Communication Plan Step 5: Identify Messages

Tool: Guidance for Writing Press Releases

Target Audience: For use by the communication team to plan for and write press releases.

Purpose: Press releases are a common tool used to communicate information about PFAS, for example, to a broad audience via the media. They might be used to introduce a PFAS investigation, communicate results of an investigation, or provide information on remedial measures.

General Guidelines for Writing Press Releases

Additional guidance on developing issue-specific key messages is provided in Section 4.5.

- The primary message/purpose is included in the first paragraph of the press release. Success occurs when the story can be understood by reading just the first paragraph. That is also the basis for the headline.
- Give the press release a title that grabs attention and makes the press want to read more, while not sensationalizing the subject.
- Provide timing information. Date the press release itself and note whether it is for immediate release or to be held – "embargoed" – until a specific date and time.
- Use as few paragraphs as you need to get your points across. Write tightly, using the fewest words possible. But better to have more short paragraphs than fewer very long paragraphs.
- The main target group for press releases is the press (print, TV, web), but the information they contain is meant to reach further to inform larger target audiences. Tailor the style, level and content to suit the needs of the press while keeping the target groups in mind.

Press releases should present the most important information first. Use an "inverted pyramid" structure so press and target audiences can scan information and get to most important points quickly (see Figure E-1).



Figure E-1. Inverted pyramid structure for press releases.

Tips on Mechanics of Press Releases

- Use plain language, no jargon.
- Sentences should be 25 words or less. A press release should be between 400 and 500 words (about one page long).
- Use letterhead if you have it, plain white paper otherwise.
- Provide facts, not spin or opinion. Keep it objective.
- If the project is multiagency, it's critical to include all agency logos on the press release to identify cooperators and to visualize unity.
- Be sure it is "newsworthy." How do you decide?
    - Timing: Did it just happen? Old news isn't news.
    - Relevance: Does it directly influence people's lives? Is it important to your target audience?
    - Proximity: Is it local or does it have local impact?
    - Implications: What are possible consequences? Is it really good or really bad news?
    - Conflict: Is there controversy? Is it a debated topic?
    - Scientific news: Is it about new information people should know about?
    - Crosslinking: Is it related to other news on a related topic?

A few other points on writing successful press releases…

- Know whom to send a press release to and when to send it. Understand that weekly/local papers may have a certain day as a deadline for later publication. Give them time to use your press release and get follow-up information, especially if your information is time-sensitive (for example, a notice of a meeting before the next week's publication date).
- Research the press and other audiences being targeted. Tailor your press release to their style and needs if you can. For example, the local shopper weekly paper has different needs for content, amount of information, level of detail and ability to do follow-up than a large national circulation newspaper like the *New York Times*.
- Every news story has many "angles" that help determine how you write and to whom you send the press release. Consider targeting local and, if warranted, national press or specialist press (to reach another audience that would be interested in your story, for example, local newsletters, professional organization publications).
- Write in third person. Unless in a direct quote, don't use "I" or "we".
- Write to your target audience. Understand their perspectives and concerns.
- Keep adjectives to a minimum. Adjectives are distracting.
- Keep it objective.
- Edit and proofread carefully. Use spellcheckers, but don't depend on them. Proofread again. Then have another person proofread.
- Prepare properly, structure your thoughts, set limits on the topic, length and target group It's better to write two separate press releases to reach two different audiences or send two different messages than to write an overly long press release.
- Make writing as simple as possible or it won't be read.
- When writing, consider how much your audience knows. To reach the largest the audience, assume you must inform them.
- Minimize use of acronyms.

Press releases should go through several drafts. Address key points clearly and succinctly.

Organization

First Paragraph (Main Facts)

Answer the 5Ws:

Who? Who are key people; who does this information help or hurt? Is anyone else involved? Also, who is your audience?

What? What is it that's new? What has happened that's newsworthy? What are the reasons for communicating via a press release? What is your goal in doing this? What issues require the release of information?

Why? Why is this important? What does it tell people that they need to know?

Where? Where is this happening? In most cases of an environmental issue, the news reach and the audience will be local.

When? When did or will something happen that you want to communicate? Does timing make it more important? Old news is no longer news.

And, if important, tell readers **H**ow – How did this happen?

Choose the most important of these facts to include in your first paragraph and get across your main message up front.

Examples of Main Message Sentences

- *[Agency] is continuing its detailed environmental investigation to understand the nature and extent of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) on [receptor(s) and/or media], and the surrounding location.*
- *[Agency] has begun an investigation to determine the extent of pollution at sites and manage the potential impacts of PFAS at and near sites where firefighting foams containing PFAS have been used in the past.*
- *[Agency] today released the results of its site investigation into PFAS contamination. Investigation findings identified the following compounds [specific PFAS] at [location].*
- *[Agency] recently completed a targeted PFAS investigation at [location] to better understand potential impacts that may be directly related to [description of PFAS use].*
- *The findings identified potential PFAS sources and transport pathways.*
- *To date, no PFAS has been found in [location's] potable drinking water supplied to residents and businesses.*
- *Results have identified elevated levels of PFAS [list specific PFAS compounds] in seafood collected from [locations].*
- *These results are being evaluated as part of the Human Health Risk Assessment and the Ecological Risk Assessment. These assessments will provide a better understanding of PFAS exposure risks to people and the environment, and will be used to develop a plan to manage potential elevated risks.*
- *The investigation concluded that although PFAS contamination was found at [location], the risk to residents is low.*
- *The investigation concluded that the health risk associated with the use of groundwater for recreational and irrigation use was low.*

Second, Third, and Fourth Paragraphs (More detail)

The second paragraph expands on the story, including more detail. For example, this may include:

- history of PFAS use in the area and when PFAS use stopped (this answers the "why")
- next steps (for example future studies, community sessions, what is being done with this information)
- who this information is shared with?
- commitments made by the agency
- additional background on investigations

The third and fourth paragraphs (if needed) provide other related but less important information to round out the story and encourage follow-up by the press. The third paragraph typically provides a quote, which is important to most stories. Look to officials, researchers, witnesses, or impacted residents for interesting quotes.

Examples of Text from the Middle of a Press Release

[Agency] is committed to being open and transparent about these investigations. We will update the stakeholders as investigation reports are released. We will maintain the currency of information on the website and provide information sessions as required. Phone contact through the 800 number, direct mail, and fact sheets will provide further support to assist with information access as the investigation progresses.

The investigations included a desktop review of available information and an environmental sampling program.

The study was conducted by independent environmental consultants from [consultant].

The investigation area includes [description of locations/boundaries]. [Include map]

The investigations are being undertaken in accordance with the [specify regs or guidelines].

[Agency's] investigations have included, sampling and testing of soil, sediment, surface water, groundwater, animals, and plants

Environmental testing takes time, and it is important that we work closely with communities while we investigate the possible nature and extent of PFAS.

Closing Paragraph and Boilerplate

End of the press release with three pound signs (###) in **bold** font.

After that, include contact information (“For further information, please contact X”) and list contact information. Be accessible.

If any further information is needed, it can go in “Notes to editors” under the contact information. Examples might include background information (“boilerplate”) on the history of the issue or group sending the press release.

Press Release Template

For Immediate Release (or Embargoed until Date/Time)
Name of Press Contact:

Date:
Phone: Of contact person who can answer any questions about the press release
Email: Of contact person

[HEADLINE] -Brief summary of your news story.
[Dateline – CITY, STATE]

First paragraph – Providing the most important facts of who, what, when, where and why of your story.

[QUOTE] – One or more quotes that provide interest or important detail.

[Second and additional paragraphs] – Providing supporting material and details (for example, direct quotes, relevant background information, statistics) of your story.

Closing paragraph – Where to go for more information, notes to editor.

[BOILERPLATE] – Provide information about the organization issuing the press release

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Additional information is available from MDH (2019) and ITRC (2020)