

## Risk Communication Guidelines

Ultimately, people judge how dangerous a risk is and decide whether they will take action to reduce it. Therefore, people must get information that will help them evaluate the risk and determine what should be done about the risk.

**To effectively communicate risk to the public, you must consider the following principles:<sup>1</sup>**

- ▶ Involve the community early in the decision-making process.
- ▶ Do not assume what people know or do not know about the risk.
- ▶ Coordinate communication efforts with other credible sources.
- ▶ Use simple, nontechnical language.
- ▶ Use risk comparisons carefully.

**To help people evaluate risk, you must address the following questions:<sup>2</sup>**

- ▶ How much of the substance are they being exposed to?
- ▶ What is the likelihood of accidental exposure? What safety or backup measures are in place?
- ▶ What is the legal standard for the substance? Is the standard controversial or widely accepted as sound?
- ▶ What health or environmental problems is the standard based on? Are there other problems that should be considered?
- ▶ Is the source of the risk information reputable? Who funded the work? What do other sources say?
- ▶ Were the studies done on a population similar to the group it is being compared to?
- ▶ What are the benefits of the substance or facility? What are the tradeoffs?
- ▶ How does the risk compare with other risks that are of concern to the same audience?

**To encourage constructive action, you must provide the following information:<sup>2</sup>**

- ▶ Describe what individuals can do to reduce their exposure.
- ▶ Describe what industry and government are or are not doing to reduce the risk.
- ▶ Describe the benefits, as well as the risks, to the specific audience (not just society in general) of the substance or process of concern.
- ▶ Describe the alternatives and their risks.
- ▶ Describe what people can do to get involved in the decision-making process.
- ▶ Provide information that will help the audience to evaluate the risk.

<sup>1</sup>Covello, Vincent T.; Peter M. Sandman; and Paul Slovic. "Guidelines for Communicating Information About Chemical Risks Effectively and Responsibly." In *Acceptable Evidence: Science and Values in Risk Management*, edited by Deborah Mayo and Rachelle Hollander. New York: Oxford University Press 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Kamrin, Michael; Dolores J. Katz; and Martha L. Walter. *Reporting on Risk: A Journalist's Handbook on Environmental Risk Assessment*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Sea Grant Program and the Foundation for American Communications, 1995, 89-90.