




Talking with the media about biosolids

Association of Clean Water Agencies
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Has your organization been contacted
by the media with questions about
your biosolids program?

(Or have you contacted them?)

How did it turn out?

- Great!
- Okay
- Not so good
- Worst experience ever

Principles of media relations

- Media is link to the public we serve
- Honesty is the only policy
- Good service
- Accuracy



Our ability to communicate with the media will shape our organization's credibility—our inability will limit it

Be prepared: know your key messages

Agency messages

- Mission: protect the environment and public health
- Involve citizens in decisions
- Provide cost-effective services



Biosolids messages

- ✓ Every person contributes to the production of biosolids.
- ✓ Biosolids are the organic by-product of municipal wastewater treatment.
- ✓ Biosolids contain valuable nutrients and organic matter.



Biosolids messages

- ✓ Biosolids are highly treated to remove pollutants and disease-causing organisms.
- ✓ Biosolids production and its application to the land are highly regulated.
- ✓ Improvements are constantly being researched by our universities and colleges.



Messages during a controversy

- Go for the middle ground
- Admit problems / discuss improvements
- Highlight community input and regulatory requirements
- Look for ways to talking about shared control / accountability

A few techniques:

- ❑ Be responsive to all requests
- ❑ Conduct one-on-one conversations / tours
- ❑ Be open to an updated monitoring program
- ❑ First DO good things, then talk about them
- ❑ Be willing to discuss all aspects of your operation
- ❑ Keep communicating / informing

Truth
+
Time
=
Trust

When the media calls

- **Remember your messaging! (Be ready.)**
- Be helpful: provide other sources of information
- Immediately contact the third-party sources, alert them of story / provide update on your program
- After the story has run: assess the story with third-party sources / answer their questions
- Next time: Why not call them first?

Successful Interview Checklist

There are three possible answers to every question.

- I know the answer and it is...
- I don't know the answer, but I will try to get it for you.
- I know the answer, but I cannot tell you. (The reason why you can't tell better be really good - union negotiations, personnel issue, etc. - something that you have legal backing for.)
- State the important facts first.
- Make your key points first, then elaborate. Repeat key points often.
- Under tight time deadlines, reporters will often go with the quote they want, missing your real point. If your key points are first and repeated often they will be the quickest ones for the reporter to find in notes or on tape.
- Be concise. Short answers lasting 20 or 30 seconds are best.

Questions to avoid.

- Avoid 'either/or' questions. (Is it a problem for groundwater or is it a problem to have dairy cows eat the grass that grows here?)
- Avoid hypothetical ('what if...') questions. (What if this is a future health hazard.)
- Avoid third party questions. (Joe told me this material was bad. Is it?)
- Avoid 'yes' or 'no' answers. Provide your key message that is most closely related to the questions. Remember, a tape or notes can be edited to the 'Yes' or 'No' portion of the answer only. They don't have to use any amplification you may have provided.
- Don't give credence to a statement by remaining silent.

Tell the truth, even if it hurts.

- Never reply with "NO COMMENT." If you'd rather not answer, say so and explain why.
- Don't hide bad news. To do that is often worse than the story itself.
- If you don't know, don't bluff or make up an answer. Say you don't know.

Simplify if complicated.

- Speak from the reader/viewer/listener's point of view.
- Editors tend to choose what can be explained simply.
- Remember, the reporter's words usually will not show up in the interview. Yours will.
- Speak in a conversational tone.

Do not go off the record.

- Reporters want things they can quote - on the record.
- Rule: If you don't want a statement quoted, don't make it.
- Stick to your points. Don't raise "red herrings."

Keep your cool.

- Get comfortable and remain composed. Remember, the reporter always gets the last word.
- Answer at your own pace, but be concise.
- If the reporter asks rapid fire (multiple questions), choose the easiest.
- You have information the reporter wants.
- Relax, be yourself.
- Assume no one knows your business - no acronyms or jargon.

Know your audience.

- You are talking to the public - not the reporter.
- Apply the "SO WHAT?" test.
 - What does it mean for the public?
 - What difference does it make?
- Before you speak, make sure your interest is the public interest.
- Put yourself in the reporter's shoes. If there is a difference of opinion, that is news.

The successful interview checklist!

You are not alone—other resources

- Journalists want to tell both sides of the story.
- They know your opponents.
- Do they know where to get other sources of information?

Valuable sources:

- ★ DEQ
- ★ EPA
- ★ Universities
- ★ Biosolids organizations
- ★ ACWA



Thank you!

