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INTRODUCTION

From time to time NRCS staff may have contact with the news media. A reporter may call you to ask questions about a program or project you're working on or issues that relate to conservation. In most cases, NRCS's media policy is an open one. Some organizations only allow a single spokesperson to speak with reporters. Our approach is to help reporters get information in an expedient manner.

Helping a reporter obtain accurate information in a timely manner helps to ensure positive news coverage of NRCS and of local agriculture and conservation. If handled incorrectly though, interaction with the media can result in a story that is inaccurately reported or negatively presented. It can take months and even years to undo the damage done by one bad news story.

There may be times when it is not appropriate for you to speak with a reporter, but instead refer them a designated spokesperson or another organization. There are also federal government restrictions on what information can be released to the media.

On the other hand, news coverage is an important outreach tool, so there will be times when you will want to generate publicity for a NRCS program or project.

The Public Affairs Officer is always available to handle media calls directly, provide you with guidance or assistance in responding to media inquiries, and to assist in your outreach efforts by helping you get publicity.

The following guidelines will help you determine when it's OK for you to speak with the media and will provide some helpful tips and techniques for speaking with reporters. Please also see the sections on what to do in crisis type situations or when you want to get publicity.

1. **Be sure you are the one who should be answering the reporter's questions.** Are you the most complete and accurate source of information on the topic the reporter is asking about? You **are** the appropriate source if a reporter is interested in a project you head up, an area for which you are fully responsible or subject matter about which you are knowledgeable.

If you have any doubt that you may not be the appropriate person, or if the issue is complicated or controversial, don't hesitate to direct the reporter to the Public Affairs Officer who will track down the best person to address the questions and will work with the reporter to arrange interviews, etc.

Please note the following:

- **If the inquiry is from a national, regional or statewide media outlet, is regarding a statewide issue, or is for a comment on a sensitive issue, refer the call to the Public Affairs Officer or State Conservationist's office immediately.**
- For routine calls, please notify the Public Affairs Officer within a day or two so that public affairs staff may track calls and resulting coverage.
- Be sure to provide the Public Affairs Officer and/or State Conservationist with any necessary background information.
- Don't offer opinions or comments about something beyond NRCS's scope, for example a program under a different USDA agency or a state agency. Refer the reporter to the proper organization instead.

2. **Know to whom you are speaking.** Ask the reporter for his or her name and for which publication, radio or TV station he or she is working. Please write down this information, and by the end of the call you should also get the reporter's phone number and fax number so that you or someone else can follow up.

3. **Assume from the very beginning of the call that anything you say will be quoted in print or broadcast on the radio.** Phrase your responses accordingly. Do not speculate or say anything "off the record." Don't joke around or say anything that would be embarrassing to the

government or yourself. Be especially careful in using technical terms; if you must use them, be sure to define them. Radio reporters will ask if it's OK to "roll some tape" if they want to record your response, so be aware that anything you say after that point could be used on the radio. All reporters will be taking notes from the very start of the call.

4. **Follow up with something in writing.** Reporters work hard to present accurate information, they are often trying to get something written or on the air in minutes or hours about a topic they know little or nothing about. If you have any doubt whether the reporter fully understood what you told them, it is imperative that you immediately follow up the conversation with something in writing that presents the basic facts that you told them. The Public Affairs Officer will be glad to work with you to write this up and get it off to the reporter -- but be aware that this must happen IMMEDIATELY. And again, double-check that anything you put in writing is clear, complete, and accurate.

5. **Return calls promptly.** Reporters often work on tight deadlines and will appreciate it if you get back to them right away. If you tell the reporter that you'll get back to them with more information, do so as soon as you can. If there will be a delay in getting the information or there is a reason why you can't provide the information, call back to tell them so. This will go a long way to developing a good relationship with the reporter, which will pay off when you want publicity.

6. **Be aware of what information is public and what is confidential.** Much, but not all, of the information retained by a government agency is public information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). See the section of this document on the FOIA. If you have any questions about what information can be made public, please contact the Public Affairs Officer and/or FOIA Officer (SAO) right away.

7. **Notify the Public Affairs Officer and your supervisor of the call.** Please provide the reporter's name, who they work for, phone number, what they asked and how you responded. The Public Affairs Officer may want to follow up.

TIPS FOR SPEAKING WITH REPORTERS

To develop a positive relationship with the media, it helps to understand how and why reporters and editors do their jobs, and what they expect when they call. Newspapers, radio stations and television stations are in the information business, so they run stories they believe are relevant to their local readers, listeners or viewers. When speaking with the news media, please observe the following guidelines:

- **Be cooperative.** Most reporters are decent, intelligent people with a job to do. In many instances, we have initiated the contact by sending out a news release. Since they are giving us free publicity we want to make it as easy for them as possible.
- **Be brief.** Print articles must fit the publication's space constraints and broadcast news must fit the time available. If you make your point succinctly, the media will convey it. If you throw in a lot of detail, they may not be able to figure out what your main point is and might leave it out or take one detail out of context.
- **Don't use jargon and acronyms.** If you must use a technical term, be sure to define or explain it.
- **Stick to your message.** Be aware that some reporters will use techniques to get you say something you didn't intend to say. For example, they may ask the question again, phrased differently. Or, they may not respond to something you say, hoping you'll feel the need to fill the silence, perhaps saying more than you should. Stick to your message and repeat it if necessary.
- **Never speculate.** If you do not know the answer, say so. Guesses, however well-intentioned, will come back to haunt you. Offer only the facts and never falsify, slant, or color your answers.
- **Don't use the phrase "no comment."** Sometimes it's best not to comment but the phrase has become a cliché and it sounds like you're hiding something. If you feel you shouldn't comment, that's fine. It's better to explain why you can't comment and, if possible, refer them to someone who can.
- **Never refuse to be named.** If you are not the designated spokesperson, you should not be speaking to the media, period. If you are, your willingness to be quoted enhances your credibility.
- **Never speak "off the record."** There is no guarantee that they won't quote you and even if they don't it may be obvious that the comment came from you anyway.
- **Accentuate the positive.** While we may help farmers address environmental "problems" on their land, we do not want to cause any unnecessary public relations problems for them, individually or as a group. First, you should have the landowner's consent to talk about conservation practices on a specific farm. Even when speaking generally, consider the terms you use. "Natural resource concerns" is less alarming than "environmental problems."
- **Express appropriate concern.** If there is a problem, we do not want to appear unconcerned or defensive, regardless of who is responsible.
- **Keep your cool.** If a reporter gets testy or provocative, do not take the bait. Be as cooperative and understanding as possible.
- **Give information to the media as soon as you can.** If you do not have certain information, explain why and promise to get it to them as soon as you do. Then, be sure to follow up. This goes a long way in fostering good relationships with the media, which helps us in our public information efforts in the long run.
- **Don't joke with a reporter, especially someone you don't know very well.** Humor can be misinterpreted. It's best to maintain a cordial, but professional, relationship with the media.
- **Do not argue with a reporter about the news value of a story.** It's news if the editor says it is news.
- **Never ask to see the story before it goes to press.** Most reporters and editors would never honor such a request. If you think something you said may be misquoted by the reporter, ask to have your quotes read back to you, offer further clarification and follow up in writing.
- **Recommend additional sources outside NRCS,** when appropriate, that can supplement or support information that you have provided to the reporter. Helping a reporter "flesh out" their story with additional sources lends credibility to you and the information you provide.

HANDLING BREAKING NEWS

Any time something happens that might attract media attention, especially negative attention, please contact your supervisor and the Public Affairs Officer immediately, even outside business hours. The Public Affairs Officer will in turn notify the State Conservationist. The Public Affairs Officer will advise you on the proper procedure for contacting or responding to reporters.

This is particularly important if the situation is of a serious nature; for example, something that affects public safety, an environmental hazard, or a legal matter. You might want to discuss within your office what to do if a serious situation happens outside business hours to determine in advance what you should do and get the necessary phone numbers.

The Public Affairs Officer will need to know the answers to the following questions. This information will aid in responding to inquiries from the media, the public and other interested parties.

- What happened and when did it occur?
- Who was involved (people and organizations)?
- What is NRCS's official role in this type of situation?
- Was that function performed?
- If not, why not?
- Have any NRCS staff been contacted by and/or spoken to the media? If so, please provide the name of the reporter and the media organization.

WHEN YOU WANT PUBLICITY

Many of the activities and projects that you work on are newsworthy and could generate positive publicity for the agency and for our customers. As you plan projects and events always be sure to consider publicity as an integral component. Contact the Public Affairs Officer who will work with you to determine the best ways to promote your activities; the earlier, the better.

Please consult with the Public Affairs Officer before sending out a news release, planning an event or contacting a reporter directly.

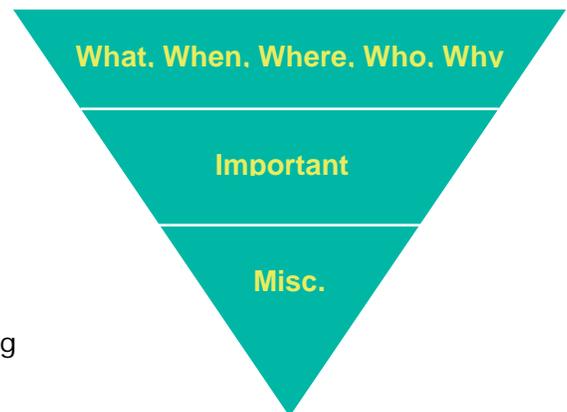
NRCS news releases and media events may need to be coordinated in conjunction with National Headquarters. We may want to invite the Chief or Secretary to attend the event or announce your news. The Public Affairs Officer can assist you in determining this.

WRITING A NEWS RELEASE

The primary means of delivering news to the media is with a news release. If you're going to write the draft yourself, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Write your release in the style of a news article
- Put the most important facts in the lead paragraph
- Get into the details in later paragraphs
- Be brief - one or two pages only
- Be accurate
- Make sentences simple and active
- Use short words
- Use short paragraphs
- Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly
- Use proper punctuation and grammar
- Avoid jargon and acronyms...or explain their meaning

The Inverted Pyramid



Reporters usually want to flesh out their stories by interviewing people who are affected by news. For example, if we send out a news release on a program sign-up, reporters may call and ask for the names of farmers in their area who have participated in the program. They'll probably also ask for their phone numbers, how much money they received and what the money was for.

We must be very careful to comply with federal laws concerning public and private information. When you receive such a request from the media, the best approach is to explain to the reporter that you'll have to contact the landowner to get their permission to give out their contact information. After getting permission, be sure to follow up with the reporter right away. Let the landowner provide the reporter with details about their contract and operation.

If the reporter insists on getting this type of information directly from our agency, they will likely have to file a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. All such requests are handled by our state FOIA officer. Direct the reporter to the FOIA officer (see contact info below).

Here's an overview of the federal laws concerning public and private information. The FOIA officer will make the determination of how the laws apply to the request.

The **Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002** (the 2002 Farm Bill), mandates that information provided to NRCS in order to be eligible to participate in conservation programs is not considered to be public information and is not releasable to the public by any employee, contractor, or consultant. This requirement does not affect the public accessibility of payment information, including names and addresses.

In limited circumstances, non-public information obtained from individuals may be disclosed or

released only to the extent necessary to enforce natural resources conservation programs or to assist in providing technical or financial assistance for any natural resources conservation program administered by NRCS or the Farm Service Agency.

The **Freedom of Information Act**, 5 U.S.C. 552, as amended by the Freedom of Information Reform Act of 1986, generally provides that any person has a court enforceable right to access federal agency records, except when portions of those records are protected from disclosure by one of nine exemptions or by one of three new special law enforcement record exclusions.

In October 2001, the government reiterated its commitment to maintaining an open and accountable system of government through FOIA. At the same time, the government recognizes the importance of protecting sensitive, commercial, and personal interests that can be implicated in government records.

The **Privacy Act** of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a, was enacted to protect individuals against unwarranted invasions of their privacy stemming from the collection, maintenance, use, and disclosure of personal information about them by federal agencies. It also grants individuals the right of access to records maintained on themselves unless covered by an exemption, provides procedures for correcting errors in those records, and requires that agencies publish notification of systems of records that are maintained on individuals.

For state-specific questions about FOIA or to file a FOIA request, contact the Iowa ASTC for Management and Strategy or the NRCS FOIA Officer for Iowa.

KEY MESSAGES WORKSHEET

When speaking with the media, it's sometimes helpful to write down the key messages that you want to communicate, along with a few supporting facts. Copy and use this sheet to list your three most important messages any time you're going to be interviewed by the media.

1.)

Supporting fact:

2.)

Supporting fact:

3.)

Supporting fact:

MEDIA CALL CHECK LIST

- Be sure that you are the one who should be speaking to the reporter. If not, refer the call to the right person.
- Return or refer calls promptly.
- Know to whom you are speaking. Get the following information:
 - Reporter's name
 - Name of publication, radio station or TV station
 - Phone number
 - Fax number
 - E-mail address, if possible
- Offer only factual information that is appropriate to release.
- Offer the State Conservationist an opportunity to comment.
- Notify the Public Affairs Officer and supervisor.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Together, we can work with the news media to effectively communicate with the public about our programs and services. If you have any questions about any of these tips or how they might apply to a specific situation, please contact:

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