

RISK COMMUNICATION PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Teresa: Hi, my name is Teresa Francom and I work at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Inspector General. Today I am joined by Bo Park to discuss the EPA Office of Land and Emergency Management's, or OLEM's, lack of a nationally consistent strategy for communicating to the public known information about human health risks at and near contaminated sites. Thanks for speaking with me today, Bo.

Bo: Thanks, Teresa. Happy to be here – though our topic is a serious one.

Teresa: Before we jump into the findings of your report, would you mind explaining what is meant by the term “risk communication” and why it is important?

Bo: Of course! The EPA defines risk communication as communication intended to supply audience members with the information they need to make informed, independent judgments about risks to health, safety, and the environment. In other words, if people are told that they are living on or near land that contains contaminants or substances that could hurt them, they can make educated decisions about managing their exposure. Without that information, they can't take precautions to protect their health and safety.

Teresa: So this is very important. What is the EPA's stance on risk communication?

Bo: To the Agency's credit, in June 2018, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler made risk communication a priority for the Agency. The EPA also established a cross-agency Risk Communications Workgroup, which is charged with creating a cohesive approach to how the Agency handles risk communications.

Teresa: Well, that's good to know. But your team found that OLEM did not consistently adhere to the EPA's guidance on risk communication. Is that right?

Bo: Yes, that's correct, Teresa. OLEM manages more than 30 programs and projects that cover different types of contaminated sites, and we reviewed eight of those sites. We found that OLEM did not consistently adhere to the Agency guidance on risk communication.

Teresa: Okay, let's back up and unpack a couple of things you just mentioned. First, where are the eight contaminated sites the evaluation team examined and how were they chosen?

Bo: The sites we examined for this evaluation are:

- Amphenol/Franklin Power Products in Franklin, Indiana.
- The Bristol-Myers facility in Humacao, Puerto Rico.
- The USS Lead facility in East Chicago, Indiana.
- The Coakley Landfill in North Hampton, New Hampshire.
- The Anaconda Company Smelter in Anaconda, Montana.
- Two tribal sites – Davis Chevrolet in Tuba City, Arizona, and Timber Lake in South Dakota.
- And the CSX Train Derailment in Mount Carbon, West Virginia.

We picked those eight sites after receiving input from EPA senior leaders and staff, as well as researching media coverage and available literature, and analyzing complaints made to the OIG Hotline. We also considered location, types of contaminants, length of contamination, and demographics in surrounding areas. At half of the sites selected, we also wanted to determine how communities living in or near the contaminated areas viewed EPA's response to the contamination risks.

Teresa: Sounds like a lot of thorough research. What were the evaluation team's findings?

Bo: We found that OLEM's risk communication efforts did not consistently provide community members with an understanding of their risk levels, or what steps might be necessary to take in order to protect themselves from exposure to contamination. We also found that OLEM doesn't have a national strategy for risk communication. This means that its many programs and 10 regions use their own discretion on how to implement risk communication, but there are no policies in place to establish measurable standards on when to communicate risks and who should receive the communications. To be effective, OLEM should implement a strategy that follows the Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication.

Teresa: Bo, can you talk a bit about the Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication?

Bo: Sure. The EPA established the Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication back in 1988 to guide all of the Agency's risk communication, recognizing that application would vary from case to case. However, OLEM was not routinely adhering to these rules, which are:

- Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner.
- Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.
- Listen to the public's specific concerns.
- Be honest, frank, and open.
- Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.
- Meet the needs of the media. And
- Speak clearly and with compassion.

Teresa: Thank you. Going back to general findings regarding OLEM, would you mind sharing some examples?

Bo: Of course! At the USS Lead site, prior to EPA's 2017 Enhanced Communications Plan, it took months, and in some cases, years for the EPA to communicate to the community information regarding sampling results or other human health indicators. Also regarding the USS Lead site, a community member's child had blood lead test results exceeding the Centers for Disease Control's blood lead reference value, but the community member was not informed on what to do to address the real health impacts experienced. In addition, community members were concerned that prospective buyers and renters of properties did not receive notice that those areas were on or near contaminated sites.

Teresa: Were findings at other sites similar?

Bo: At the Amphenol site, EPA's risk communication did not reach the local medical and health community. A local physician stated a lack of awareness about the need to address potential health impacts on patients who lived near the contaminated site.

Teresa: So, clearly there are a lot of concerns from community members near these contaminated sites. What can OLEM do to create a better standard for communication across its programs?

Bo: Good question. The Office of Inspector General recommended that OLEM create a strategy that defines relevant timelines for communications and determines who needs to be notified about the results of samples taken from contaminated sites. The use and promotion of existing risk communication tools, such as community advisory groups, customer satisfaction surveys, and site-specific websites, would allow for interactive communication with the communities. And, finally, OLEM should determine how to properly communicate the risks of emerging contaminants.

Teresa: Is the idea that having a standard for communication across the regions would not only benefit those programs but also the communities that are potentially at risk of harmful exposure?

Bo: Yes, that's right! Each site and community may be unique, but the guidance on how to reach out to all of the communities should be the same, even if the guidance may vary by program.

Teresa: What other recommendations do you have for how OLEM can improve risk communication?

Bo: Along with implementing consistent internal controls, OLEM should establish controls for conducting periodic evaluations of risk communication efforts for the sites. These evaluations can be used to ensure that standards are being met and can be modified where needed. Finally, OLEM should establish controls to provide community members with information that allows them to manage their risks when exposed to environmental health hazards.

Teresa: Thank you, Bo, for speaking with me today about the importance of risk communication by the EPA. For more information about this and other OIG work, you can find all of our public reports on our website at www.epa.gov/oig.