

RISK COMMUNICATIONS

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

John Hornback
Executive Director, Metro 4/SESARM
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DEFINITIONS OF RISK

- Anything suggesting a possibility of loss or injury.
- Something that creates or suggests a hazard.
- A cause agent for an unwanted or unpleasant experience.
- For we geeks and nerds: A combination of the probability or frequency of occurrence of a defined threat and the magnitude of the consequences of the occurrence.

ANOTHER RISK DEFINITION

Poor risk communication ...

- inadequate, uncertain, or unclear information
- withholding of information
- delayed information

Leading to ...

- increased anxiety and related psychological impacts
- less informed decision-making
- unhappy citizenry

EXAMPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS

1. Persistent pollutants
2. Infectious diseases
3. Radiological contaminants
4. Chemical agents
5. Conventional pollutants

ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS

- Reality?
- Perception?
- Does it matter?
- Is perception, in fact, reality?

ENVIRONMENTAL RISK CHARACTERISTICS

- Discrete incidents or longer-term trends
- Human or natural origin
- Potential to inflict harm to human health and/or ecosystems

- Past occurrences
- Ongoing situations
- Possible future scenarios

RISK COMMUNICATIONS

- The exchange of information, advice, and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health and/or economic or social well-being.

WHY IS RISK COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT?

- Legal requirement pursuant to legislative mandate to agency.
- Moral obligation to constituents and those without a voice.
- We are judged.
 - Monday morning quarterbacks are very accurate.
 - Agency management “where the buck stops.”
 - Elected officials – must answer to their electorate.
 - Media – right, left, middle, fringes – all have an agenda.
- Agency credibility – easy to lose, hard to rebuild.

WHAT INHIBITS GOOD RISK COMMUNICATIONS?

- Inability to reach all affected in a timely manner.
- Uncertainty that we have the facts.
- Lack of a clear solution to the underlying problem.
- Belief that impacts from a release will be inconsequential.
- Presumption that a hazard may be temporary.
- Lack of recognition of a sensitized populace.
- Tangled up in bureaucracy.

WHAT SENSITIZES THE PUBLIC?

- Coerced risks vs voluntary
- Industrial risks vs natural
- Exotic risks vs familiar
- Feared risks vs accepted
- Acute/catastrophic vs chronic
- Unknown risks vs known
- Immoral risks vs moral
- Controlled by others vs me
- Perceived to be unfair vs fair
- Hazard + Outrage

Adapted from: ***Responding to Community Outrage: Strategies for Effective Risk Communication***
Dr. Peter Sandman. June 1993. <http://www.psandman.com/book.htm>.

QUICK CASE STUDIES

- “It’s like a teaspoon in a rail car.”
- “There are more bad chemicals in what you are smoking!”
- “You just don’t get it!”
- “We are following the regulations. We can’t do more.”