

Exceptional Events Workshop
Best Practices for Communications
Breakout group session ideas
2/29/2024

The Exceptional Events Workshop in St. Louis, MO was held February 27-29, 2024. Breakout groups were formed to discuss best practices for communications during exceptional events. The following questions were posed to initiate discussions:

- What tools do you use in your agency to communicate with the public during an exceptional event? How could these tools be used to inform them when you prepare a demonstration?
- How do you make sure that different audiences (media, EJ communities, local elected officials, etc.) are informed during an event and when you prepare a demonstration?
- How do you determine whether a communication tool is effective?
- What tools or concepts should be developed to improve communications with other agencies and the public?
- What are the priority practices during exceptional events?

The following summarizes ideas from the small group discussions.

Communications Tools

Media platforms used by air agencies include the National Weather Service, email distribution, mobile apps, radio stations, including non-English speaking radio stations, X, Instagram, Facebook, smoke blogs toll-free phone numbers, website banners, road signs, press releases, text messaging, county public health departments, and agricultural extension/state universities. Enviroflash could be a good way to communicate air quality if more people signed up for it. Air agencies note that there is more frequent outreach to Environmental Justice (EJ) communities. A measure of whether communications are effective might be to see if Emergency Room visits increased or declined during an event; a decline could indicate that the public received the message to limit exposure to unhealthy air. Another measure of success is the number of webpage visits. One agency conducts a survey every 5 years to determine how residents are accessing and using their materials and outreach platforms. The survey collects suggestions for improvement as well. It is expensive to conduct; they send hard copies as well as push electronic surveys to their email and app subscribers. They also pay contracts to conduct random sampling via phone calls.

It was noted that public engagement after the events could be improved, but also noted that the public is not very interested in the exceptional event demonstrations. It is helpful to have an internal communications team within the agency that interfaces with the media. It was suggested that air agencies "go all out" on messaging during exceptional events. There is an important role in communicating what the AQI means, and the communications team must know their audience. The communications team should build trust with the local news media.

Smoke-Ready Communities

Air agencies should seek to partner with other agencies, as well as city and emergency managers, before and after events to move towards Smoke-Ready Communities. It was suggested that curriculum in schools for air quality and purple air sensors at schools is a good way to get students/families thinking about air quality. The idea of using colored flags to relate air quality, especially at schools, is a good one. YouTube videos could be helpful for education.

The Fire and Smoke map is useful and a good source of information for the public, agencies need to get in the practice of screenshotting the map periodically during the event. Because smoke impacts can be localized, having more sensors in more locations will help us to gather data and more accurately inform the public of impacts.

Standardizing air quality forecasting around metro areas on state borders, where the air quality agencies' forecasts and alerts don't necessarily match each other is important so that the public doesn't receive conflicting messages. A successful example of this was Kansas City with a metro planning organization across several state and county lines, which enabled consistency between states and counties.

Agencies may consider messaging the public about ways to reduce smoke exposure, including clean-air shelters that may be locally available for people without a method of cleaning the air inside their residence during a smoke event. Air agencies do not typically set these shelters up but might coordinate with other agencies that do.

Agency Coordination

There is a need for state/local/tribal air agency coordination with the USFS and state/local health departments during events. Sensors provide new and more data; agency coordination is important for sensor and temporary monitor placement. It was noted that it is important to understand the timing of severe smoke impacts and follow up with the public daily. Daily 1300 (1:00 pm) calls have been successful in coordinating on smoke events. For prescribed fire, it was mentioned that there needs to be better communications between the burners and the air agencies. Where a different state agency oversees prescribed fire, there is a need for interagency communications. Air Resource Advisors (ARAs), if assigned to a wildfire by the USFS, are good points of contact for collaboration. Agencies should ensure that monitors continue to run during exceptional events. There should be a post-event discussion among collaborating agencies (state/local/tribe, USFS, NWS) to debrief and document what could be improved. The state DOTs can be asked to add road sign messaging during events.

What EPA can do

There could be some benefit to having EPA coordinate the following:

1. Language translations for advisories

2. Press release or template for press release for smoke events
3. Develop a protocol/training for agencies to gather data like pictures and the Fire and Smoke map, satellite imagery, fire detection maps, HRR smoke so that agencies can use these tools to "build the story" they relay to the public.
4. EPA can create infographic templates and evaluate the success of various communications strategies
5. EPA could suggest a protocol or template to standardize issuance of health advisories and air quality alerts, including a threshold for issuance, what the advisory is called and the area of coverage. A national public health message about wildfire smoke should be developed.
6. Outdoor worker standards are an emerging issue; EPA should work with OSHA to address.
7. EPA should create templates for agencies to develop press releases on wildfire smoke for cities and schools.
8. EPA should fund an academic study to determine the best ways to present and communicate air quality information during wildfire smoke events to different groups.