



# **Risk Communication Guide for State and Local Agencies**

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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 2 GENERAL RISK PERCEPTION/COMMUNICATION ISSUES

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### Key Risk Issues Often of Interest to the Community

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**Have the following general emergency/disaster risk issues been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Consequences of worst-case/alternative scenarios and the likelihood/probability of the occurrence of an emergency/disaster
  - Natural phenomena hazards
  - Community emergency response actions
  - Community notification systems
  - Perceived risks reported by the media
  - Use of standards and accepted practices
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**Have the following industrial facility-based emergency/disaster risk issues been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Safety (threshold) limits
  - Use and acceptance within the technical community of the dispersion, release, and other consequence models that may have been used for risk assessment
  - Community confidence in crediting safety/mitigation systems
  - Other potential considerations (financial/business impact and real estate)
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### Factors Contributing to Community Outrage

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The following summarizes the key objective in dealing with community outrage:

**Pay as much attention to outrage factors, and to the community's concerns, as you do to scientific data. At the same time, do not underestimate the public's ability to understand technical information.**

**11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 2, continued**  
**GENERAL RISK PERCEPTION/COMMUNICATION ISSUES**

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**Have the following potential community outrage factors been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Voluntary risks are accepted more readily than those that are imposed.
  - Natural risks seem more acceptable than artificial risks.
  - Risks under individual control are accepted more readily than those subject to industry or government control.
  - Risks that seem fair are more acceptable than those that seem unfair.
  - Risk information that comes from trustworthy sources is more readily believed than information from untrustworthy sources.
  - Exotic risks seem more dangerous than familiar risks.
  - Risks that are associated with other memorable events are considered more risky.
  - Risks that are “undetectable” are perceived as more dangerous.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 3 POSSIBLE OBJECTIVES OF A RISK COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

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*Defining clear goals and objectives is one of the most important initial activities because it can provide a platform for the risk communication program to be more effective, better focused, and more likely to achieve the desired benefit.*

### Defining the Target Audience

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**Have the following general issues associated with defining the target audience been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Identifying the stakeholders to anticipate or assess their varying interests, in order to design an effective risk communication program, is a critical initial task.
  - Stakeholders can include:
    - Residential Community
    - Business/Commercial Community
    - Industrial Community
    - Your Agency
    - Other Agencies (local and state government, special districts)
  - The level of stakeholder interest is a driving force in the assignment of risk communication priorities.
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### Pre-Incident Objectives and Information Priorities

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**Have the following potential pre-incident objectives and information priorities been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Properly identifying and understanding the objectives of all stakeholders often enhances the effectiveness of risk communication.
- Possible pre-incident objectives of risk communication:
  - inform the community
  - seek input or feedback from the community useful to the agency
  - clarify the probability and consequences of a potential risk to provide an improved risk perspective for the stakeholder
  - address an existing controversy or concern of the stakeholder
  - provide a forum for discussion
  - improve the stakeholder's understanding and ability to support effective emergency response
  - warning vs. reassuring
  - clarify the agency's role in controlling risk
  - coordinate agency emergency response plans with the business/industrial community's emergency response plans
  - satisfy a regulatory requirement for risk communication related to emergency events

Research the issues with the stakeholders to gather sufficient information to identify the most important risk communication objectives to address.

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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 3, continued POSSIBLE OBJECTIVES OF A RISK COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

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### Objectives and Information Priorities During and After an Incident

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**Have the following potential post-incident objectives and information priorities been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Some potentially important objectives and information priorities during and after an incident:
    - retaining credibility and trust (See Section 4.4)
    - clarifying how the incident compares to the previously assessed risk
    - providing clear information regarding incident causes, effects, and lessons-learned (this includes agency responsibilities for having identified, assessed, or responded to the emergency)
    - identifying how these lessons-learned will be used to decrease the likelihood or consequences of the risk in the future
    - providing an updated balance for the stakeholder by validating the assessment of risk, adjusting it as necessary, and re-clarifying the likelihood or consequences
  
  - The agency should not underestimate the ability of community members to keep risks in perspective even after an incident. The agency should still research the issues with the community and other stakeholders (including potentially small minorities that may be unhappy about how the event was handled) to ensure that the appropriate risk communication objectives are identified and addressed. After an incident, it is easy to address perceived concerns that may not accurately reflect actual stakeholder issues.
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### Potential Enhancements to Community Emergency Response

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**Have the following potential enhancements to community emergency response been considered for the risk communication program?**

- Desirable community emergency response actions (that can be improved with effective risk communication) include:
    - contacting the appropriate municipal emergency responders
    - remaining calm during the emergency
    - proper application of shelter-in-place
    - evacuation
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 4 TRUST AND CREDIBILITY FACTORS

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**Trust and credibility lay an important foundation for successful risk communication.**

### **Pre-Incident Actions to Build Trust and Credibility**

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**Have the following points been considered when devising the risk communication program?**

- Emphasize factors that inspire trust.
  - Pay attention to agency process.
  - Explain organizational procedures.
  - Be forthcoming with information and involve the community from the outset.
  - Focus on building trust as well as generating good technical information.
  - Follow through.
  - Only make promises you are sure you can keep.
  - Provide information that meets people's needs.
  - Get the facts straight and avoid mixed messages.
  - Try to coordinate within your organization and with other responsible groups.
  - Listen to what various community groups are telling you.
  - Work together with organizations that have credibility with communities.
  - Consider working with opponents.
  - Avoid "closed" meetings.
  - The following issues should be considered when maintaining an atmosphere of trust:
    - Alarming communications are inherently more trusted than reassuring communications.
    - Trust is greatly damaged if the agency has to amend its risk estimate or damage estimate in the more-serious-than-we-thought direction, but only modestly damaged when amending it in the less-serious-than-we-thought direction.
    - It helps to acknowledge the fact that mistrust exists (when it is there), its validity, and its sources.
    - Trust relies on transparency, not mere honesty.
    - Trust may be an unachievable goal. Therefore, agencies should aim for accountability instead of trust.
    - Ensure that employees play a key role in risk communication.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 4, continued TRUST AND CREDIBILITY FACTORS

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### Timing of Information Releases

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**Have the following points been considered when releasing information?**

- If people are at risk, do not wait to communicate (and to act on) the available risk information.
  - If the agency is investigating a potential risk that people are not aware of, consider making known what you are doing and why.
  - If it seems likely that the media or someone else may release the information before you are ready, release it yourself.
  - If it is likely that the media will "fill in" the missing facts with information concerning an on-going story while they are waiting for you to speak, so speak first.
  - If you do not yet have a high degree of confidence in the results, talk to the community about your procedures, but don't release the results.
  - If initial investigations do show a problem (and you are fairly confident of the results), release the results, but explain that they are preliminary.
  - Before deciding to wait to communicate (especially if the news is bad), consider the effect on the credibility of the agency representative dealing with the community.
  - Release information while the risk management options are tentative, rather than waiting to develop solutions.
  - If you feel the information will not make sense unless it is released with other relevant information (and you don't have all the information yet), wait to release it all at once (but explain why you are waiting).
  - If you wait until the results are quality-assured to release them, use the time (and the preliminary results) to develop management options and advise the community on interim actions.
  - If you are waiting to communicate results or information for some other reason, do not say you are waiting for the evaluation to undergo quality assurance.
  - If you have decided that you can't communicate right away about the risk, talk to the community about the process you are going through to get the information, etc.
  - Consider the ten key reasons to release information early.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 4, continued TRUST AND CREDIBILITY FACTORS

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### Trust and Credibility Issues During and After an Incident

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**Have the following points been considered when communicating risk information during an incident?**

- Maintain open channels of communication
  - Provide critical information promptly.
  - Ensure that the public receives a clear message that the emergency responders are taking appropriate actions to mitigate the event.
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**Have the following points been considered when communicating risk information after an incident?**

- Provide a resource for the public to call to secure additional information.
  - Take appropriate steps to promptly investigate the cause(s) of the event.
  - Ensure that the public receives a clear message that an investigation of the incident was performed and appropriate actions to prevent a future incident were identified for implementation.
  - Provide appropriate follow-up information and follow through with any commitments to the community.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 5 EFFECTIVE VEHICLES FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

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### Defining Effective Pre-Incident Risk Communication Activities

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**Have the following points been considered to communicate key risk issues prior to the occurrence of an incident?**

- Pamphlets and flyers are cost-effective and appropriate for short-term, one-message communication efforts that cover one aspect of the risk communication process.**
    - Focus these short communication tools on meeting specific needs.
    - Make pamphlets and flyers self-contained.
    - Distribute pamphlets and flyers where your audience lives.
  
  - Newsletters are effective for delivering information on long-term projects with a relatively stable audience.**
    - Allow time in your schedule for necessary approvals.
    - Develop and maintain mailing lists.
    - Avoid the use of acronyms and abbreviations.
    - Use compelling headlines and graphics to encourage reading of the newsletter.
    - Provide your audience with a consistently high quality newsletter.
  
  - The Internet has become an unparalleled resource for disseminating information (e.g., pamphlets, flyers, and newsletters) on a global level.**
    - Several significant drawbacks exist that limit application of the Internet as a risk communication medium:
    - Often busy individuals may need another mechanism to trigger their attention and to get them to participate in the risk communication process.
    - The audience is limited to those who have invested money and/or time to be able to access the Internet.  
*Note the concern regarding the dissemination of worst-case scenario data on the internet—there is the possibility that it could be misused somewhere else.*
  
  - Public forums can be very effective mechanisms for communicating risk issues. However, there is questionable value in conducting large-scale public meetings as a way to engage the community in constructive dialogue.**
    - When appropriate, develop alternatives to public hearings, such as smaller, more informal meetings.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 5, continued EFFECTIVE VEHICLES FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

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### Defining Effective Risk Pre-Incident Risk Communication Activities

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**Have the following points been considered to communicate key risk issues prior to the occurrence of an incident?**

- If you cannot avoid a large public meeting, the logistics should be developed so that both the agency and the community are treated fairly.
  - Consider breaking larger groups into smaller ones.
  - Be clear about the goals for the meeting. If you cannot adequately fulfill a citizen request for a meeting, propose alternatives.
  - In certain situations, one-on-one communication is more effective than a group setting.
- Researching and understanding the stakeholder is critical.**
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### Defining Effective Risk Communication Activities During and After Incidents

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**Have the following been considered to communicate key risk issues during or after incidents?**

- If an incident was noticed by the public or impacted the public, the key differences are:**
    - Time is of the essence in providing information to the community.
    - Several communication media will be readily available, but not necessarily controllable, e.g., newspapers, television, radio, technical journals.
    - Community interest will most likely not have to be encouraged.
  - The community will gauge the success of the incident investigation efforts and control of causal factors by how much information is communicated to the community.**
  - During the incident, consider doing the following (to the extent that it does not detract from emergency response efforts):**
    - If there is a high degree of uncertainty, focus the risk communication effort on what is being done to control the emergency. Keep the communication channels open, and provide additional facts as they become available.
    - Contact news media to announce the event (probably not necessary for a major emergency) and begin to provide them with information.
    - If there is uncertainty with respect to the chronology of events or causes of the event, release information prudently and properly identify that the information as preliminary, but that the agency will promptly provide additional facts as soon as they are available.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 5, continued EFFECTIVE VEHICLES FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

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### Defining Effective Risk Communication Activities During and After Incidents

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**Have the following been considered to communicate key risk issues during or after incidents?**

- Consider implementing the following key actions:
  - Maintain open channels of communication (possibly via the Information Officer).
  - Provide critical information promptly.
  - Ensure that the public receives a clear message that the emergency responders are taking appropriate actions to mitigate the event.
- **Never go “off-the-record.”**
- **After an incident, the following should be considered:**
  - Ensure that any preliminary information provided during the course of the incident is verified, clarified, or modified, as necessary, so that future references to the incident will have actual factual information.
  - Follow-up with local and regional newspapers, radio, or television to verify key information and to provide a close-out mechanism for the event.
  - Be honest and candid with the public regarding incident events, potential public impacts, and follow-up investigation corrective actions.
  - Consider implementing the following key actions outlined in Section 4.4:
    - Provide a resource for the public to contact to secure additional information.
    - Provide appropriate follow-up information and follow through with any commitments to the community.
    - **When communicating “lessons learned”, ensure that broader lessons, in addition to the lessons directly relevant to the particular incident, are brought out.**

## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 6 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC FORUMS

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A public forum can be an effective (and often necessary) mechanism for communicating “high profile” risk issues. Ensuring that the appropriate risk communication strategies are applied is critical.

### Understanding the Risk Communication Needs of Different Audiences

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**Have the following points been considered to identify and respond to the needs of different audiences when communicating in a public forum?**

- Try to identify key stakeholders who are affected by the situation at the beginning and meet with them informally.
  - Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of citizen advisory groups.
  - Define the role of the group from the outset.
  - Treat everybody equally and fairly.
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### Dealing with Values and Feelings

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**Have the following points been considered to recognize that people's values and feelings are a legitimate aspect of public health and safety issues, and that such concerns may convey valuable information when communicating in a public forum?**

- Recognize that people’s values and feelings are a legitimate aspect of public health and safety issues and that such concerns may convey valuable information.
  - Provide a forum for people to air their feelings.
  - Listen to people when they express their values and feelings.
  - Acknowledge people's feelings about an issue.
  - When people are speaking emotionally, respond to their emotions. Do not merely respond with data.
  - Show respect by developing a system that responds promptly to calls from community members.
  - Recognize and be honest about the values incorporated in agency decisions.
  - Acknowledge agency politics and dissension.
  - Be aware of your own values and feelings about an issue and the effect they have on you.
  - Empathetic words will be effective only if your tone of voice, body language, and demeanor reinforce what you are saying.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 6, continued

### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC FORUMS

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#### Responding Personally

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**Have the following points been considered to prepare responses to personal questions about risk when communicating in a public forum?**

- When you speak at a public meeting, tell people who you are, what your background is, and why you are there.
  - Let people see you are human.
  - Prepare responses to potential personal questions that you may be asked about the risks before the meeting. This allows you to present a well thought-out answer to commonly asked questions.
  - When speaking personally, put your views into the context of your own values, and urge your audience to do the same.
  - If your personal position does not agree with agency policy, do not misrepresent yourself or mislead the community.
  - If speaking personally makes you uncomfortable, work on it until it gets easier.
  - People are accustomed to assimilating information by the sharing of experiences. “Storytelling” can be a very effective mechanism for risk communication that can have a strong personal content.
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#### Other Communication Strategies

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**Have the following communication strategies been applied when communicating in a public forum?**

- Effective listening requires a number of simultaneous activities:**
    - Paraphrasing
    - Clarifying
    - Encouraging
    - Reflecting
    - Summarizing
    - Being Open
  - The most important part of your message is clearly communicating your conclusions.**
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 7 RESOURCES FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC FORUM RISK COMMUNICATION

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When directly interacting with the community, having the proper resources available can make the difference between success and failure.

### Choosing the Right Representatives

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**Have the following points been considered to choose the right representatives and link them to the appropriate assignments when devising the risk communication program?**

- Use field/community relations staff to relay community concerns within the agency.
  - Choose carefully those who represent the agency, and provide appropriate support (e.g., time, training, resources).
    - Technically-qualified people should have a major role in risk communication.
    - For effective communication of emergency risks in a public forum, it is typically important that representatives can effectively address at least the following elements:
      - Technical
      - Communication
      - Authority
    - If possible, use the same agency representative throughout the life of the issue.
    - In some situations a non-agency representative may be more useful than someone from inside the agency.
  - Although the above mix of skills is important, ensure that sufficient technical resources (i.e., back-up technical data and individuals) are provided to address the community's interests adequately.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 7, continued RESOURCES FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC FORUM RISK COMMUNICATION

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Choosing the right representative to get your message across is very important

### Developing the Message

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**Have you thoroughly covered these topics in your message?**

- Information about the nature of risks?
  - Information about the nature of benefits?
  - Information on alternatives?
  - Uncertainties in knowledge about risks?
  - Information management?
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### Effective Communications

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**Have the following points been considered to ensure that effective communications media are utilized when devising the risk communication program?**

- Professional communication media are critical. However, effective communication media for public forums do not necessarily mean expensive, extravagant, or flashy.
  - The following identifies some presentation media that have been effective:
    - LCD Projector
    - Posters and Flip Charts
    - Overhead Transparencies & Slides
    - Television
    - Displays, Models, Objects, Demonstrations
    - Verbal Presentation
  - Match the communication medium with the information needs of the community.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 8 EXPLAINING RISK

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Although skills in explaining risks are relevant, the emergency management professional's attitude toward and interaction with the public are key variables in successfully explaining risk.

### Avoiding Outrage When Explaining Risk

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**Have the following potential community outrage issues been considered when explaining risk?**

- Be prepared to give people's concerns as much emphasis as the technical data.
  - Be sensitive to related issues that may be more important to many people than the risk itself.
  - Review and consider the Community Outrage Factors identified in Section 2.2.
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### Presenting and Explaining Technical Information

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**Have the following points associated with the explanation of technical information been considered when explaining risk?**

- Find out what risk information people want and in what form.
  - Anticipate and respond to people's concerns about their personal risk.
  - If you are explaining numbers derived from a risk assessment, explain the risk assessment process before presenting the numbers.
  - Put data in perspective.
  - Express risks in several different ways, making sure not to evade the community's risk concerns.
  - Explain the agency's protective approach to risk assessment and standard setting.
  - Avoid health and safety comparisons that ignore "outrage factors".
  - Avoid health and safety comparisons that seem to minimize or trivialize the risk.
  - Consider developing health and safety comparisons of similar situations or substances.
  - Be cautious because risk comparisons may result in negative misinterpretations.
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## 11.0 QUICK SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR SECTION 8, continued EXPLAINING RISK

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### Presenting and Explaining Technical Information

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**Have the following points associated with the presentation of technical information been considered when explaining risk?**

- Know your audience and gear your presentation to its level.
  - Prepare thoroughly.
  - Present the information that is most important to convey.
  - Be sure to give people sufficient background.
  - Use as down-to-earth language as possible.
  - Beware of the tendency to oversimplify and to only give data that support your point.
  - Choose supporting graphics that illustrate your message clearly and simply.
  - As well as presenting points that support your conclusions, include negative information too.
  - Be aware of body language and other signals your audience gives you that they're lost.
  - Have background material available at meetings.
  - Always have question-and-answer periods after presentations.
  - Critique your presentation afterward, so you can learn from the things you did right as well as those you did wrong.
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### Dealing with Uncertainty

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**Have the following points associated with the acknowledgement of uncertainty been considered when explaining risk?**

- Acknowledge your uncertainty.
  - Give people background on the inevitable uncertainty of science.
  - Be specific about what you are doing to find answers.
  - If possible, consider involving the community in resolving the uncertainty.
  - Stress the caution built into setting standards and developing risk assessments.
  - If people are demanding certainty, pay attention to values and other concerns, not just the science.
  - Acknowledge the policy disagreements that arise from uncertainty.
  - It is important to explain what you know, not just what you do not know.
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## **12.0 GUIDELINES FOR MEETING WITH THE MEDIA**

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- 1. Be Prepared**
  - Plan what you want to say
  - Anticipate reporters' questions
- 2. Take/Keep Control**
  - You decide where to be interviewed
  - “Bridge” to your points or to turn negative questions into positive responses
  - Don't repeat negatives
  - Know when to exit the interview
- 3. Make Your Point**
  - Bring your own agenda to the interview
  - Stress positive aspects of your operation
- 4. Keep Your Composure/Watch Body Language**
  - Look and sound like you “want to be there”
  - Be cooperative; not combative
  - Avoid defensive appearance
- 5. Don't Speculate**
  - If you do not have an answer, say so.
  - Do not answer hypothetical questions.
  - Do not feel all questions must be answered immediately.
- 6. Never Say “No Comment”**
  - Give sound reasons why you cannot answer a question (proprietary information, lack of authority, etc.).
- 7. Never Go “Off the Record”**
  - Anything you say may be reported.
  - Do not be tricked into answering a question when a reporter says he has turned off a microphone or camera.