

POLICY ISSUE INFORMATION

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FOR: The Commissioners

FROM: Eliot B. Brenner, Director
Office of Public Affairs

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON AGENCY COMMUNICATION INITIATIVES

PURPOSE:

This paper responds to the June 4, 2008, staff requirements memorandum (SRM) from SECY regarding COMSECY-08-0013—Action plans regarding Web redesign and publication improvements. In the SRM, the Commission tasked the NRC staff and OPA, among other things, to develop a plan for ensuring that additional recommendations for improvements by Information Experts in its 2007 report, *Gauging Public Perception: External Focus Group Findings, Analysis, and Communications Recommendations for the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, are incorporated in the agency's communications initiatives. Specifically, a plan should be developed to address how the agency would:

- 1) Adopt a proactive approach to communications to clarify the NRC's independent role, and showcase the safety and protection the agency provides citizens; and
- 2) Depict the breadth of responsibility of the agency [for instance, incorporating the NRC role within the regulation of healthcare/nuclear medicine].

This paper addresses these two recommendations within the context of existing and planned communication activities throughout the agency. It identifies enhancements of current activities for proactive communication and ideas for initiating new approaches.

DISCUSSION:

The two recommendations from the *Information Experts Report* are captured to a large extent in the Strategic Plan's Openness strategies to inform and involve stakeholders in the regulatory process. The strategies are to:

- Enhance awareness of the NRC's independent role in protecting public health and safety, the environment, and the common defense and security.
- Provide accurate and timely information to the public about the NRC's mission, regulatory activities, and performance and about the uses of, and risks associated with, radioactive materials.

CONTACT: Beth Hayden, OPA
415-8202

Because offices have taken the initiative and are already working to implement these strategies they have made some progress on the recommendations in the *Information Experts Report*. A number of activities and new approaches for proactive communication are just getting started, including those involving social media and the Open Government Initiative. Many offices have embarked on activities to improve communications with the public without a formal plan in place. The activities are developed as opportunities present themselves. Following are some of the key activities that contribute to achieving proactive communication with the public with regard to our independent role in protecting citizens and our regulatory responsibilities in the nuclear materials/medicine arena.

Web Redesign

The agency is redesigning its public Web site because it is the NRC's single most important communications tool, receiving approximately 2.2 million page requests per month. It can be a highly valuable means to both influence the public's perceptions about the agency and illustrate our commitment to a transparent government. One of the objectives of the agency's public Web redesign effort is to emphasize NRC's independent role and the breadth of its responsibilities. The latter will include more prominent information about the agency's involvement in nuclear medicine and other uses of nuclear materials to protect the public from unnecessary radiation exposures.

Information will be organized on the new Web site to better meet the needs of site visitors and improve the public's experience. The intention is to make it more citizen-centric and though the content will remain largely the same, the information will be reorganized and/or reformatted to enhance usability by the public and other stakeholders. To the extent possible, information will be expressed in non-technical jargon, employing plain English so the agency is seen as communicating candidly to the public and not speaking primarily to the nuclear industry. Contemporary-designed materials and images will show that the NRC takes pride in itself, its mission, and work, and will help convey the value that NRC provides to the public in its role as a nuclear industry watchdog. The Web will showcase inspectors out in the field learning, monitoring and protecting the public. Images on the homepage and elsewhere on the site will expand to cover more nuclear medicine and materials activities of the agency to let the public know that our work affects their lives daily. We are already employing this strategy with the addition of photos on the home page showing the NRC at work and putting a face on the agency.

Web content will be reviewed to help ensure we're conveying the agency's independence from licensees. This is in response to the Information Expert Report's recommendation to pay attention to the minority viewpoint of focus groups that, when surveyed, expressed doubts about the NRC's impartiality and openness. Information on the Web will be more understandable by the general public and not geared to licensees and the industry we regulate. The redesign will also reflect a more citizen-centric format with appealing graphics and visuals. Taken together, these measures to consistently target the general public as the Web's primary audience should help convey the NRC's independent role and mission to protect public health and safety.

Publications

There are numerous NRC publications for the general public where we get our "independent, safety" messages out, including the Information Digest, the Strategic Plan, NRC—Regulator of Nuclear Safety, The Performance and Accountability Report, and the Reactor Oversight Process. Frequently read publications have been and continue to be revised to more strongly

convey our messages. For example, the Information Digest starts out with a section title of “NRC: An **Independent** Regulatory Agency.” The first two sentences state: “The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is an **independent** agency created by Congress. The mission of the NRC is to license and regulate...nuclear materials in order to **protect public health and safety**....” Increased use of photos and images showing people and how we protect them further helps to visually convey how our mission is citizen-centric. Making these publications easily accessible on the public Web site also helps to give greater visibility to our messages. Similar messages are incorporated in posters at open houses and slide presentations for meetings held near regulated facilities and at the annual Regulatory Information Conference.

For all general audience publications, the Office of Administration helps to ensure publications adhere to recommendations provided by Information Experts including to:

- Ensure all materials are visually consistent
- Use and update photos, diagrams and other images to freshen the look, and follow new design conventions
- Keep images simple and understandable by the general public
- Look to make publications citizen-centric where possible.

It is evident that our publications increasingly promote the independent and safety aspects of the agency.

Press Releases and Fact Sheets

The Office of Public Affairs strives to strongly convey the safety mission of the agency and its independence from the industry in all of its press releases. We look for opportunities to issue press releases on non-reactor activities to showcase this area of oversight that may not get as much public attention as it needs to make the public aware that NRC is not synonymous with nuclear plants. We also look for positive stories we can tell the public about what it is we do and how we are recognized for that work. We incorporate message-driven quotes by NRC officials whenever appropriate that are picked up by the media verbatim and reported in papers across the country, thus helping us get our message out clearly to the public.

Key messages about the agency’s independence and safety mission are also reinforced in over 60 Fact Sheets that OPA updates and develops for contemporary issues important to the public such as the recent leaks in buried pipes at nuclear power plants leading to groundwater contamination. Through the use of clear writing and illustrative images, Fact Sheets help the public understand basic facts about the issue and how the NRC is working to protect people and the environment every day. Other examples of Fact Sheets include those on medical use of radioactive materials, radiation source security, fire protection, medical event risks, and cyber security. All the Fact Sheets are available on our Web site and in hard copy for use at meetings, conferences and open houses.

Outreach and Proactive Communication

The Offices of Congressional and Public Affairs initiated outreach to Congressional staff at district offices and local media near licensed facilities a couple of years ago and plan to continue this practice. It has been very beneficial to introduce ourselves as an independent agency, explain what the agency does and how we protect public health and safety through regulation

and oversight of those facilities that are in the officials' neighborhood. This has been particularly successful in advance of somewhat controversial meetings for those facilities that have a high profile in the media. The regions have supported this effort by meeting and talking to local officials as frequently as needed to help get our message out early and often.

A recent example was the extensive preparations and area meetings conducted in advance of the April 19 Vermont Yankee meeting that included key messages that everyone used with officials, reporters, the public and the licensee. We reached out to others by holding a groundwater contamination workshop the very next day at headquarters to gather ideas on whether the agency should take additional actions with regard to tritium issues at plants. Our messages were crafted to help instill public trust by emphasizing our independence from the licensee and our focus on looking out for the public's safety.

Whenever the Chairman visits a facility, OPA uses the opportunity for the Chairman to meet with the press to deliver key messages; OCA does the same with their local constituents as time permits. Messaging in Chairman's speeches and the selection of organizations at which he speaks are other effective means that help get information on our independent regulator role out to the public.

Public Meetings and Training

Meetings provide a tremendous opportunity to communicate to the public the agency's nonpartisan role and showcase the safety and protection the NRC provides to citizens. For license renewal and new reactor applications, regular public meetings are held near plant sites in advance of receiving applications to allow the staff to reach out to communities to explain who we are, what we do and how the public can participate in the regulatory process. These meetings are for the public's benefit and are generally held separately from public meetings with the licensee.

Both OPA and OCA have worked closely with staff to improve annual plant assessment meetings with the public. They have been instrumental in the development of more public-friendly, meaningful slides by putting our health and safety findings/messages up front, telling the public what we do without the use of technical jargon, and reducing the time the agency speaks before the public is allowed to speak. These changes have contributed to the success of meetings so that the public goes away with a more favorable impression of the agency and the importance we give to public input.

In OPA's recent review of instructional materials for a pilot class on conducting effective public meetings, we reiterated the need for meeting slides to be succinct, to convey our safety mission at the beginning and to use clear, non-technical language to explain key information. We said that use of updated material and images appropriate for the intended audiences can help garner public trust and confidence.

Guidance should be included in the training to address what behaviors transmit what messages to the public. For example, staff should be mindful that even simple things can help convey the agency's independence such as where agency staff sits at public meetings and who we mingle with. If we only talk to and sit next to industry officials, this can be misconstrued as NRC being "cozy with" the industry, rather than its watchdog. In developing a meeting agenda, the staff needs to allot adequate time for members of the public to ask questions at meetings to signal that we are listening and to avoid the perception that we do not value the public's contributions as much as industry's input.

Meetings should be held in a neutral location such as a high school or nearby hotel at a time when the working public can attend. The curriculum should be structured so that it helps staff become potential ambassadors of the agency to the public with the right messages. These may seem like trivial things but it can be very significant in forming public perceptions about the agency.

The recently launched NRC approach to Open Government is helping the agency reach out to the public and other stakeholders, too. This allows the NRC to take advantage of Web technology to solicit and evaluate ideas and best practices from diverse stakeholder groups to build stronger relationships and improve our processes. Ideas are submitted to NRC via the Web for improving outreach, openness and collaboration and, if approved, are posted to the Web for anyone to post their comments. Staff then evaluates these ideas to see if they have merit and whether they can be implemented within budgeted resources. OPA posts the decision or response on the Web as the moderator so that everyone can see the disposition of ideas.

We recently engaged the public by putting up the groundwater contamination issue on our Open Government Forum, inviting comments. The comments received via this portal provided the agency valuable public input into our regulatory framework review. In another instance, a member of the public submitted an idea for NRC to have an easily accessible link on the public Web site to comment on various issues of concern to the public. The staff is actively pursuing this idea. Maintaining an open NRC Web location for public ideas/comment is yet another way the agency can garner public trust and positive perceptions about us as an open agency. Although in its infancy, and depending on the outcome of the evaluation, it is likely that some form of this open communication will continue on the agency's Web site.

New Ideas

We are updating a slide presentation on who the NRC is and what it does to reflect explicitly the independence and broad role of the NRC. The presentation will be available on the Web and can be downloaded by anyone looking to understand the agency and its mission.

We should consider doing a new video about the agency to incorporate recommendations and illustrate our values and post it to the Web in segments--possibly to YouTube in the future. Copies of the DVD could be made available to schools and local cable stations as requested.

A new tri-fold brochure could be created to describe who we are and what we do, emphasizing our key messages. It could be handed out to Congressional staff, members of the public at meetings, to students and instructors at schools we visit, and posted to the Web.

We need to consider use of social media to improve the agency's outreach efforts, broaden our communications to new audiences and make it easier for existing audiences to hear from us. Social media could expand our communications both internally and externally to "push" news and information out to audiences. Our use of listserve has helped bring NRC information to interested individuals rather than them having to look for it on our Web site. Use of Twitter could augment the listserve to make more timely announcements of Web postings and major events especially to more digitally-focused members of the public and the media. Twitter could also be a new vehicle to communicate fast-breaking information to employees. The working group is looking at how the use of social media can be used to meet communication goals by plugging gaps and reaching out to new audiences.

An external Chairman's blog with moderated comments could be initiated and blog posts could go out via Twitter as well. Basically, Twitter could augment our listserve.

Audio files or podcasts could expand the NRC's ability to "tell its story" and could reach new interested audiences. Podcasts are pre-recorded audio programs that are posted to a Web site and made available for download so listeners can listen to them on their personal computer or mobile devices (e.g., iphone) if and when they want. Podcasts, starting with press releases, could be posted on the Web with RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds available for those interested.

Short, two-minute videos on various topics done by NRC experts in layman's language could be posted on the Web and possibly made available on YouTube sometime in the future. These could be picked up by TV stations and broadcast locally or nationally. The videos could address such questions as:

- What is radiation? How is it measured?
- What is NRC's role in nuclear medicine?
- What happened at TMI?
- How does NRC protect the public?
- What is KI and how is it useful in radiation protection?
- What is tritium and is it harmful?
- How is NRC independent from licensees?
- Can a nuclear power plant withstand a large aircraft impact?
- What does our various staff do on any given day?

The videos would be announced by a press release initially with follow-up notifications via Twitter.

In addition, the NRC's link on "Ask an Expert" could be expanded to address these and other kinds of questions submitted by the public through a video or audio link or textual response.

The use of social media at NRC is currently being addressed by a newly formed working group. It is important for the group to be mindful of the *Information Experts Report* recommendations where appropriate as it goes forward in its discussions of agency communications through social media. Our policies for using social media should mesh with our other communication policies so that the agency has consistent, effective communications with the public and its stakeholders.

SUMMARY:

Numerous activities are underway by many offices that support the recommendations in the *Information Experts Report*; others are still in the planning stage. We believe the agency should keep pushing forward on these initiatives – strengthening coordination – rather than consolidating all the offices' communication activities under a single plan. The Web redesign will be completed in March 2011. Social media ideas will be handled by the newly-formed working group under the Deputy Executive Director for Corporate Management in coordination with OPA over the remainder of the year. Other initiatives will be implemented by OPA, OIS, ADM and other offices as resources allow. We will work with other offices to provide periodic status reports on office activities on the Intranet or SharePoint sites. The Communications Council is also a good resource to keep pace with new communication activities in the various offices through its monthly meetings and existing SharePoint site where offices could post status reports on proactive communication activities, further strengthening efforts to coordinate agency messaging.

COORDINATION:

The Office of the General Counsel has reviewed this paper and has no legal objections.

/RA/
Eliot Brenner
Office of Public Affairs