

Region 4 Media Relations Guidance

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Media Relations Staff

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RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROCEDURES

The Media Relations staff in the Office of External Affairs (OEA) is responsible for coordinating and executing official communications such as news conferences, news releases, print and broadcast interviews, opinion-editorials, guest opinions and responding to reporter inquiries. The Media Relations staff is the primary focal point for all Regional communications, conveying agency messages, and all other activities relating to the news media. OEA makes decisions concerning the appropriateness and content of media events, interviews, and press releases for the Region in partnership with the Regional programs.

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA

1. OEA is responsible for coordinating and overseeing all contacts with the media. The following steps will be followed for all media inquiries.

- All reporter calls received by staff will be transferred immediately to OEA. OEA will coordinate responses to media inquiries, including interviews, with program staff. OEA will accompany staff during interviews, as deemed appropriate by OEA.
- Senior managers will respond to media inquiries, as appropriate, and will inform OEA regarding the reporters name, news organization represented, and subject discussed.
- OEA will inform the Division Directors and the Deputy Division Directors, through e-mail or phone, of media inquiries pertinent to their Division.
- All national media responses must be coordinated with OEA and headquarters as appropriate.
(National media includes: CNN, NY Times, Associated Press, Washington Post, etc.)

2. If staff is outside of the office and **completely** unable to route media inquiries to OEA, i.e., staff working in a field location, then the direct media inquiry may be addressed. The employee will notify their managers and OEA as soon as possible of the reporter's name, news organization represented, and subject discussed. The following guidelines should be followed when speaking to the press.

- Speak only about your area of responsibility. Don't speak for another EPA program, another agency, or anyone else.
- If you are unsure of EPA's position, politely respond that you will work to obtain a response in a timely manner.
- Be respectful of reporter deadlines.
- Assume that nothing is "off-the-record." Assume that anything you say will appear in print or on a broadcast.
- Use plain English. Avoid or explain acronyms and technical terms, and try to be patient if you have to explain an issue more than once.
- Do not answer inquiries about criminal investigations. These inquiries should be referred to OEA who will follow the appropriate procedures for informing the Criminal Investigations Division (CID).
- Pending decisions and enforcement actions are not public information. Don't speculate about possible EPA actions.
- Remember that when you are talking with reporters, you are speaking for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. **The opinions offered must represent those of the agency, not your own.**

NEWS RELEASE PROCESS AND TIME LINE

The Media Relations staff will prepare news releases and other such products using information supplied by program personnel. The process includes evaluating whether a news release should be issued (see *Criteria For When To Issue A News Release*).

1. Program Provides Information to OEA.

Program offices will provide background materials and other pertinent information, ten (10) days prior to scheduled news release (attached forms for program and enforcement related news releases may be used). There may be occasions when it may be impossible to provide this advance notice and OEA will work with the program offices to expedite a release so that it can be issued in a timely manner.

2. OEA Drafts and Distributes News Release for Internal Review.

The Media Relations staff will use the information provided by the program office to draft a release. This process will be completed within four (4) days under normal conditions. Draft news releases will be sent electronically and/or in hard copy to the program office contact, the legal contact (for any matter that is in litigation or where significant legal counseling issues have been identified) and the person quoted (if applicable).

Draft news releases will be routed to the appropriate program contacts for comment. OEA will not finalize a news release without appropriate management sign-off. (Sign-off must be by email).

As appropriate, OEA will also coordinate the review of releases with other agencies, such as the Department of Justice in any enforcement matter, and with state agencies for joint state-federal actions. Divisions are expected to coordinate with other programs and agencies, as appropriate, on all news releases.

3. OEA Finalizes

The Media Relations staff will incorporate technical comments, confirm that the release can be issued (check for management/technical contact approval on draft news release), and obtain concurrence from the OEA Director.

A NEWS RELEASE CANNOT BE NEGOTIATED (EPA HQs Policy): "It is against EPA policy to negotiate the Agency's option to issue news releases, or the substance of news releases, with parties outside of EPA, particularly those parties involved in settlements, consent decrees or the regulatory process."

4. OEA Distributes.

The Media Relations staff will conduct targeted distribution of the news release to news organizations in the affected geographic area, trade press, and subscribers to the electronic mailing list. The news releases are also available on Region 4's Internet page, as well as the Headquarters news release web page. OEA provides electronic copies (hard copies where necessary) of releases to state and EPA contacts, including the technical and legal contacts, state coordinator, and congressional liaison.

Criteria for
WHEN TO ISSUE A NEWS RELEASE

The Media Relations staff works with the program offices and Headquarters to inform the public of what is happening in the environment around them. One way of doing this is through a *news release* targeted to a specific audience. Because the ultimate use of a news release is determined by news organizations, our goal is to issue news releases that are newsworthy and are most likely to be used to inform the public.

The following criteria cover Region 4's guidance for news releases related to both enforcement actions and program highlights. In the case where there is disagreement on issuing a news release, the Director of the Office of External Affairs will consult with the appropriate Division or Office director to make a final decision.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

EPA issues news releases on a variety of topics related to our programs. Many news releases are triggered by a specific event, such as a public meeting or the award of a grant. News releases are also appropriate for announcing program achievements and successful partnerships in protecting human health and the environment. In general, we should issue a news release when EPA initiates, takes a major step in advancing, or brings to conclusion a matter that is of significant environmental impact and interest.

If you have an item that you think would be appropriate for a news release, contact the Media Relations staff. They will assist you in deciding how and when to publicize it. For events that are related, such as awards given by a program to several facilities, OEA will generally issue one news release that covers all of them. This increases the overall newsworthiness of the release.

POTENTIAL TOPICS FOR A NEWS RELEASE:

- Recognize achievements, success stories, and awards
- Highlight partnerships with citizens, industry, or state/local/tribal organizations
- Announce compliance assistance opportunities
- Provide information on new regulations or policies
- Announce attainment of standards
- Announce permits or changes in permits

- Announce grant awards
- Provide the status of a site cleanup (start and completion of removals)
- Announce a state, local, or tribal agreement
- Provide public service announcements or advisories
- Announce public meetings, workshops, and information sessions
- Announce settlements and enforcement actions
- Provide information on status of activities during/after an emergency response
- Matters in litigation

NOTE: Issuing a news release does not fulfill the legal requirements for public notice. A news release may or may not be used by news organizations.

In addition to covering Region 4's activities, the Media Relations staff also issues news releases that provide a local angle on certain national releases from Headquarters and publicizes visits from EPA senior management and media events.

TOPICS WHICH DO NOT REQUIRE A NEWS RELEASE

- Routine meetings with state agencies
- Routine progress on a superfund site cleanup
- Internal reports or documents

NEWS RELEASE GUIDELINES for ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS

Region 4 initiates and completes a high number of enforcement actions each year. While news organizations will not cover all the actions, many are newsworthy and should be publicized. The following criteria help determine the level of publicity for enforcement actions based on the public's interest in an action, the likelihood that news organizations will cover it, the impact that publicizing the action will have in educating the public and preventing other violations, and the impact of the violation on human health and the environment. Additionally, all matters that have been referred to DOJ must have DOJ approval prior to the distribution of any news release.

A NEWS RELEASE CANNOT BE NEGOTIATED (EPA HQs Policy): "It is against EPA policy to negotiate the Agency's option to issue news releases, or the substance of news releases, with parties outside of EPA, particularly those parties involved in settlements, consent decrees or

the regulatory process.”

News releases should mention the environmental result desired or achieved by EPA’s action.

News releases and other publicity must receive high priority in all reviewing offices.