



# Association of State Wetland Managers Wetland Regulatory Capacity Building Series

## Effective Communication Strategies for State and Tribal Wetland Regulatory Programs

March 2021

A solid communications plan and strategy is a cornerstone for good relationships and effective management of state and tribal aquatic resource regulatory programs. Good communication is essential, whether explaining new rules and regulations to landowners or educating the public on the importance of protecting wetlands. An informed public that is invested in the work of an agency can help the agency by reporting violations, complying with regulations without enforcement, and helping to protect these important ecosystems. Developing a thoughtful communications plan can help you meet your immediate communications goals while also growing your network of partners and stakeholders who can help spread the word during future outreach events.

Across the nation different environmental agencies have varying communication needs and experience. Knowing your audience through focus groups and listening sessions, knowing who your partners are, and knowing how to frame your message will help spread the word and educate the public.

ASWM provides a step-by-step guide to developing state and tribal communications plans in ASWM's Wetland Program Plan Handbook. This information sheet complements the Handbook, sharing some additional takeaways specific to communications around regulatory issues. The suggestions below are meant to help you start thinking about communications around regulatory components of your program. To view a webinar going into more detail about this topic, check out ASWM's recording of the webinar, entitled "[Communication Strategies and Lessons Learned for State and Tribal Wetland Regulatory Programs.](#)"

### Planning considerations

- **Identify your communications goals and target audience:** Crafting your message to target a specific audience and articulating what you want them to understand is integral to any communications plan. Failure to properly target your message often results in wasted time and resources. Identify who your target audiences and what you want each target audience to understand/do. Are you rolling out new rules that affect all landowners or just farmers? Do you want them to change a current habit, develop a new one, or simply inform them of

a regulatory change? Always make sure your communication plans and messages are in line with the mission and goals of your agency.

- **Know your audience:** A fundamental tenet of communications and marketing is “you are not your audience.” It is critical to understand what your audience’s values are, what they want to see happen, what they consider a “win” on the topic you are discussing, how they get their information, and who/what influences them. You may want to hold focus groups or listening sessions to help inform your communications plan. You may want to engage a communications expert to help you think through the questions you want to ask or access demographic marketing data that can inform decision making. Understanding your audience in depth allows you to develop materials and a message strategy that are effective and build on the public's understanding of what wetlands are and what your agency does. Understanding what each target audience understands and thinks about a topic also gives you the opportunity to correct misconceptions.
- **Identify stakeholders and partners who can help share your message:** Stakeholders are individuals or groups of individuals that have a vested interest in the regulatory change you are making. With regulations, stakeholders might be landowners, developers, businesses, farmers, ranchers, environmental nonprofits, and others. Professionals like real estate agents and developers often have a stake in understanding rules, regulations, and your agency’s mission. Working with professional groups can help you to disseminate your message indirectly. Many outreach efforts involve working in partnerships. When coordinated, business groups, environmental organizations and others can help get your message to a wider audience and add their influence as a “trusted messenger” of the information you are seeking to communicate.
- **Be ready and able to answer basic questions:** When communicating directly with the public, it is important to remember that much of the population does not have a nuanced understanding of wetland ecosystems or the many benefits that they can provide for local communities. Be prepared to explain: What are wetlands? Do I have a wetland on my property? Can I still use my property? How do I identify a wetland? What are the benefits of living near a wetland? What are the impacts of filling a wetland?
- **Frame your message in memorable terms:** Messages need to be memorable and easily shared. The adage, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” applies here. Communications research and practice has shown that simply listing facts often fail to leave a lasting impression. Communications should be framed using logic, as well as humor and empathy as appropriate. Storytelling is one of the best ways to get a message across that will both resonate and be easily shareable. Humans are innately drawn to stories and sharing them is easier than reciting findings from a research study or field data.

- **Any technology being used for communications should be simple and easy to use:** Remember that you are communicating to a general public audience, many of whom have the capacity to understand complex concepts but are not familiar with the technical aspects or underlying assumptions of your program. Complicated GIS maps with a rainbow of color-coded layers can easily overwhelm most people. Keep technological tools easy to use and understand and remember that most people only want or need to understand the basics. Use graphics to support your storytelling, however, do not include information on graphics that are not necessary for communicating your message, as it can distract from key takeaways.
- **Develop a communications plan:** Now that you know your target audience, prepped your message framing, and simplified the tech, a communications plan will help you develop a formal strategy for reaching out to your target audience(s). Will you issue press releases, travel the state giving presentations, send mailers to residents, go door to door in affected communities or some combination of these? For example, if you are reaching out to landowners in rural communities where internet access is limited, do not host informational sessions online. Going door to door or canvassing is probably the most effective form of outreach, but it is resource intensive and can be costly. For the best results, work with internal or external communications experts to inform your communications plan, as this will increase the impact of your limited resources.

### Implementation steps/tasks

- **Engage with the public and stakeholders:** Once you have determined your audience, articulated your message framing, and prepped your technology, it is time to roll out your communications campaign. This may mean that you host listening sessions across the state, provide stories or give interviews to local news outlets, or visit landowners to educate them on a new rule change. Keep a record of communications activities, who you met with, where, what questions or concerns were raised, and any follow-up tasks needed.
- **Publicize all events, in some cases even site visits.** Letting the public know and see what your agency is doing is part of developing transparency and trust, which are important elements of good communication. These actions will help the public gain a better understanding of what your agency does and what a wetland program looks like. Well informed and engaged neighbors can help identify violations and support your work.
- **Use pictures and other visuals help to explain complicated topics:** The importance of using visual aids cannot be understated. If you are trying to explain the negative impacts from building on a wetland, visuals that show how flooding and infrastructure damage may occur can be a compelling part of storytelling. Simple maps showing where wetlands are located or guides detailing features of wetlands can also help landowners identify wetlands on their property or understand how they will impact the community.

- **Educate Through Positive Messaging:** Research and practice have shown that individuals are more inclined to protect something if they understand its value. Message testing has shown that people are willing to change their perceptions of wetlands after receiving positive messages.
- **Finally, be patient:** Good communication takes investments of time and resources. Repetition is a critical element of any strategy to gain concept recognition or move individuals to change behavior. In general, people do not change their habits overnight. Understanding and valuing wetlands likewise does not develop after a single conversation or contact. People are going to need to hear the same information repeatedly and hear messages targeted in ways that connect with them before their awareness, attitudes and/or actions may start to change.

**Additional Useful Resources:**

- [2020 Wetland Regulatory Capacity Building Webinars \(aswm.org\)](https://www.aswm.org/2020-wetland-regulatory-capacity-building-webinars)
- [ASWM Wetland Program Plans Handbook](#)
- [EPA Wetlands Education for Teachers and Students](#)

**Examples of Wetland Communications:**

- [ASWM Wetland Communications Case Studies](#)
- [Publicity & Outreach | Wisconsin Wetlands Association](#)
- [Delaware Freshwater Wetlands Toolbox](#)
- [America's Wetland Foundation Communications Graphics](#)
- [Vermont Landowner's Guide to Wetlands](#)
- [Nebraska Wetlands Communications Webpage](#)

**For more information, contact:**

Association of State Wetland Managers

[www.aswm.org](http://www.aswm.org)

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