



Want a truly sustainable biosolids recycling program?

Focus on proactive communications

Ned Beecher, Natalie Sierra, Kate Kurtz, Kevin Litwiller, Lakhwinder Hundal, Ben Davis, Tyrone Jue, and JoAnn Livingston

Managing biosolids sustainably is a worthy goal of many water resource recovery facilities (WRRFs). Part of “sustainability” is public support. Achieving sustainability requires attention to myriad details, and it is easy for biosolids managers to become overwhelmed by the complexity. But focusing on one thing – proactive communications – can ensure that you pay attention to the most important details of your biosolids management program.

Proactive communications force you to reflect on the quality of your program. For example, are you uncomfortable giving tours of your biosolids facility? That’s okay if it’s a matter of public speaking. There is someone on your team who could lead tours or you can get communications training. But beyond that, are there things about your program that you are uncomfortable showing? The work conditions? The end product? What needs to happen to make you proud of – and comfortable talking about – your entire operation?

The lens of proactive communications reveals priorities for improving your program and getting closer to sustainability.

Likewise, when you proactively communicate, you start dialogues. You hear from stakeholders what is important to them. This input helps you adjust your priorities and attend to the details that address their concerns.

Dialogue with stakeholders helps you

- frame the discussion in your terms, focusing on the positive aspects of your biosolids story;
- display competence, quality, and transparency;
- demonstrate respect for stakeholders; and
- build credibility and trust.

The goal here is to encourage you to schedule more tours, get more communications and media training, and reach out to your local stakeholders (including reporters) to begin proactively communicating.

Step No. 1: Build commitment within your organization

No one knows a biosolids program like its staff, so that is precisely who should take the lead in communicating. If your program benefits your organization and the people it serves – ratepayers, farmers, etc. – the staff are in the best position to explain those benefits.

Encouraging farmers and other end users to speak up also can provide powerful support, but you have to take the lead.

To develop commitment for biosolids communications, pay attention to the following:

- Seek management support for making communications about your biosolids program a top priority. This is where you have to start. The organization, from management to maintenance, should understand and be proud of your solids management story and recognize its value.
- Make “proactive communications” part of your and your staff’s job descriptions. If you’re going to do it well, someone has to be responsible for it.
- Get communications training. It’s a learnable skill, like wastewater math.
- And this should be a biosolids manager’s goal: “Continuously earn our stakeholders’ confidence, trust, and support for our operations, our products, and our services, which are essential to the long-term viability and sustainability of the practice.”

This quote comes from the 2011 Water Environment Research Foundation (WEF) report, *Conducting Effective Community Outreach*

and Dialogue on Biosolids Land Application: Primer for Biosolids Professionals.

Need more convincing? The sidebar on p. 33 describes some recent examples of good biosolids recycling programs that have learned – the hard way – what happens without proactive communications.

“Most utilities don’t put much effort into biosolids

communication unless a project is in trouble,” noted Steve Frank in the May 2014 *Treatment Plant Operator* article, “Talkin’ Biosolids.” Frank retired as Public Information Officer at the Metropolitan Wastewater Reclamation District in Denver and is now a communications consultant.

Learn from these examples: Proactive communications serve as an insurance policy against public upset and disruptive challenges. It’s worth valuable staff time and money.

Step No 2: Develop your story

Sometimes, in the middle of fixing pumps or analyzing test results it is hard to see the big picture. Your organization is transforming the least pleasant “waste” stream on the planet into clean water, while protecting your community from rampant disease and environmental degradation. Clean water is a powerful story.

On top of that, the biosolids program carefully manages the solids, perhaps, recycling them and, perhaps, generating renewable energy. Around the world, millions of tons of biosolids are generating power and returning to soils, recycling nutrients and organic matter, supporting farms and local economies, replacing energy-intensive fertilizer production, improving soils, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Biosolids recycling is backed by 40 years of science, risk assessment, and quality standards. Biosolids today are resources solving environmental and social challenges.

Your program is a part of this worldwide success story – something to be proud of.

Step No. 3: Identify your stakeholders and connect

Who needs to know about your program?

“Stakeholders are the individuals, groups, or organizations that may affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by decisions related to biosolids management,” says the aforementioned 2011 WERF report. The list includes internal stakeholders (your organization’s employees, managers, and politicians), the media, product users, associated experts (agricultural advisors, local academia), neighbors to land application or facility sites, and community leaders where those sites are located.

As you reach out, keep these ideas in mind.

- Keep key stakeholders informed and up-to-date. Politicians and boards change; you will have to re-educate them regularly.
- Maintain a group of informed stakeholders willing to speak up and defend your program if needed.
- Foster relationships with key media contacts. Develop those relationships while things are quiet.
- Understand that transparency is important. Update stakeholders about your program at least a couple of times per year. Your efforts will be rewarded with trust.

Proactive communication example No 1: King County

In 2014, King County, which includes Seattle, Wash., created a brand for the biosolids it has been producing and marketing successfully for decades: Loop® (www.loopforyoursoil.com).

The county is communicating proactively about Loop as a highly valued product used in bulk land application and as an ingredient in composts and soil blends. This is called an “ingredient brand,” marketed similarly to “Intel inside”. (In contrast, Milorganite, the leading bagged biosolids product, uses a brand that refers to a final product, not an ingredient.)

By branding Loop, King County has taken another bold step in proactive communications. This step brings together and builds on what county staff has done for years:

- Focus on strong markets for its biosolids products (e.g., farms in eastern Washington).
- Work with respected farmers who are community spokespeople.
- Support university research to ensure independent, comprehensive knowledge of the product and its uses.
- Work closely and build trust with regulators.
- Stay hands-on with all projects, ensuring success for the end user every time.
- Network with other utilities to share knowledge and experience with biosolids management.
- Continually improve – do more than required.
- Consider who communicates; farmers and other end users are best. University researchers are independent and effective communicators. Also don’t forget the field applicators and truck drivers who will be interacting with the media and public.
- Recognize that the Internet and other media sources contain a lot of scary misinformation. You need to overcome that by creating and supporting a product that is trusted, understood, and valued by many people who will stand up and defend it, if needed.

Proactive communication example No 2: Dundalk, Ontario

In 2013, a biosolids processing company, Lystek, successfully commissioned a stand-alone facility in Dundalk, Ontario. When the facility was proposed 2 years before, there was community upset. Considerable time and money had to be spent working through the issues and establishing trust and credibility. The company took the following concrete steps:

Listen to and learn about true community needs & concerns. For example, truck traffic was a real concern, along with the potential for odors and other environmental effects. Biosolids managers know odors can be controlled, but the community legitimately cannot be sure. In addition, there were existing First Nations issues, such as unresolved land claims. And there was natural local skepticism about someone from out of town (who are you?) and about biosolids (naturally a polarizing subject matter).

Understanding the community is key. What’s the history of biosolids in the area? What are the demographics of the community? What are the local values/beliefs and economic drivers? Are there existing sensitivities from environmental, political, or neighbor to neighbor audiences?

Commit time & money for the long public outreach ahead. Invest in media training for key people who will be involved in communications.

Work with the community. Find the thought leaders.

The cost of silence

Without proactive communication, your good work is misunderstood and your message gets lost

These three case studies show what can happen, even to effective biosolids management programs. They experienced considerable loss of public trust and spent a lot of time and money to rebuild trust and survive. But survive they did, and they grew stronger. However, there are many other examples of programs permanently shut down because of poor communications.

Proactive communications reduce the risk of significant public upset. It's like an insurance policy.

San Francisco

In 2006, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) began a biosolids compost giveaway program that attracted hundreds of local consumers glad to have free, effective compost. However, in late 2009, two national groups opposed to biosolids recycling targeted the program with an organized, negative media campaign.

SFPUC has highly competent biosolids and public relations staff who historically had been very proactive in the land application program. But they were thrown on the defensive by the compost-giveaway opposition, since it was such a small part of the overall program. They scrambled to get ahead in the media and bolster political and community support, providing science and test results to defend their product. But the swift media tactics of the opposition – including a staged event on the steps of City Hall – proved too much and the giveaway program was suspended. Today, San Francisco biosolids composting continues, as does bulk land application. But the public-facing giveaway portion of the compost program is gone. During the opposition's campaign, there were not enough stakeholders knowledgeable about biosolids to stand up for it. Consumers, SFPUC managers, local politicians, and the media – these key stakeholders were not committed enough to the biosolids and compost giveaway program. Media-savvy opponents filled the knowledge vacuum with misinformation and fear.

The bright side of this story – and any similar story – is that the controversy provided a chance for many more people, including key politicians, to learn more about biosolids.

North Texas

In Texas, public upset over biosolids bulk land application led to several years of heated community conflict and, in 2014, new state regulations. The genesis of the conflict was the common issue of malodors.

When a new interpretation of the regulations in 2007 required longer storage of biosolids before land application, some products generated more odors when land applied. At the same time, development trends were bringing new neighbors closer to the large ranch areas where biosolids are used.

Odor complaints led to hearings held by the regulatory agency at which farmers and opponents spoke to both sides of the biosolids debate. Overall, at these hearings, there was far more support for biosolids use than opposition. The new 2014 regulations that came out of the debate are a compromise that also helped to increase public communication.

In 2015, a bill was proposed to the state house of representatives that would have effectively banned biosolids in one county. The bill died quickly when it went to committee hearing. As in San Francisco, a positive outcome of the public debate was that more Texans became knowledgeable about biosolids. But the original conflict was costly and might have been lessened, to some extent, by proactive communications.

New York State

Recently in western New York, a developer of anaerobic digesters for renewable energy production failed to pay enough attention to biosolids public perceptions and proactive communications.

"Despite having a solid public relations campaign, proper state permits, and working relationships with several farmers in the area ... the company was forced to examine how it approached the public and what type of information it needed to present," according to the January 2015 *Treatment Plant Operator* online article, "Biosolids Battle," which was written by Jennifer West.

The resulting public relations battle has been ongoing for more than 2 years, and most of the biosolids product has been sitting unused, stopping further production. There have been several legal actions, which fortunately have led to decisions in support of biosolids recycling.

But the company learned that "outreach is imperative and should be done early – before opposition emerges," the article says. "[They] discovered what others in the industry know all too well: Biosolids need a public relations facelift."



The company created a public advisory committee, set up an information kiosk on a main street, held public meetings, provided tours of a similar facility, worked with local officials, and sponsored local activities.

Do it right. Pay attention to quality (meet and exceed all regulatory requirements), transparency, fairness, respect, tailoring communications to be understood by stakeholders, being patient and consistent. These actions build trust.

Get out in front with your messages; modern communications happen fast. Respond in a timely fashion. But also remember, no matter what you do, it is unlikely you will ever achieve 100% “buy in” or support – recognize and accept this.

Proactive communication example No 3: Chicago

Chicago’s biosolids program not only dates back to the 1970s, it also has been the subject of regular scientific research throughout its history. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago employs researchers who continually evaluate the benefits of biosolids recycling and current concerns. Because of this, Chicago’s proactive communications lead with positive facts and science, such as the following.

- Farmers love biosolids – they can see profit increases of \$250+/-acre.
- Biosolids improve food nutrient value by supplying micronutrients absent from standard fertilizers.
- Biosolids recycling reduces greenhouse gas emissions and sequesters carbon.
- Biosolids recycling protects water quality. Chicago communications follow several tenets that have resulted in positive media coverage:
 - Highlight testimonials of uses from users of biosolids.
 - Demonstrate compliance and, thus, low risk.
 - Be ready to provide the science and the extensive risk assessment that protects public health and the environment; rebut false claims with sound science.
 - Know the stakeholders: farmers; their neighbors; people along the trucking route; road commissioners; public health, agricultural, and elected officials.
 - Listen to and address concerns in a timely manner.
 - The scientific basis for land application of biosolids is strong and sound. Patiently use science to assess concerns and allegations of harm.

Risk communications

Eventually, as you talk biosolids, you will encounter questions about risk. Communicating about risk is a well-developed science. There is plenty of information now available about risk communications for biosolids management, including two WERF research projects: *Public Perception of Biosolids Recycling: Developing Public Participation and Earning Trust* (2004) and the 2011 report noted above. The most important things to remember are discussed in the paragraphs below.

It’s not just about the biosolids science and risk assessment. Strive “to systematically earn trust and, ultimately, societal support by actively demonstrating: a) your commitment to your people, products and communities; b) good performance; and c) your efforts to communicate effectively,” says the 2011 WERF report.

The 2004 WERF report explains that when people face something new to them, certain factors cause them fear. Biosolids recycling has many of these factors: it is involuntary (to the neighbor), it is unfamiliar, it is seen as industrial (not natural), it is memorable (especially if there is odor), there is uncertainty (“Do you know exactly what is in every truckload?”), and there are no obvious benefits (to the neighbor). These factors upset people, and when they go on the Internet and search on “sludge,” their fears may be reinforced.

Anything you can do to reduce these factors helps them feel more comfortable. For example, proactive communications makes biosolids more familiar and less industrial and demonstrates benefits. Demonstration plots comparing performance of biosolids with compost and commercial fertilizers give the concerned public confidence in environmental safety of your product (seeing is believing!).

As Peter Sandman, a leading social scientist noted, “People think it’s dangerous because they’re upset, not the opposite.” Proactive communications and building relationships will reduce people’s upset and, in most cases, reduce their fears.

Modern risk communications research emphasizes dialogue – two-way communications.

Research has found that the most important single factor is trust. Proactive communications – including dialogue – will help build trust and knowledge about your program. Then, if someone attacks it, you have knowledgeable supporters to speak for it. (Third parties are more believable than you.)

As trust grows, people become less afraid. Trust builds from the communicator (a more senior person is more trusted); it also builds from the organization, its past history, and the process of communications. Trust is built on demonstrations of honesty, shared control, competence, openness, fairness, and the totality of your actions and statements (are you doing what you say you're doing?). You have to earn trust. It takes time. And it can be lost quickly.

Working with the media

Reporters and journalists are people. Therefore, “media skills” are really just “people skills.” As you respond to or reach out to the media, display those skills: have a positive attitude; show enthusiasm, motivation, and dedication; and be trustworthy, helpful, sincere, and appreciative. As with any stakeholder, it's about building trust and a relationship. Consider every interaction an opportunity to share your biosolids story.

Reporters don't necessarily know about biosolids – it's likely new to them. It's a complicated topic and they need (but don't necessarily have) time to absorb it all. Most strive to be fair. Try to understand their needs: deadlines, time limitations, and the need to tell both sides of the story. Remember that asking challenging questions is part of their job; don't take it personally.

And if you want to gain practice in a lower-stress situation, get in touch with your local media *before* a crisis, to help them build background knowledge and to develop the relationship.

To catch their attention you'll need a timely, interesting story. It could be about a new process, new customers, or an event that's coming up. The “perfect pitch” answers these questions:

- What is the story?
- Why does anyone care?
- What are the facts?
- What is the timing?
- What are the visuals?

As you prepare for the interview, establish your goals. How can the media support your goals? Anticipate follow-up reactions.

Advice from the media

At workshops on biosolids communication held at the WEF/IWA Residuals and Biosolids Conference 2015 and WEFTEC® 2015, independent journalists who recently wrote about biosolids provided their tips and insights. These journalists had been assigned to a biosolids story having known nothing about it previously. The items below reflect what they felt and what you need to be aware of.

- People have legitimate concerns around biosolids reuse, especially regarding emerging pollutants.
- There are unanswered questions about biosolids; be honest about them.
- Biosolids operators are knowledgeable, but the science is where journalists can get the most “objective” information. Provide the science. Have evidence to back up your claims. Journalists thrive on specifics, not generalities.

- Remember your audience: Who is going to be reading the article or watching the TV piece? Speak to those people.
- Be honest and reliable. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then track it down.
- Answer the question you're asked; not something you'd rather be asked.
- When appropriate, admit mistakes – and then tell how you addressed them.
- The media's biggest challenges are limited time and scheduling. So, make yourself available and provide plenty of information. Strive to become the primary, helpful source by having readily available phone numbers, contact information, and data. Provide access to biosolids facilities, sites, people, and processes.
- Demeanor is important. No quips or off-handed remarks. Don't be negative about anyone; show understanding of others and their concerns.
- Don't say anything you don't want to see on TV or in print. You are always on the record.

Now go out and communicate

Armed with these recommendations, now is the time to advance proactive communications for your biosolids program. One simple way to start is to offer tours of your biosolids process and active field sites. Reach out to a local reporter.

Know your program and your story well. Then, lead the discussion. Maybe your program never will face a public upset, but regardless, prepare for it. Build trust, and your program will have supporters and be resilient.

Ned Beecher is executive director of the North East Biosolids and Residuals Association (Tamworth, N.H.). **Natalie Sierra** is supervising engineer at the Andover, Mass., office of Brown and Caldwell (Walnut Creek, Calif.). **Kate Kurtz** is a Loop biosolids project manager at King County Water Treatment Division (Seattle). **Kevin Litwiller** is director of business development for Lystek (Cambridge, Ontario). **Lakhwinder Hundal** is supervising environmental soil scientist at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (Chicago). **Ben Davis** is Environmental Program Manager for Renda Environmental (Fort Worth, Texas). **Tyrone Jue** is director of communications at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (San Francisco). **JoAnn Livingston** is a freelance journalist based in Waxahachie, Texas.

The authors (except Livingston) are members of the WEF Residuals & Biosolids Committee's Outreach and Education Subcommittee, of which Sierra is chair.