

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: RESOLVING PUBLIC AFFAIRS ISSUES FOR TRU WASTES

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ABSTRACT

At the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) the responsibilities assigned to Public Affairs (PA) include communications to two main groups: institutional representatives and the general public. Research data indicates that these two populations perceive risk in different fashions. This paper discusses these distinct perceptions and how the communication programs at WIPP have been designed to accommodate these two differences.

The growing widespread concerns of the general public, as expressed in environmental movements and through media attention and political activists, have spawned a corresponding interest in the subject of risk--measuring risks, relative risks, and the acceptance of risks. These studies have revealed that among the general population, any risk that lies outside an individual's expertise has an emotional element. One investigator has designated this element as the "outrage factor" and has provided suggestions on how to minimize the "outrage."

On the other hand, the technical community is much more receptive to risks that have been analyzed and quantified. WIPP PA has learned that many institutional representatives fall into this category.

To be successful, the WIPP PA Program must address both the information needs of these groups as well as their perceptions of risk. To do this, the WIPP Program has been designed with two separate but interacting segments. The Public Information group principally deals with the general public. The Institutional group works primarily with representatives of state and local governments and Indian tribes.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) communications program is to promote a full understanding of the WIPP Project emphasizing public health and safety. Areas of focus are primarily the public sectors of New Mexico, but include interaction throughout the continental United States as the opportunity avails. In carrying out this mission, effective communication involves defining audiences and their information needs and providing this information in an understandable form. This obvious principle applies universally, but its application to the WIPP Project program can be described with particular clarity.

Public Affairs Programs

The Westinghouse Public Affairs Department, which support the WIPP Project Office of the Department of Energy (DOE), operates two distinct (although mutually supportive) programs. One is the Public Information Program, the other is the Institutional Program.

The growing trend at all levels of government to consider environmental and socioeconomic effects when making operational decisions has resulted in active public participation in the decision-making process, particularly in evaluating risk. The increasing significance of the public's attitudes has led to recent studies regarding how the general public perceives and reacts to risks. The results of these studies have influenced how the WIPP communications program has been developed and implemented.

One study recently released by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) is entitled, "Improving Dialog With Communities: A Risk Communication Manual for Government" (1). This study designates the root of community opposition as an "outrage" factor, and

identifies eleven characteristics associated with the perceived risk that contribute to community outrage. It then recommends actions to address the outrage factor. The study makes the point that "activist" groups rarely can generate outrage; the most such a group can do is focus or direct any pre-existing outrage present in the community. It also develops the position that attempts to reduce outrage by the simple application of cold logic and statistics may well be counterproductive. Thirdly, much of the manual is dedicated to preaching the "ounce of protection" approach, i.e., how to head off the outrage emotion from the beginning.

At last year's Waste Management '88, R. C. Mitchell, et. al (2), identified and discussed the concepts and effects of what he called "stigma" associated with radioactive waste facilities. He defined stigma as the "discrediting or devaluing of a person (or group) when that person is deemed 'different' from normal individuals in some fundamental and important way that sets him or her off as deviant, flawed, limited, spoiled, or generally undesirable." Certainly, the awareness of a degree of stigma contributes to the outrage felt by a community.

Both of the studies cited underline the major role played by emotions in influencing the general public risk perceptions. On the other hand, experience has shown that (in general), the public officials who are the principal contacts of the WIPP Institutional Program staff look on their responsibilities as professional. The actions required of them to issue permits, determine routes, provide emergency response capabilities and perform similar interfaces with the WIPP Project fall into an occupational category that is largely controlled by law, rule and regulation. Judgmental and emotional aspects are relatively minor. As a result, governmental representatives are more receptive to factual and logical analyses. Nevertheless, since U.S. governments

derive their authority from the consent of the governed, the stigma and outrage of the electorate are factors that must and do influence the actions of governmental agency staff. In recognition of the pressure of public opinion, WIPP relations with institutional representatives may require not only factual analyses, but assistance in addressing community outrage.

It is the real necessity to operate at two levels that has dictated the organization of the WIPP Public Affairs Department into two separate programs. The Public Information Program (PIP) is assigned to deal with and respond to the needs of the general public and media. The PIP role is to engender trust and respect for the Project based on the public's understanding of the mission and plant operations. The PIP material is factual, and is explained using ordinary terms and descriptions in an effort to increase understanding. The PIP group is "hands-on oriented" and provides media contact, exhibits and displays, brochures and fact sheets, a Speakers Bureau, and a site visitation program. PIP also handles special events such as ground-breakings, dedications, and Family Days.

The work of the Institutional Program (IP) group differs slightly in that its personnel work with persons whose involvement with the Project is most often in an "official" capacity. This usually requires working with technical information with individuals who have pressures or expectations placed on them by their organizations. For the WIPP startup period, IP is primarily concerned with the transport of transuranic (TRU) wastes to the facility near Carlsbad, New Mexico. The transportation corridors pass through 23 states, and the responsibility for overseeing the safe transport rests with state highway transportation and safety agencies. Ensuring understanding of the Project, and resolving issues with these groups, is the focus of IP.

While two separate groups are identified within Public Affairs, it must be recognized that these groups overlap and interact closely. For example, the IP staff reviews public information materials for accuracy and currency, while the PIP staff contributes heavily to the design of IP public awareness programs, and handles media contacts and publicity arrangements during these tours.

It is a given that public affairs activity never ends. Even those matters satisfactorily resolved today may be resurrected tomorrow in the same or somewhat different form by different or possibly the same sources. Nevertheless, the WIPP Public Affairs Department has achieved a number of successes that demonstrate the validity of its programs.

Two information displays, one at the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque and another in the lobby of the WIPP Office and Information Center in downtown Carlsbad were installed. These displays will generate a walk-through traffic of more than 200,000 visitors annually.

A series of three Open Houses were held at the WIPP site for residents of Carlsbad and surrounding communities, including some as far away as Santa Fe, New Mexico. More than 2000 visitors toured the WIPP facility, the Waste Handling Building and the underground areas, and viewed various briefings. Their reactions were almost universally

favorable, with the visitors expressing reassurance that WIPP would operate safely.

A similar but more ongoing program is arranging and escorting visitor tours through the WIPP facility. As a first-of-a-kind, deep, geologic repository, the Project has hosted a steady stream of foreign dignitaries, government figures, legislators, and other interested parties. In fiscal year 1988, more than 4500 individuals toured the site.

A fourth program of note is the WIPP Speakers Bureau. The Speakers Bureau is a cadre of volunteers who have been trained in public speaking and have been briefed in areas of WIPP operations of interest to the general public. These individuals are available on request to speak to school classes, civic groups, clubs, and other organizations. The Bureau has received an increasing number of inquiries and opportunities to describe WIPP activities. In fiscal year 1988, over 100 presentations were made to more than 4500 citizens.

A unique communications project was the conduct of the Public Awareness Program presentations in the five states through which initial waste shipments are scheduled. The Public Awareness Program featured a full-scale, eighteen-wheeler model of the WIPP TRU transport vehicle, accompanied by an exhibit of displays designed for an open house type of presentation. Individual display panels described separate subjects, such as basic radiation facts, WIPP operations, transportation routes, the construction of the specially designed transport container and the emergency response training program provided by the Project. The exhibit was supported by a WIPP team to answer inquiries. Each state in which the presentations appeared was urged to provide a display and the staffing to describe that state's role in coordinating transuranic waste transportation within its borders. This contributed to the credibility of the presentations in the general public's perceptions. Each presentation received advance publicity via media releases. The Open House format allowed the visitors to choose their own time and pace for reviewing the exhibits.

The public is a long way from universal acceptance of the perceived nuclear industry risks, and opposition is even more common among the population in the immediate vicinity of a proposed facility. One hundred percent approval of the WIPP facility is an unrealistic goal. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the program can best be measured by the degree of acceptance of the Project. Using this cardinal criterion, the WIPP Public Affairs Program can be judged to be a success. Locally (within Carlsbad) the Project has consistent support. Following various exhibits and the Open Houses at the site, New Mexico residents along the transportation corridors (except for a dedicated and vocal opposition group in the state capitol) generally recognize the importance of the Project and accept waste transportation provisions. Similarly, following institutional discussions and the Public Awareness Program presentations, the transportation program has been negotiated with state agencies and achieved acceptance from the populace residing along the projected initial transportation routes. The Project has the support of both U.S. Senators and two of

New Mexico's three Congressmen. It also has the general support of the State legislature.

CONCLUSION

The profession of public affairs is continually growing and developing, acquiring approaches to address public information needs and the perception of risk.

For the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Project, the unique nature of its mission may have resulted in enhanced visibility compared to some other endeavors. This in turn has produced increased pressures and demands on the Public Affairs Department.

In a controlled response to those pressures, the WIPP Project has developed an effective communications

program. This program recognizes and is organized to deal with two distinct audiences; it has developed a program to reach out to interested audiences in other states; it has patiently and forthrightly dealt with matters of interest to the public, including risk; and it stands ready to learn and to improve as the state of the art advances.