

Public Perception of Biosolids Recycling: Developing Public Participation and Earning Trust

The ultimate goal of a biosolids recycling program's outreach, education, public relations, and public participation efforts should be to develop public relationships with all stakeholders who may be potentially impacted by a biosolids recycling program. This report provides recommendations for biosolids managers who are currently working with or planning to work with their communities. It presents and discusses 12 steps for developing and implementing a public outreach and participation program (see Table 1). Many of the recommendations are not new, but their consistent implementation by biosolids managers may mean the difference between success and failure. The recommendations included in this report can be applied to any situation in which there is considerable public interest and a need for public participation.

Developing the Twelve Steps

To develop their recommendations,

investigators collected more than 1,000 references from peer-reviewed, published, and gray literature regarding public perceptions, as well as interactions with biosolids recycling programs and social science literature on communications, public perceptions, and participation. A searchable electronic, annotated bibliography is included on the CD-ROM.

The literature review was conducted to learn what has been written about biosolids recycling by those in the biosolids management field as well as interested persons outside the field. A wide variety of perspectives on environmental issues and biosolids recycling were included.

The team also developed 14 case studies that document and analyze a variety of experiences with public perceptions and public involvement in biosolids recycling programs. The details of the case studies are included on the CD-ROM. The experiences described in these case studies range from programs that have

Table 1. Twelve Steps for Developing Public Participation and Earning Trust

Step 1.	Build commitment within your organization.
Step 2.	Understand the national and local context.
Step 3.	Learn more about conflict.
Step 4.	Determine what is beyond your control; work on what you can control.
Step 5.	Determine who your stakeholders are.
Step 6.	Get input from key stakeholders as soon as possible, early in the process.
Step 7.	Redefine success.
Step 8.	Build public relationships.
Step 9.	Improve communications, especially listening and dialogue.
Step 10.	Provide information useful to recipients.
Step 11.	Don't be afraid of conflict—work patiently through it.
Step 12.	Continue to monitor public perceptions and public relationships.

BENEFITS

- Provides biosolids management programs with recommended resources, strategies, and tools for developing enhanced two-way communications, greater public participation, and the trust of communities in which they operate.
- Provides understanding regarding public's perception of biosolids recycling and what influences those perceptions.
- Provides biosolids managers with understanding of science research regarding similar environmental and public policy issues.

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developed considerable public support by developing effective communications, trust, and long-term relationships with key "gatekeepers" to programs that were stopped by public outrage. The case studies provided additional insights into how public acceptance issues noted in the literature review play out as biosolids recycling programs interact with the public.

Based on the literature review and case studies, the investigators developed the first-ever, large-scale national survey regarding public perceptions of biosolids recycling. The details of this survey are included on the CD-ROM. Highlights of the significant findings include:

- Knowledge of the term "biosolids" is limited (only 3% of the respondents can accurately define "biosolids" and another 11% had a fairly good idea of what "biosolids" are).
- Regional differences are minimal regarding the level of public knowledge and perceptions of biosolids recycling.
- People are uneasy and have questions about biosolids recycling.
- The choice of words makes a significant difference: using "sewage sludge" instead of "biosolids" creates a marked drop in positive response to a neighbor's hypothetical use of the material.
- If they need to learn more about biosolids, people want more information about many different aspects of biosolids recycling.
- Support for wastewater treatment is high (93%).
- Faced with a hypothetical situation in which biosolids are used by a neighbor, people say they would turn to and trust friends and neighbors, government agencies, and academic researchers for initial information.
- Faced with a hypothetical situation in which biosolids are used by a neighbor, people say they would trust government and others who appear knowledgeable and objective; they strongly distrust those with a profit motive.
- People favor constructive uses of biosolids (creating energy, recycling nutrients).
- Most people think that biosolids recycling is a relatively small risk to them.
- Strong arguments in favor of biosolids

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recycling are: Biosolids recycling returns nutrients to the soil, and recycling biosolids disposes of a necessary waste.

- Although they clearly expressed support for the concept of recycling biosolids, respondents indicated that the strongest argument against biosolids recycling is not enough is known, indicating that they are uncomfortable with their own lack of information and what they perceive to be an overall lack of information on this topic.

Finally, investigators held a one-day workshop in the Boston area in April 2002 in order to bring additional expertise from the social sciences to the project. At this workshop, the project team and advisors from around the continent learned more about how public perception develops, what affects the public's understanding of and response to a proposed project, and how biosolids managers might better interact with the public to

gain greater trust and improve their programs. Details from this workshop are included on the CD-ROM.

Final Recommendations

In addition to the 12 steps, the researchers had many other recommendations for how to make a public participation program effective. Researchers encourage biosolids managers to pay attention to social aspects of their programs. An overarching guiding principle is to say things and take actions that build constructive long-term public relationships. Building positive public relationships hinges on the following principles, which have become central WERF themes identified from social science literature and experience through this project and a related one. They recommend that managers think of public relationships as an umbrella held up by:

- trust;
- fairness;
- quality of information;
- excellent communications; and
- organizational commitment to public outreach, dialog, and participation.

They also stress the importance of actively listening to all stakeholders and recommend that programs engage stakeholders as early in the process as possible. They say such programs should focus on building long-term relationships.

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