Standard Operating Procedures For Working With The Media

Produced by EPA Region 9 Office of Public Affairs May 2008

I. Organization of OPA

Two sections in the Office of Public Affairs conduct media outreach. The Press and Congressional Affairs section has five full time press officers, two Congressional liaisons, and a videographer, all who report to the Communications Director. The Web team is composed of a Web writer and a Webmaster who report to the regional Website content coordinator/Web team leader. The Web team also employs two contractors who support the technical infrastructure of the Web. The Web team is part of the Environmental Education and Information Office and the Web team leader reports to that section chief.

The press team is organized and functions much like a news bureau. Each press officer is assigned a "beat" with one press officer responsible for a state or a portion of a state in our Region. This allows the press officers to develop strong contacts with reporters in their beat and provides "one stop shopping" for the media, who can have one point of contact for all questions. Current contact information and beat assignments for the press officers are listed on our website at www.epa.gov/region09/contact_press.html. Beat assignments may change periodically and will be updated on the Web. The Communications Director will typically be available as an additional backup if necessary.

Press BEATS (as of March 2008)

Arizona:	Margot Perez-Sullivan, lead; Francisco Arcaute, backup
Northern California:	Wendy Chavez, lead; Mary Simms, backup
Central California:	Mary Simms, lead; Wendy Chavez, backup
Southern California:	Francisco Arcaute, lead; Mary Simms, backup
Nevada:	Margot Perez-Sullivan, lead;
Hawaii and Pacific Islands:	Dean Higuchi, lead; David Yogi, backup

II. Messaging

OPA conducts media outreach to make sure that EPA's national and regional messages are picked up in the press and its efforts focus on those actions or accomplishments that further the Agency messages. Each fiscal year, the program divisions should identify three key messages that highlight the division's priorities. These messages can then be tailored for individual actions or events. OPA will work with the divisions to refine and update these messages. Press officers are assigned to each division to assist the divisions in messaging, developing and completing press releases, and to keep apprised of division work.

Press Officer Division Assignments (as of March 2008)

Air: Francisco Arcaute
CED: Margot Perez Sullivan
Superfund: Mary Simms
Waste: Wendy Chavez
Water: Dean Higuchi

III. Identifying News

In general, OPA provides information to the media when EPA initiates, takes a major step in advancing, or brings to conclusion a matter that is of significant interest to the public. Some examples are:

- Enforcement actions
- Public meetings and workshops
- Recognition of achievements and awards
- Permits or changes in permits
- Grant awards
- Superfund removal actions or other steps in a Superfund site cleanup
- "Amplification" of certain national releases from headquarters to highlight the local interest.
- Speeches and other media events
- New regulations, standards, guidelines, or policies
- Significant new studies, results or reports
- SEP results
- Non Superfund cleanups
- Corrective actions
- Brownfields and other revitalization projects

But not all information is news. We typically do not publicize certain components of enforcement such as notices of violation, "show cause" actions, and referrals to the Department of Justice. There can be exceptions to this general guideline (except for referrals), particularly if the actions are part of a regional or national initiative or there is a high degree of local interest in the subject matter. OPA will provide assistance and advice to determine whether particular actions will get media attention and what the best method is for providing the information to the media.

IV. News Outreach Methods

There are multiple methods for announcing news. Examples of various news announcements are attached to these Standard Operating Procedures.

News Release: The most common method for providing information to the media is by news release, otherwise known as a press release. These contain the 5 Ws and 1 H (who, what, where, when & how) plus a quote and some background information.

Media Advisory: A media advisory alerts the media, in a concise manner, to upcoming events and developments in the agency. It is structured like an invitation, identifying only the who, what, where, and when. A quote and background information are not included.

News Brief: Shorter than a news release, a news brief provides limited information. These are used to announce web features and for actions that do not warrant a formal press release.

Desk Statement: A desk statement is sent to the media in response to an event or an issue.

Outreach to specific reporters: Some issues are localized, and only one or two media outlets will likely cover the story. In these instances, calling a reporter or two or sending them a fact sheet or other information can be the most effective way of getting news out. OPA can do this in advance of an event or an action to give the reporter early access to the background material and have an opportunity to write a more complete story. In this case, the material or the interview would be "embargoed" until the date of the event or the action. Sometimes, the best way to provide information is to give reporters an "exclusive" on a story. If a reporter is interested in or is working on a particular issue, an "exclusive" allows more extensive and detailed reporting than would result from a news release.

News conference or press availability: These are media events inviting the press to hear EPA speak and ask questions of the agency.

Television, print, or radio interviews: Reporters will often call the program divisions or OPA about a story, particularly after the region has issued a news release.

Web feature story: A feature story is an in-depth article on a particular issue, project, or success that EPA wants to publicize. Feature stories are an excellent method of telling our story directly to one or more targeted audiences (media, stakeholders, lawmakers,). Feature stories "live" on the Region 9 Web site and are not interpreted by reporters or other interested parties before reaching our Web site readers. Feature stories can easily be modified as the issue or project changes. We have complete control over feature stories. Feature stories also easily allow us to link to myriad sources of information on our own Web site and other Web sites. Unlike press releases or advisories, feature stories are a great way to provide background, detailed, complex and scientific or technical information on a topic.

Media events: Site tours, demonstrations of a new technology, grants, "big check" events, and major program milestones are examples of events that can provide good visuals and sound for television and radio.

Opinion piece: At times, an opinion piece is the right way to send EPA's message, particularly in response to negative media coverage. OPA will provide advice and counseling on the timing and content of an opinion piece.

Published articles: Writing articles for an outside publication is a good way to tell our story in a more in-depth manner. An EPA employee can publish an article in either an individual capacity or an official capacity. If asked to publish an article, notify the regional ethics attorney in the Office of Regional Counsel to obtain advice. If writing an article in an official capacity, the article must represent the EPA's official point of view. Please notify the Communications Director, and your division director, who can assist you in obtaining the appropriate approvals, and advise whether EPA Headquarters or Regional Administrator approval will be needed.

Public Service Announcements: An announcement that informs the public about safety and health information. Can be written or filmed.

Video and still photography: OPA has a regional videographer who can produce professional quality videos in house and take still photographs. Press officers may also be available to film or photograph events. To request video or still photography from OPA, use the media tracker described in Section V.

Actualities: Short (10-second) sound bites that can be embedded into a news release or Web feature and can be picked up by radio outlets.

Podcast: a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player. A podcast may also include video.

V. Roles and Responsibilities for Conducting Media Outreach

The roles and responsibilities for the most common types of media outreach are discussed below. These are press releases, media events, and press inquiries or interviews.

To request a press release (or any other news outreach), media event, or videography services, the program lead should use the Public Affairs Tracking System, a Lotus Notes database. If you need this database installed on your workspace, please contact the Communications Director.

A. Press Releases

General Policies for Issuing Press Releases

- Press releases are issued by the Office of Public Affairs in coordination with the program divisions and the Office of Regional Counsel (when an enforcement case or other legal matter is at issue). Press releases are written in Associated Press style, a format used by the wire services and newspapers. This gives the Region credibility with the print media and allows them, if they wish, to use our news releases without making changes. Reporters may also decide to take the information from our news release and adapt it to their needs. We cannot control what the media do with a news release once they have received it, but we can increase the potential for accuracy by giving reporters well written information in a format that they can easily use.

- In Region 9, all enforcement actions should be accompanied by a press release. On occasion, an enforcement action may not be suitable for media outreach. For those exceptional circumstances, the program division director should discuss this with the director of the Office of Public Affairs.

- For significant actions, the program should consider using a Communications Strategy, which identifies all the necessary contacts and the plan for outreach. An example Communications Strategy is attached.

- EPA does not negotiate with external parties on the content of any news announcements or whether an announcement is to be made, but can send a copy of the release to the external party at the same time that the release is sent to the news media. If the program wishes to do this, the program lead should coordinate this with the press officer. Press releases issued jointly with a state, tribe, the Department of Justice, or other federal agency are jointly edited with the issuing partners.

- The Office of Public Affairs has final approval of all press releases and may modify a release before sending it to the press, but will coordinate with the program lead and ORC so that the staff and management are aware of the change. Any disagreements or issues that arise in editing the press release should be first worked out among the team, then raised to the Communications Director, and finally to the director, Office of Public Affairs.

Process for Issuing a Press Release

A typical press release should take approximately 5-8 days to draft and finalize, but it is best to give OPA at least two weeks notice. Press officers can also draft and finalize a press release much more quickly to address immediate needs.

A press release goes through the following steps from initial request to the time it is issued:

1) Program Request
2) OPA Draft (includes OPA management review)
3) Editing (program division, ORC (if involved), OPA)
4) Program gets final management approval and quote approval
5) OPA issues final press release to the media and interested members of Congress.

Submitting a request for a press release

The program lead requests a press release through the Public Affairs Tracking System. The request is electronically submitted to the Communications Director, who will assign a press officer. The program lead should provide relevant information, particularly a description of the action or event and the key points the program would like to convey. An example of the type of information needed to draft the press release is in the attached News Release Information Form. The program lead can choose to fill out this form or just provide the information in a discussion with the press officer.

The program lead should identify the key stakeholders or partners that we need to coordinate with (including the Department of Justice) and consider whether any agency partners (e.g. states, tribes) would be interested in providing a quote for the press release. Also consider including a quote from the community impacted by the action. Documents, graphics, photos, or video can be attached to the press release request.

Press Release Quotes

The program lead can submit a draft quote with the press release request or the press officer will draft one. The quote will reflect the key message that has been identified by the program staff and be consistent with the overarching messages that OPA and the programs have developed for the Air, Water, Waste, CED, and Superfund divisions.

The quote is typically from the Division Director or the Regional Administrator, but can also be from any relevant manager or staff if it seems appropriate. The program lead is responsible in most instances for obtaining approval of the quote from the person quoted and the press officer will make sure that this is done before issuing the press release. If the Regional Administrator is quoted, the press officer or the Communications Director will obtain quote approval from the RA.

If writing a press release that involves multiple parties, we will often invite other parties to provide quotes for our release. It is best to limit the number of quotes so that there are no more than two or, if necessary, three

Press Release Editing and Finalization

The press release is drafted, edited, and issued in the following order:

- The press officer prepares the first draft, which is reviewed by OPA management

- The program lead and ORC contact, if ORC is involved in the matter review the draft. The press officer should also send copies of press releases to the OPA liaisons in each of the divisions that have one.

- Program lead gets input from the first level supervisor (unless supervisor prefers to review a later draft) and coordinates program comments with those of ORC. Program lead sends comments to the press officer.

- Press officer prepares a second draft.

- Program lead gets final management approval and quote approval

- Press officer prepares final draft

- Program, ORC, and OPA management review once more and provide comments only if something significant must be changed.

- Program lead, in coordination with ORC, where appropriate, notifies the press officer when the press release can be issued (if it is an enforcement case, this will typically be after the case is filed).

- Press officer issues the press release to the media only after receiving the "green light" from the program lead.

OPA uses an electronic database that encompasses most of the local and national media and will electronically send press releases out to the relevant news agencies. OPA can also send the press release to additional news sources, such as trade publications, but doesn't have a ready list of such publications. If the program is interested in trade publications, the program lead should notify the press officer, who can assist with identifying relevant trade publications. The regional library is also a good source for identifying trade publications. All Region 9 press releases are posted to a database and appear in the Newsroom section of the R9 Web site.

Lastly, when a press release is ready to be issued to the media, OPA's Congressional liaisons notify the appropriate Congressional offices and send them a copy.

Tips for drafting press releases:

- To avoid confusion when editing multiple drafts of press releases, press officers should name the releases with the action or event name and date (and time if multiple drafts will be distributed on the same day).

- In preparing a news release, it is important to avoid legal and technical jargon, avoid acronyms, use active voice, check grammar and spelling, and check the facts. The program divisions should edit the press release for substantive content and accuracy only so that the final release remains in AP style.

- AP style follows the "inverted pyramid" format that newspapers use, with the important information first. The inverted pyramid allows editors to easily fit the story into available space without losing important facts. The first section is the lead and contains the 5 Ws – who, what, when, where and why (and sometimes "how").

- In EPA's press releases, the second or third paragraph will typically contain a quote, which should convey the key message of the news release. Following the quote is the "body." This section provides background and some interesting details related to the story. The facts in the body are often presented in diminishing order of importance. References to web links or other contact information are provided at the bottom.

B. Speaking With A Reporter and Conducting An Interview

Speaking with the media may take a few minutes or an hour, depending on the depth and breadth of the information requested. Reporters will tend to contact OPA first if they are calling about a news release, as these always contain OPA contact information. Reporters calling to follow up on something other than a press release may contact the program division first. If program staff or management is contacted by the media, notify the press office as soon as possible.

OPA strives to respond to all press inquiries within one hour of receiving the call. This does not mean that we need to have an answer within an hour; often that is not possible. A timely phone call shows our responsiveness and willingness to work within a reporter's deadline, which is often that day's publication or newscast. It is not credible for the Region if the public hears that EPA was unresponsive or had "no comment." If a reporter is calling about a matter in litigation, the press officer and program lead will contact the Office of Regional Counsel, who may also determine that the Department of Justice should be notified.

Preparing for the Interview

The press officer will get initial information from the reporter to help the program division prepare for the interview, including the information the reporter is looking for and what the deadline is. The press officer will contact the relevant program manager to set up the interview and in an enforcement case or other legal matter, notify the Office of Regional Counsel. The program manager can designate a staff person to take this call if the staff person is the most knowledgeable and appropriate person.. To quickly respond to reporters' calls, if the program manager is not available, OPA will contact another manager or, if a manager is not available, the press officer can call the appropriate staff contact. If the press officer contacts program staff, the staff will coordinate with their management prior to the interview. Program managers should return press officer calls quickly to ensure a timely response to the inquiry and should leave an out of office message with contact information if they are not in the office, so that calls can be returned as soon as possible. EPA's credibility can be damaged if we do not respond to press calls in a timely manner.

Conducting the Interview

At times, an interview with the press officer will be the most efficient and effective means to deliver the information. In other instances, the interview will be conducted with program management or staff (with ORC, where appropriate). The press officer will typically join the program for the interview, although there are times when this is not possible or not necessary. When conducting an interview with a reporter, keep the following points in mind:

- Think about the subject and identify three key messages in advance. The press officer will assist the program in this effort. These messages should be consistent with the key messages identified by the program division. In general, the Region gives the most emphasis to the environmental or public health benefit of the action or accomplishment.
- Repeat the main points at least twice.
- Try to use plain language and avoid jargon.
- Keep in mind that what you say will be in print.
- Speak clearly and pause when asked a question to give yourself some time to think
- Correct a reporter if he or she makes an incorrect statement during the interview. You can ask the reporter to repeat or summarize something you have said to make sure that they understand it correctly. This is particularly important if it is a complex legal or technical issue
- Only discuss something that you have firsthand knowledge about. Don't exaggerate, guess, or of course, lie.
- Ask the reporter (or the press officer will do so) when the story is expected to be published.
- Be prepared to provide background information if asked.

After the Interview

OPA will track the story and provide the relevant team members with a copy either directly or through OPA's Hot Issues, which is distributed daily and identifies all of the media pickup tracked by OPA the previous day. If there are any concerns about the interview, OPA may be able to provide additional information to the reporter or call the reporter back to clarify statements. It is well worth the effort to make sure the reporter has the accurate information. If the story is inaccurate or misleading, speak to the press officer about a letter to the editor. Some stories may also warrant an Opinion piece to clarify or further elaborate on EPA's view.

OPA tracks all reporter inquiries in a daily "End of Day" report, which identifies the subject and inquiring news agency for each call received by OPA. The Press and Congressional Affairs section chief prepares this report and reviews it daily with the

Public Affairs Director, the Deputy Regional Administrator, and the Regional Administrator.

Additional Tips for Television and Radio Interviews

If you will appear on camera, think about your appearance. Dress properly; stand or sit naturally, but don't fidget; make sure your demeanor reflects an appropriate tone for the story; and maintain eye contact with the interviewer, rather than the camera.

In television and radio interviews, it is even more important to identify your three main messages in advance of the interview and repeat them. This will create the sound bite you are looking for, rather than one you are not happy with. Watch your tone of voice and avoid anger or sarcasm. A calm presence has more credibility since passion and intensity often do not translate well in an interview. Prepare talking points in answer to expected questions and prepare a response to have ready in answer to difficult questions or one you don't know the answer to. A press officer will be glad to assist you in preparing for television and other media interviews.

D. Media Events

Planning for an event

- The program lead should request OPA assistance with a media event by using the Public Affairs Tracking System. Relevant background information should be included with the request, including whether this event will require the attendance of the Regional Administrator or senior management from EPA headquarters, and which stakeholders or partners should be invited. The program lead should also identify the lead agency (EPA or otherwise) in the request.

- The Regional Administrator's Chief of Staff has prepared a handout addressing frequently asked questions. It includes recommendations for correspondence, briefing materials, talking points, and preparation for speaking events. Please review this handout if the Regional Administrator is attending the event. The handout is attached and will also be available in the Public Affairs Tracking System.

- When a press officer is assigned, the press officer and program lead should immediately have a planning meeting to scope out the event. The attached Event Planning Form is useful to identify all the necessary logistics and to ensure that roles and responsibilities of team members are clear. For significant or large events, the team may also want to use a Communication Strategy, which identifies all the contacts and the desired outreach as well as roles and responsibilities of team members. A model Communication Strategy is attached

- Generally, the program is responsible for the content of the event, including talking points, questions and answers, and briefing materials. The program lead should develop this material with review by the press officer, the Communications Director, and program management. The program lead is also responsible for identifying the location and time of the event and for identifying the attendees.

- One of the keys to making an event successful is to make sure that it is visually compelling. The program lead and the press officer can work together to identify photos or video that may be of interest to the media. The location of the event should also provide a good visual backdrop if television media is attending. Press officers can arrange to bring a still or video camera to the event.

- The program lead should set up a briefing prior to the event with the program division director, and with the RA, if s/he is speaking. The briefing materials will typically include talking points, Q & As, agenda, logistics, bios on other speakers of high level officials attending, attendee list, and background material. For events involving the Regional Administrator, the program lead should coordinate with the RA's Chief of Staff, who is responsible for the RA's logistics.

- The press officer is generally responsible for the many of the event logistics, including the microphone, lectern, seating, scouting the location, etc… The press officer will also invite the media, prepare a press release and press kits, and coordinate media interviews at the event. This will often include calling specific reporters in advance to encourage them to come to an event. Media attendance, however, is outside OPA's control and will often depend on the timing of news stories that may compete with EPA's event. Also note that press officers will not typically contact trade press unless the program specifically asks for that. OPA's Congressional liaisons will coordinate with the Congressional members or their staff, where appropriate.

- If EPA is not the lead for the event, many of the logistics, including the time, location, and attendee list, will be arranged by the lead agency. Generally, the program will need to prepare the content material and the press officer will attend the event and coordinate with the media. If the lead agency is not issuing a press release and inviting the media, EPA's press officer will do so. The program lead and press office will coordinate with the lead agency to ensure that the event is planned appropriately. If the lead agency is not experienced in event planning, the program lead and the press officer may have to take on the responsibility.

Brownfields Events

The Waste and Superfund Divisions use a separate protocol for Brownfields events. Please contact the Brownfields team or the Forms section of the Public Affairs Tracking System for this protocol.

VII. Video and Multimedia

The best multimedia stories on the Web are multi-dimensional – rather than having a text version of a story accompanied by a video clip that essentially tells the same story, different parts of a story should be told using different media. The Web and Press teams are available to consult and advise on the best media for telling stories and conveying EPA's messages. When a multimedia approach is to be used, the Press and Web teams will meet together with appropriate program staff/managers to determine what it should include and the timeline for production and release of multimedia products. OPA's videographer is typically available to produce 1-2 videos per month.

A. Available Products

- The most common products are video, audio, slideshows, and google maps displaying real-time data.
- External Communications: OPA provides video and audio coverage for the press office. OPA's videographer can create broadcast quality footage and high resolution photos to increase our coverage with the print and broadcast media. OPA can also embed video and audio into press releases to increase their interest in a story.
- Internal Communications: OPA produces annual videos for the Environmental Awards and the State of the Region, as well as conferences or other in-house communication needs.
- Consultation Services: OPA can provide consultation and technical advice on contracts.

B. Process for preparing a multimedia project

The program lead should clear the project with their supervisor first, then make the request through the Public Affairs Tracking System. The request should include a half page description (called a treatment) and a due date for the project. OPA will determine the priority based on the videographer's current workload and by the due date for the project.

Typically, an idea will need scripting before any video or audio editing is done. The press office can do this based on the treatment and request submitted by the program lead. OPA will then request existing images or video footage and determine with the program division whether to shoot new footage or get it from somewhere else (stock footage, for instance). OPA and the program will storyboard the project using Powerpoint and get supervisory sign off from OPA and the program. OPA will submit a rough draft of the video with a "drop dead" date for any additional material and a firm due date for delivery. Generally, all finished projects go through one more round of review before final release.

VIII. Regional Website And Web Feature Stories

If a program wants to develop new content such as a feature story or a new topic area, the program lead should contact the Web Content Coordinator, Bonnie Barkett, to discuss the idea. The Web Team and Press Team, along with the program, will collaborate to determine whether it makes sense to coordinate the timing of a Web feature story or new site with a press release or other media event. The program contact and the Web Content Coordinator will create the new content together. Generally, the program develops the first draft of the new content and the Web Content Coordinator edits the draft so that it is written in a style and format that works well on the Web site. The program and the Web team work together to determine which links should be contained in the new Web site. There are also many times when the Web team will propose new content development to a program, often as part of a coordinated outreach effort that includes press, video, or public service announcements. New content on the Web site is reviewed and approved by the appropriate program managers or their designees and the Web Content Coordinator.

Routing updates and changes to the website should be given to the Web team via Webtracker (http://r9tc.r09.epa.gov/webtracker/), the online R9 web project tracking tool.
Programs are encouraged to check their Web content periodically and consult with the Web team to ensure that content is up-to-date.

Attached are the following documents:

- News Release Information Form: provides examples of the type of information useful to press officers in drafting a press release.
- Communications Strategy: Useful for large or significant events or actions. Provides a form for identifying all necessary contacts and dividing roles and responsibilities among the team
- Event Planning Form: Useful for events. Provides a checklist of the event details and identifies roles and responsibilities among the team. Can be used alone or with the Communications Strategy.
- Frequently Asked Questions handout for working with the RA
- Examples of news releases