itself, its mission, and work its, and that the organization wishes to reach out to its constituents.



The NRC is a big building in Rockville, MD. Communications of a previous generation were concerned with exerting authority, and a representative image suggesting this authority would be the literal depiction of the actual building that houses an organization. But, in today's more value-based, peer-to-peer culture, a more effective depiction of the NRC would be some essential interaction—perhaps a human touchpoint—that explains to citizens in a concise image the value that the NRC provides. Showing a picture of a building is anachronistic, static, impersonal and negatively authoritative; instead, display a dynamic interaction, imbued with meaning.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS *cont'd*

WHAT SHOULD BE INSTILLED

The following are qualities that, if displayed through NRC communications, would improve the public perception of the organization. Unlike the Transform items, these are more tactical items, easier to embody and achieve.



INSTALL
*these new
ideas into the
communications.*



The NRC's perpetual, protective vigil. The NRC must provide a believable promise that it is always protecting people. Such a promise can be conveyed through a current, dynamic Web site. Frequent updates, timestamped content, and a structure that prioritizes news are components of a Web site for a perpetually active organization.

We are aware that in the event of an emergency the NRC site will swap out for a new site dedicated to a particular emergency. But there is little evidence for confidence that this will happen well—or to come back to this site when it's needed most—based on the current elements and structure.



A community presence and focus. In contrast to merely being a presence at headquarters in Rockville, MD and the DC metropolitan area, inculcate a sense of being national and on-site in communities. This focus will enable people to understand the NRC is where the citizens are, and that the organization provides local information and interaction.



An integrated team of experts. The NRC should not follow that earlier generation mode of describing itself strictly as a bureaucratic organization of “regulators.” The NRC will have more authority, credibility, and favorability if people understand that the NRC comprises many types of experts integrated to work together for solutions for the American public.



Interactivity and feedback. Feedback mechanisms cannot be determined at this time, except to say that it is always useful to turn one-way communications into a two-way dialogue. Whether through event blogs, message boards, surveys, focus groups, hosted TV community events, feedback devices on the Web site, or other mechanisms, the NRC will benefit not only in terms of knowledge, but in goodwill obtained for these efforts.



The active voice. The passive voice is standard in scientific communications. However, any layman copy, highlights, overviews, captions, introductions to more scientific areas should be written in the active voice. Active voice is more readable and speaks to accountability, because it tells WHO or WHAT did the action immediately, using the standard subject - predicate model.



Be partial... to the public. The NRC counters arguments of partiality with claims of impartiality, but the best counter might be that, yes, the NRC is partial...to the public. The NRC should ensure that materials are written and designed for citizens, and not for industry professionals.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

CONTENT

The most salient of our findings that have tactical ramifications are listed and interpreted below.

What We Heard	Interpretation
<i>Technical terminology indicates the material is “not for us” but for workers and other industry insiders.</i>	Citizen-focused content treatment is needed.
<i>Positive reaction to particular phrasing/terminology, such as “Protect the public,” “Protect the environment,” and “Protection of public health and safety.”</i>	Great theme: Protection, protection, protection!

The following information is a sampling of how to improve specific terms and phrases frequently referenced in NRC materials.

	Current	Recommended
Who	Regulators run by a commission appointed by the president to 5-year terms.	An integrated team of scientists, engineers, and experts all across the country dedicated to safe energy.
What	Licensing and nuclear power plants.	Energy, medicine, research, and industry.
Why	To prevent danger and reduce exposure risk.	To conduct nuclear research to support our nation’s need for clean, low-environmental impact energy and for advanced technology, while ensuring public worker safety through licensing and regulations.
When	When someone needs a license, periodic inspections, or worst-case scenario.	All the time; ensuring worker and plant safety; before, during, and after any scenario that could arise.
Where	In Rockville, 4 regional offices, on site at reactors.	In communities whose economies include nuclear facilities; in regional offices to serve large concentrations of facilities, and serving the entire U.S. from its headquarters in Rockville/DC.

**TACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS**
cont'd

WEB SITE

Of all the existing NRC materials, we have the greatest concerns over the Web site for two reasons:

- It is the most visible and most accessed reference, and is the command center for emergency communications; and
- The site inspired mistrust.

A third concern is the target for the site. It is not a citizen-focused website. It needs to have a target audience, which we assume is the American public, even if much of the material is better directed toward industry participants. To achieve this:

- Write in plain, non-jargon language;
- Address citizen needs;
- Find other places on the site to address the needs of other groups; and
- Address industry participants while still putting it into language that citizens could think the info is also for them.

What We Heard	Interpretation
<i>Positive feedback about overall look and navigation; feel that the site is targeted specifically to the general public.</i>	High-level praise is superficial.
<i>“Now Hiring” design/placement suggests “NRC has a difficult time attracting/keeping employees.”</i>	Mistrust
<i>Poor quality of images; unappealing</i>	Site does not look official; looks like a small-business site.
<i>“Site is more for industry insiders than for the public” (caption, “No Fear EEO,” etc.).</i>	Not an official, rich, citizen-focused experience.
<i>Citizens would seek information from the NRC regarding their local plant, including getting news on a plant safety issue, reporting a safety issue, and finding out how to respond to an accident.</i>	The site is built like a circa-2000 information repository, not a dynamic, maintained interactive communications portal and authoritative news source. There is no reason to have confidence that this site would transform into a helpful “situation room” in the event of any type of concern.
<i>Activists are experienced and frustrated users.</i>	Site does not organize information to make it possible to find information easily.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS *cont'd*

WEB SITE RECOMMENDATIONS



Make the Web site the centerpiece of NRC communications. The NRC Web site offers the most dynamic and cost-effective opportunity to improve public perceptions.



Create a citizen-focused site. Write in plain, non-jargon language and address the needs of independent citizens.



Meet special audience needs through separate sub-sites. Information for media, industry, and local audiences should be bundled into easy-to-find yet distinctly subordinate areas on the NRC Web site.



Dramatically improve the site information flow. The Web site does not look official. It fails to embrace users, to show them how to find what they are looking for, and to highlight how the NRC serves as an important resource. The reorganization of the site should showcase the NRC's national scope, local efforts, and service breadth.



Determine interactivity and online feedback mechanisms. Interactivity means that the site features ways for citizens to do things, in addition to being able to navigate to pages to read from a menu bar. Feedback mechanisms, downloads, forwards, and interesting navigation structures (e.g., a map) could help the site be more lively and fresh — and give citizens the notion that the NRC cares about providing them with a positive experience.



Optimize site for search engine performance. Certain keyword searches should yield NRC first. This demonstrates thought leadership and primacy in an area. Maintaining Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an ongoing task, and requires well-coordinated design, development, and management of the site.

**TACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS**
cont'd

Consider blogging. Blogs are issue-driven, online diaries. This forward-looking, time-consuming activity can be of great benefit to the NRC public image. Blogging enables a “blog-worthy figure” at NRC to open up and talk about industry issues in a candid, forthright, leadership manner. Precedence for successful blogging exists in the public sector, including at the SEC, the FTC, NASA, and the Los Angeles Police Department.

The “problem” with blogging is that, strategically, bloggers spend a lot of time appealing to a virtually unattainable audience, the Activists, who will, unlike the general population, read every word. If concerned about the efficacy of blogging, the NRC may wish to host a less time-intensive “event blog,” which follows a specific event over a predefined, discrete time period.



Implement RSS feed technology. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) technology is the current manner of publishing frequently updated digital content. The easy-to-implement format allows users to easily syndicate the content, pushing NRC news to more audiences than what the NRC directly reaches. Furthermore, the use of RSS feeds demonstrates that the NRC is at the forefront of emerging technologies.

**TACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS**
*cont'd***PRINT MATERIALS**

Employ a document identification system to show how all the documents fit together into a communications package. These documents can populate categories such as For Citizens, For Healthcare, For Power Industry Professionals, etc.



Ensure all materials are visually consistent. They should be consistent with respect to visual elements, naming convention, typography, seal usage, voice, photography, and other factors. They should constitute a brand experience, consistent and rigorously managed.



Update photos, freshening the look, and following new design conventions. By doing so, the NRC will demonstrate currency, relevancy, care, and respect for the audience. Viewers quickly detect outdated photography, and old images hinder the appeal of design.



Keep images simple, solid, and clear. Every image should serve a purpose beyond “filling space.” Simple, uncluttered images allow the audience to quickly “read” the visual elements of the materials and connect these messages with those explicitly stated in the text.



Know the NRC audience. Every word, image and element in a printed material should be targeted toward a specific audience.

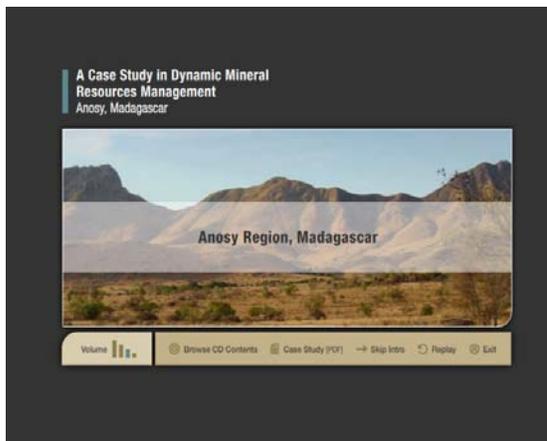
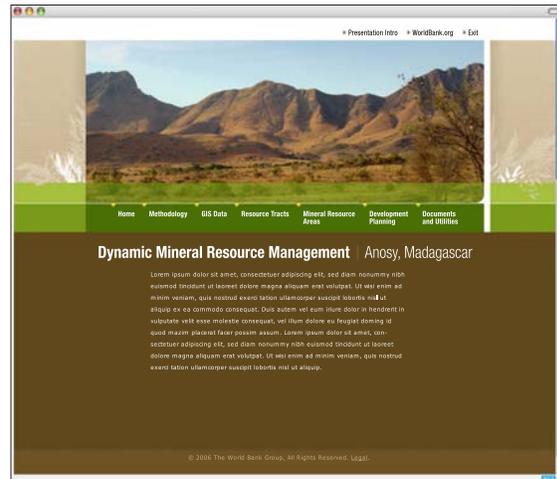
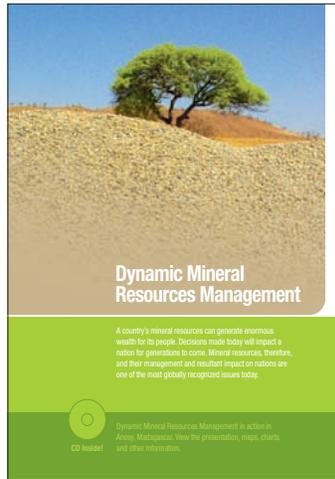


Give documents descriptive, friendly names. For example, possible titles include “Reactor License Renewals: Process and Status” and “Meet the NRC: Protecting and Informing the Public.”

**TACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS**
cont'd

EXAMPLES OF GOOD DESIGN: EXCELLENT PHOTOGRAPHY

Good images lead to good design. Below are some good designs that were made possible by superb photography.



**TACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS**
cont'd

EXAMPLES OF GOOD DESIGN: ACHIEVE VISUAL CONSISTENCY

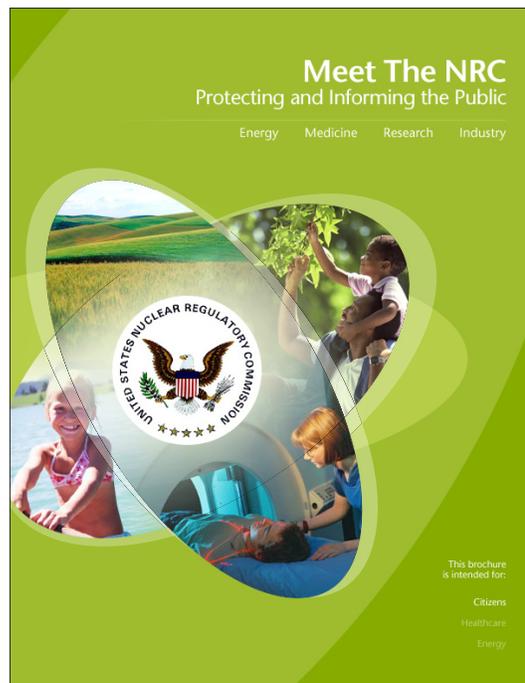
Materials should be visually consistent. Below are four unique brands that are visually consistent within their own system. When audiences see one of these individual pieces, images and messages from previously seen materials are reinforced. This efficient approach eliminates the need for citizens to reappraise the organization during each separate encounter with NRC materials.



SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS

SAMPLES DESIGNED BY INFORMATION EXPERTS

The following three product samples are just that: samples. A true creative engagement to design new materials would require much more dialogue and collaboration with NRC to get the materials much more on target and practical. The images and themes of these samples come from the focus group exercise and are discussed in the Findings, Future Communications section. However, these samples should serve as a worthy baseline, a good headstart, for next-generation communications.

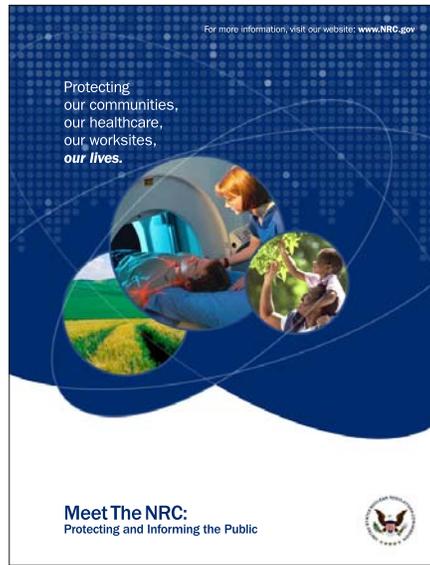


Sample 1. Brochure Concept

The green is used to attract attention and to evoke nature and environmentalism. It works well with an NRC-identifier blue. The seal is used to be central, in the middle of the action and people's lives in a manner both official and friendly. The list of areas served—Energy, Medicine, Research, and Industry—while doubtlessly not the right terms, serves to show the range of impact of the NRC, and to change the mindset of many citizens who only associate the NRC with reactors.

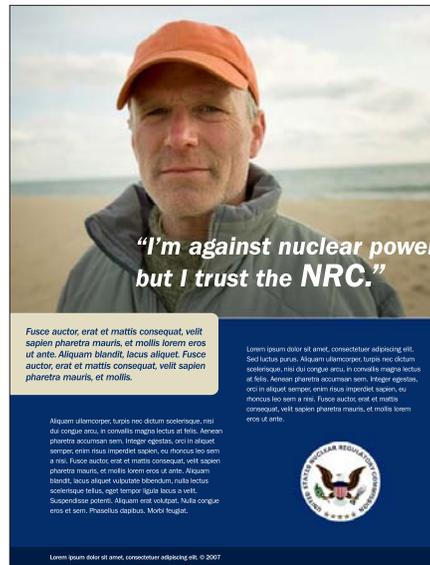
The shapes are designed to be appealing but ambiguous—at first, then to reveal themselves as a molecular/atomic shape. This shape conjures science but also the interconnectedness of nuclear power in our lives and the NRC's central role of protecting the environment, our health, our lives.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS
cont'd



Sample 2. Brochure Concept

Another aesthetic take on the same themes, this approach is a bit more formal, impressive, and scientific. It is not as warm, but is very vibrant. It is arguably more official than the previous concept.



Sample 3. PSA Concept

PSAs in general media—as push media—enable the NRC to reach wide audiences who may not be motivated to seek out information about the NRC. It is an opportunity to make a fresh start with those learning of the NRC for the first time and to settle lingering prejudices against the NRC in a non-defensive manner.

**SAMPLE
COMMUNICATIONS**
cont'd



Sample 4. Web Site Homepage Concept

This homepage concept for NRC.gov attempts to be warm and friendly through vivid colors, human and environmental images (as our focus groups audiences indicated), active content displayed in a user-friendly manner, font-size adjustment capabilities, and vivid curvey lines. However, we also seek to offer these elements with a technical and communications familiarity and control that conveys that the site is professional, official, and authoritative.

The site also demonstrates other recommended aspects, such as:

- News Alert device that—even when no alert appears—indicates this is the place to come for information in the event of an incident.
- An interactive map that will immediately enables users to get information pertaining to their areas of concern, while demonstrating that the NRC is in local communities, serving on a national scope away from Washington, DC.
- Targeted to citizens but providing sub-sites for other audiences, such as teachers and the media.

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

This document provides a range of strategic and tactical recommendations for improving NRC communications across media outlets. To implement these recommendations effectively, the NRC should follow these steps:



Develop a strategic communications plan. The communications plan will capture the recommendations that the NRC wishes to adopt, list key messages, identify audiences, segment messages by audience, prioritize audiences, identify audience-appropriate communications, establish measurements for success, select a campaign timeframe, and map out a schedule for communications.



Redesign the Web site. A new NRC Web site is an appropriate first step in this campaign. It reaches a wide audience, and it represents the most immediate outlet to showcase NRC's revised, up-to-date identity.



Create a new brochure. This initial brochure will serve as a reference guide—the general messaging platform from which future communications will derive.



Develop the NRC style guide. A style guide codifies visual recommendations into—easy to use reference manual. The style guide will deal with the spirit of NRC, the high-level communication goals, colors and font rules, logo usage, inventory of “brand elements,” proper spelling of key words and terminology, and access points for obtaining the most updated source files.



Create an internal communications initiative to enable all staff to embody the new approaches. After management accepts the new conceptual model and the style guide, and sees these new ways of presenting and thinking about the NRC, the NRC should roll out this thinking to all internal staff to promote new ways of speaking and writing about the NRC. The internal initiative will announce upcoming materials, gather feedback, and instill pride.



Institute evaluation methods. The NRC will need to choose methods for measuring the effectiveness of the communications strategies. This focus group research provides one set of benchmarks against which to measure future communications efforts. Other stakeholders should also provide feedback.

EXTERNAL FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

GAUGING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The NRC contracted with Information Experts to conduct external focus groups, composed of the American public, to evaluate the public perception of the NRC and the NRC's communications to the public. This method of research was chosen because focus groups, unlike surveys, provide an opportunity for individuals to speak in their own words, to offer their perspectives and perceptions, and to engage in conversation with others. The resulting data, while not quantifiable, provides qualitative results that show strength of preferences and reactions to facilitator questions. It is from these findings that the communications recommendations are formed.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

A total of ten focus groups were conducted. Eight focus groups were held in four locations. IE recruited focus group attendees who lived within the ten-mile Emergency Planning Zone (EPZ) around a nuclear energy plant. The NRC selected four locations based on the following criteria:

- Areas where the nuclear energy plant had shifted from having a contentious history to a peaceful one, or vice versa, a peaceful history to a contentious period;
- Locations where there might be future license applications;
- Geographic distribution; and
- Demographic distribution.

The four areas selected are: Connecticut, around the Millstone plant (Region 1); North Carolina, around the Shearon Harris plant (Region 2); Illinois, around the Clinton plant (Region 3); and San Luis Obispo, around the Diablo Canyon plant. (Region 4).

Two focus groups were conducted by teleconference: one with Americans at large, and one with individuals known to the NRC as activists. The purpose of the first group was to test for any distinct differences with those within the 10-mile EPZ. The value of the latter group was to learn the activists' perspective on the ability of the NRC to communicate with the public.

Professional recruiting firms in each region recruited respondents. A guide was provided to the recruiters to ensure that each focus group would be composed of eight participants with a mix of demographic characteristics that were reflective of the area. These include sex, age, education, race, home ownership versus rental, length of time resident in the area, household income, and education. For a full break down of each group see the table in Appendix A. To be qualified, focus group respondents were required to be "somewhat familiar" with the work of the NRC. Respondents who had to travel to meetings were compensated for their time. Activists were recruited from a list provided by the NRC. Every activist invited to participate in the teleconference focus group accepted.

**GAUGING PUBLIC
PERCEPTION**
cont'd

Respondents were asked about the perceptions of regulatory agencies in general and their perception of the NRC specifically. They were asked for input on the NRC mission statement, and on publications selected by the NRC. The four publications that respondents were asked to comment on are: The Information Digest, NRC Regulator of Nuclear Safety, Protecting Our Nation, and a Backgrounder on Nuclear Energy plant licensing. They were also shown a one-page printout of the revised Web site.

Each session concluded with a collage-making activity, in which respondents were asked to assemble images and words that reflect how they would like the NRC to communicate with them.

The teleconference sessions were one-hour in duration. For the Americans-at-large focus group respondents were from throughout the country. Nuclear energy activists were invited to the focus groups from a list provided by the NRC. All respondents were required to have broadband access. Due to the shorter session length and the inability to easily share printed documents, the discussions focused on perceptions of “regulatory agency” (Americans-at-large only) and the NRC. Respondents were asked to comment on the NRC mission statement and the revised Web site. In addition, they were asked to for their recommendations for future communications.

On-site focus groups were held in the period November 28th, 2006 and Dec 6th, 2007. The teleconference sessions were held the second week of January 2007. There were a total of 82 respondents.

FINDINGS

AWARENESS OF THE NRC AND ITS WORK

There was a high consistency of response across the groups and the locations. In every group there was a majority response with a few people expressing differing views. These differences are reported as “Majority” views or “Minority” views. In many cases, the activist group expressed strongly different views than either the majority or the minority.

Overall, the majority of respondents recognizes the NRC as a regulatory agency in the nuclear arena and, assuming that there are no local power plant issues, do not feel compelled to learn more. When asked to comment on communications materials produced by the NRC they generally found them more interesting than expected. A minority expressed doubts that the NRC discloses all pertinent information to the public.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE NRC



MINORITY: *“They’re supposed to work on behalf of the people, but whether they really do....”*

When asked what the phrase “regulatory agency” means, the majority stated that a regulatory agency is a government institution or agency that sets standards and rules and enforces them. In addition, the majority pointed out that regulatory agencies are established for fields and industries where public health and safety are at stake. A minority expressed skepticism that agencies follow the mandate of protecting people. They thought it possible that the agency is controlled by big money interests, politics, and self-interest.



MAJORITY: *“They keep us safe.”*

Role of the NRC

After participants commented on the phrase “regulatory agency” they were asked specifically about the role of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The majority understood that the NRC was responsible for regulating nuclear power plants, in building plants and in running them. They were aware that the NRC monitors compliance through regular inspection of the plants. Several participants cited examples of when plants were shut down or when problems were discovered.



MINORITY: *“The only time you hear about the NRC is when something bad happens.”*

There were a few minority views. One view expressed is that the actual role is not the same as the supposed role. As one participant stated, “They’re supposed to protect the public from harm, but whether or not they do is another story.” A few people were only aware of the NRC as being primarily concerned with nuclear waste.

The activist view is that the NRC is tightly allied with the nuclear energy industry and is pro-nuclear power. They believe that the NRC works on behalf of the industry.



MAJORITY: *“The NRC is always looking over their shoulders, making sure things are done right...”*
“has the authority to shut the plant down..”

On Whose Behalf Does the NRC Work?

Participants were asked on whose behalf the NRC works. The public is the majority answer. A minority said that the NRC is swayed from serving the public by money, power and politics. The activists expressed their view that at times the NRC overrules it’s own experts to keep plants running.

FINDINGS

cont'd



MAJORITY: *It's hard to have an opinion when you don't have information"*



MINORITY: *"They tell you what they want to tell you."*



MAJORITY on the Button for Report a Safety Concern: *"I like that it's right out there where you can see it."*

Relationship between NRC and Local Plants

A different question was asked about the relationship between the NRC and the local plants. The majority thought that the NRC is a separate body that exercises control over the local plants, and in fact governs what they do. A minority was unsure of the relationship.

Confidence in the NRC

When asked, "How confident are you in the NRC?" the majority expressed a guarded optimism. They point out that there haven't been any major accidents since Three-Mile Island, so the NRC is most likely doing a good job. They said that they had a difficult time judging because they felt unqualified to judge when they didn't have more information. The activists stated that because the NRC works on behalf of the nuclear energy industry, public health and safety are at risk.

Information from the NRC

Outside of the activist group, only two focus group participants had ever looked for information from the NRC. When asked how they would look for information if they wanted it, everyone said that they would use Google on the Internet. The activist group had extensive experience with the NRC Web site.

REACTIONS TO THE REVISED WEB SITE

Focus group participants were given a one-page print out of the planned revisions to the NRC Web site as scheduled for March 2007. The first reactions to the home page were largely positive. Focus groups stated that the Web site looks easy to navigate, current, and user-friendly. They felt that they could find things easily. They liked that the News section is front and center, that they had phone numbers to call and that there were resources for students and teachers. The majority of respondents thought that the Web site seemed to have everything.



In every groups respondents had strong reactions to the prominence of the "Now Hiring" button. They interpreted it to mean that the NRC has a difficult time attracting and keeping employees. This interpretation signals a deeper mistrust of the NRC than focus groups were stating, since in other settings a "now hiring" message would indicate a dynamic and growing organization.

They found the photograph uninteresting. They also thought that it indicated that the site is for insiders who would know who the people are and what the meeting was about.

FINDINGS

cont'd



MINORITY on the photographs: *“Is the Web site just for people who know who these guys are?”*

“I would like to find everything related to my location- news, reports, safety issues – all in one place.”

The majority of the focus groups respondents thought that the Web site probably has everything that they would need to know. A minority of the focus group attendees thought that the site architecture makes searching on a particular plant difficult. They expressed the desire to find all information related to their location all in one place, such as news and safety issues. The activists are not pleased with the Web site redesign. They are experienced users of the Web site and are frustrated by the site architecture. In their view, information that used to be easy to find is now buried, requiring multiple clicks and when found the information is incomplete. They stated that they should be able to access plant documents directly and not have to search by time frame or other criteria. Licensing documents should be together.

When asked, “Who is the audience for this Web site?” the majority said it was for the general public, for them. A minority reacted to the photograph, the “Now Hiring” button, and the line at the bottom that says “No fear EEO” and concluded from this evidence that the Web site is for industry insiders.

There was a high degree of consensus that focus group respondents would look for information from the NRC regarding their local plant to find up-to-date information on a plant safety issue, to report a safety issue, or if there were an accident.

EXAMINING THE MISSION STATEMENT



MAJORITY: *“The message that they are sending is that the general public is safe and secure regarding any nuclear facility.”*

Perceived Message

The NRC Mission statement was presented to focus group respondents to learn about their perceptions of the NRC. Focus group attendees were asked about the message, the clarity, and the intended audience. The majority stated that the message is that the NRC works to ensure the safety and welfare of the public. A minority added that the NRC has responsibility for the environment. A different minority was surprised by the range of nuclear materials uses and had thought that the NRC’s role was regulating the nuclear energy industry.



MINORITY on the word ‘adequate’: *“Sounds like they have leeway in protecting us” “Who gets to decide what is adequate?”*

Clarity

For the majority, the mission statement is clear, to-the-point and understandable. For a minority it was too technical. There are words in the mission statement that are thought to be confusing or unclear. The word “adequate” caused individuals to wonder how “adequate” is decided. Other words that were unfamiliar or technical include: “fuel cycle facilities,” “Byproducts and sources” and “common defense and security”. As with the Web site, a majority reported that the audience is the public, while a minority thought the technical language meant that it was for workers in the industry.

Intended Audience

The majority felt that the mission statement was intended for them. A minority stated that the technical terminology indicated that the mission statement is for an internal audience.

FINDINGS

cont'd



MAJORITY first reactions: *“The average American wouldn’t read 160 pages of governmental gobbledey-gook.”*

MAJORITY Closer Examination: *“A lot of my questions are answered here.”*



MINORITY: *“[Message is] don’t worry, we are doing our job”*



MAJORITY Closer Examination: *“A lot of this terminology is just over my head.”*



MINORITY: *“What were they doing before 9/11?”*

Effective language/terminology

Across all groups in all the locations there was a positive reaction to phrases such as “Protect the public,” “Protect the environment,” “Protection of public health and safety,” “The NRC’s regulations are designed to protect the public and occupational workers from radiation hazards in those industries using radioactive materials.”

INFORMATION DIGEST



First Reactions and Closer Examination

The first reactions to the *Information Digest* from the majority of the respondents was that it is too long, too comprehensive, too technical, and generally inaccessible. A small minority had an initial reaction that the *Information Digest* would be a good resource for doing research. When the respondents were given an opportunity to examine the publication, the majority stated that there was a font of interesting and unknown information that it is complete and comprehensive.

Perceived Message

For the majority, the message of the *Information Digest* is that it is a general reference about what the NRC does. To a minority, the publication is designed to make the public feel more secure.

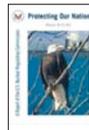
Clarity

The charts, graphs, and pictures were well received by the majority. They serve to make the information interesting and draw the reader in. However, the majority also stated that the terminology was very technical and not for the layperson. A minority commented on the inclusion of the budget. They wondered why it was included.

Intended Audience

When asked who the *Information Digest* is for, the majority thought it is for the general public. A minority thought it was for a nuclear power insider, who would understand the technical language, or for possible industry investors.

PROTECTING OUR NATION



Perceived Message

The majority of focus group respondents stated that the message of this publication is that the NRC has taken extra measures to increase nuclear safety since 9/11. It is a reassuring document relevant to current circumstances. There was a very vocal minority, especially at Diablo Canyon, who thought that 9/11 has been overused and therefore found the publication untimely, not reassuring, and in some cases distasteful. Some noted that 9/11 was over five years ago. Others stated that the use of 9/11 is a ploy for the NRC and that the publication is public relations for the NRC.

FINDINGS

cont'd



MAJORITY: *"It is meant straight for us."*

Clarity

The majority found the text easy to understand but were perplexed by the images. The pictures are not self-explanatory, so they need captions to explain their purpose. In all groups, respondents commented on the low quality of the pictures. A minority of respondents found the phrase "force-on-force exercise" confusing. They didn't understand the term, or the accompanying photograph.

Intended Audience

The majority of focus group attendees stated that this publication was for the general public. A minority thought the technical language requires the reader to be a member of the industry to understand it.

REGULATOR OF NUCLEAR SAFETY



Most frequent reactions

When shown the publication, NRC: Regulator of Nuclear Safety the strongest first reaction is that it looks outdated. When asked why, the majority of the respondents focused on the pictures. They stated that the pictures are low-quality, blurry and outdated. They found the text to be clear with a typeface that is easy to read. They were pleased that it wasn't technical. Respondents stated that the publication is a basic document summarizing why the industry is regulated with an educational bent. They thought it would be used for the general public, specifically for high schools students or plant visitors.



MINORITY: *"[The cover] looks like nuclear winter."*

Less frequent reactions

A minority expressed concerns about the missing table of contents, and the back cover. It was seen as dark and like a nuclear winter.

BACKGROUNDER: LICENSE RENEWAL



Most frequent reactions

The most frequent reactions to the Backgrounder on License Renewal was that it is unengaging, and not for the general public. Respondents offered that it offers deep detail on plant licensing that could be of value to the industry and to nuclear activists. The language is very technical and laden with acronyms.



MAJORITY: *"This is for industry or nuclear activists, not for me."*

Less frequent response

A small minority found the document interesting and informative. They stated that if someone wanted to know about licensing they could learn it here. Another minority wondered about the name "Backgrounder." It is an unfamiliar term and it didn't communicate to them what the document is about.



MAJORITY: *"The more you tell us, the less concerned we need to be."*

FINDINGS

cont'd

Ideal Communications

Focus group respondents are looking to the NRC to tell them about how the NRC provides for the safety and protection of the people. They stressed the importance of the protecting of the environment, keeping the food and water supply safe for human consumption and protecting future generations.

A different theme that emerged from the collage exercise is the focus group statement that information and communication eliminate stress and worry. Most respondents offered that the best way to communicate with them was through television and radio.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

NRC Focus Group Demographics¹

	Millstone	Shearon Harris	Clinton	Diablo Canyon	Teleconference at Large	TOTAL
TOTAL	18	16	15	16	8	73
Male/ female split	7 men/ 11 women	8 men/ 8 women	5 men/ 10 women	10 men/ 6 women	4 men 4 women	34 men/ 39 women
Race/ ethnicity	15 Caucasian 3 Hispanic	8 Caucasian 5 African Am. 1 Hispanic 2 Asian	15 Caucasian	15 Caucasian 1 Am. Indian	4 Caucasian 3 African Am. 1 Asian	57 Caucasian 8 African Am. 4 Hispanic 3 Asian 1 Am. Indian
Education	6 High school 7 Some college 2 College grad. 3 Post-grad.	1 High school 6 Some college 7 College grad. 2 Post-grad.	7 High school 2 Some college 4 College grad. 2 Post-grad.	1 High school 2 Some college 7 College grad. 6 Post-grad.	1 high school 6 College grad. 1 Post grad	16 High school 17 Some college 26 College grad. 14 Post-grad.
Professional status	5 Full-time 6 Part-time 5 Retired 2 Unemployed	12 Full-time 2 Part-time 2 Retired	6 Full-time 2 Part-time 5 Retired 2 Homemaker	5 Full-time 6 Part-time 3 Retired 2 Unemployed	7 Full-time 1 Retired	35 Full-time 16 Part-time 16 Retired 4 Unemployed 2 Homemaker

¹ Demographics were not collected for the nuclear energy activist group.

APPENDIX
cont'd

	Millstone	Shearon Harris	Clinton	Diablo Canyon	Teleconference at Large	TOTAL
Household income	2 >\$30K 2 \$30-\$40K 5 \$40-\$50K 8 \$50-\$75K 0 \$75-\$100K 1 \$100K+	1 >\$30K 1 \$30-\$40K 3 \$40-\$50K 5 \$50-\$75K 3 \$75-\$100K 3 \$100K+	2 >\$30K 3 \$30-\$40K 2 \$40-\$50K 3 \$50-\$75K 4 \$75-\$100K 1 \$100K+	3 >\$30K 3 \$30-\$40K 1 \$40-\$50K 7 \$50-\$75K 1 \$75-\$100K 1 \$100K+	1 \$30-\$40K 1 \$40-\$50K 2 \$50-\$75K 2 \$75-\$100K 2 \$100K+	8 >\$30K 10 \$30-\$40K 12 \$40-\$50K 25 \$50-\$75K 10 \$75-\$100K 8 \$100K+
Home ownership	13 own 5 rent	10 own 6 rent	15 own	9 own 7 rent	5 own 3 rent	52 own 21 rent
Length of time living in region	1 6 mo.-2 yrs. 6 2-10 yrs. 11 10 yrs.+	0 6 mo.-2 yrs. 5 2-10 yrs. 11 10 yrs.+	0 6 mo.-2 yrs. 3 2-10 yrs. 12 10 yrs.+	2 6 mo.-2 yrs. 6 2-10 yrs. 8 10 yrs.+	3 2-10 yrs. 5 10 yrs.+	3 6 mo.-2 yrs. 23 2-10 yrs. 47 10 yrs.+