



Telling the Watershed Story

Tips on Working Your Local News Media

Why Watershed Project Sponsors Should Continue to Tell the Watershed Story:

- To keep the public, state legislators and Congressmen informed of the benefits of the projects and of the work and responsibilities of project sponsors
- To gain support and funding for planned work
- To gain support and funding for inspection and operation and maintenance of completed projects
- To keep the public, state legislators and Congressmen informed of any needed rehabilitation projects that will require both local and federal funding.

After a watershed project is completed and practices such as flood control dams are installed it is easy to stop publicizing the project. But much work and expense still remains in inspections, repairs, operation and maintenance and sometimes rehabilitation.

While many project sponsors have limited staff or may not have someone trained in public information there are ways to carry out and an information program about watershed projects.

Here are a few tips for project sponsors in getting the watershed story in the local news outlets:

Smaller newspapers and radio stations may have limited staff and often are open to receive submitted articles and news releases from sponsors. Sponsors should make contact with these news outlets and ask these questions:

- Do they prefer to write or report their own stories or will they accept submitted stories?
- Who is the primary reporter or staff person that would cover watershed/conservation stories and what is their contact information?
- What is their deadline for articles?
- How do they prefer to receive information, email, hard copy, etc?

- What kind of photos do they prefer?
- Do they have staff members that would cover events such as ground breaking or dedication ceremonies?

Larger newspapers usually prefer to use their own staff members to write articles. Most papers will have someone on staff designated to write conservation/environmental articles. In this case they just need to be provided with story leads. It is important to develop a relationship with someone at the newspaper to know what kind of stories they would be interested in and don't provide them with things they will not report on.

Writing Articles for Local News Papers:

Writing a news article or an announcement about an upcoming event such as a ground breaking ceremony for a new dam is pretty simple, just follow a few simple rules.

- Put the most important information in the first paragraph and answer the questions: what, when, where, why and sometimes how.
- Example: The Pontotoc County Conservation District (who) will hold a ground breaking ceremony for the construction of a new flood control dam in the Sandy Creek Watershed (what) on April 2, 2018 (when). The ceremony will be held at the new dam location three miles south and two miles east of the Countyside Store at the intersection of Highways 108 and 66 in the eastern part of Pontotoc County (where).
- Additional details about the new dam and ceremony can be included in the following paragraphs. Remember if a newspaper doesn't have room for all your information, they will cut from the bottom of your news release, so put most important information in the first paragraph, second most important in second paragraph and so on.

Ways to Generate Interest in the Watershed Program

The media may not be interested just in the fact that there are flood control dams in the county. Sponsors have to provide them with something news worthy. Here are a few ways to get the them interested in writing an article or covering an event:

- Take advantage of events such as extreme rainfall events to publicize the flood control benefits of the project.
- Use ground breaking or dedication ceremonies and invite legislators, Congressmen and other dignitaries.
- When constructing a new dam, provide status updates to the media with photos, such as construction begins, construction reaches half way mark to completion, and construction completed.
- Organize a tour of a watershed project. Invite local media representatives.
- Develop fact sheets on watershed projects or individual dams pointing out benefits such as flood control, recreation, water supply, etc. and send to news media.
- Send a note to local outlets about special occasions such anniversaries as “Dams have provided protection for ____County for 50 years”.
- Invite media staff members to take a tour of a project and explain how flood control dams function to reduce flooding, etc. In other words educate them on watershed projects.
- Utilize social media such as Facebook, web pages, and Twitter to highlight watershed success stories and reach additional audiences.

Ways to Ensure the News Media Gets the Information Correct:

Many media staff members have limited knowledge about watershed projects and

conservation, so sponsors should be careful in using terms that might not be familiar to them.

One of the best ways to ensure the media gets the information correct when covering an event such as a ground breaking ceremony is provide them with a fact sheet about the event. They will appreciate it because they won't have to take as many notes or ask as many questions.

This will help ensure the names and facts about the project will be correct in the article, social media or radio report.

Working with Radio Stations

Smaller radio stations have limited staff and don't usually have someone to go to the field to cover stories. But they can be a valuable resource to help publicize events and other functions.

When sending radio stations information about upcoming events to publicize, consider these things:

- Does the station have a community bulletin board or designated time to make public announcements?
- What is their deadline to get information to them?
- Would they use someone familiar with the event to come to the station to talk about it?
- Can they use a 15 or 30 second spot announcement about the event? And if so do they prefer to record their own or could they use someone else to record it? If they can use someone else to record it, type it out and read it over timing it so it doesn't exceed their time limit.

Keep in mind that time is limited on announcements so keep them short just sticking to the needed information such as date, time, location and brief description of the event.

For more information about working with the media visit the National Watershed web page at watershedcoalition.org. Look under the Publications tab for the “Media and Information Packet for Sponsors”. This packet provides tips on holding events, developing a media backgrounder and other information about working with the news media.

July 2018