



Society of Environmental Journalists

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Dear Nancy and Mary:

On behalf of the Society of Environmental Journalists we want to thank you for including our members and other working journalists in the recent panel discussion on “Facilitating Communication and Journalism during Environmental Disasters,” and for seeking our input on the draft communication strategy for Spills of National Significance.

As you heard during the panel discussion, we have great concern that the draft communication strategy puts too much emphasis on bureaucratic organization and glosses over the importance of transparency during disasters. Phrases like “speaking with one voice” and “unify Federal agency messaging” only reinforce the impression that this document is about spin, not open and honest communication.

Mary, you said that was not the intended thrust of the strategy. You stressed that it was just a draft, and that you would take our feedback and suggestions into account in finalizing it. And Nancy, you said you planned to follow up on the issues raised during the June 8 forum. We hope so. SEJ would like to continue the discussion about how to get away from such message-control language, which if left uncorrected or clarified would be a communications disaster in itself.

As we said at the June 8 event, too often we journalists have found that government agencies are afraid of providing conflicting information after a disaster, especially if it’s coming from their own scientific experts. We believe the public would be better served – and would rather know, in any case – when there are uncertainties or incomplete information, rather than being denied answers. As we said, being honest about what you know and don’t know enhances the government’s credibility more than trying to hide uncertainties or conflicting information.

*Strengthening the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media
to advance public understanding of environmental issues*

You received lots of comments and suggestions, but here are a few key ones: Show us the data, don't just assure us that "there is no threat to the public." Give regular updates, and provide access both to your experts and to the disaster scene, whenever and however safely possible.

It may sound counterintuitive, but such openness can actually reassure the public – that nothing is being withheld.

We hope you'll take our comments in the constructive vein we intended and seek to incorporate them into the final document. SEJ stands ready to work with you in crafting that language, either in future meetings, conference calls or email exchanges. We see this as an opportunity to develop a communications strategy that can serve as a model for all levels of government.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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