

## **REPORT: EM COMMUNICATIONS**

September 25, 2008

Submitted by the EMAB Communications Subcommittee

### **Background:**

In response to the Environmental Management Advisory Board's (EMAB) expressed concern that a communications function was not part of the Office of Environmental Management's (EM) 2006 proposed reorganization, the Assistant Secretary requested that the Board make a recommendation as to whether EM should create a communications position with direct report to his office. In support of this request, EMAB established a subcommittee to review how communications within the Department and with stakeholders were being handled in EM, and report back to the full Board on its findings.

The Communications Subcommittee's original report included five recommendations and was presented to EMAB during the Board's August 2006 meeting. All five recommendations were unanimously adopted by the full Board and officially submitted to EM shortly thereafter. The primary recommendation contained in the Subcommittee's report encouraged the program to establish a permanent position in the Office of the Assistant Secretary that would be responsible for the coordination of EM's internal and external communications. In addition, the report recommended that EM incorporate communications into all aspects of decision-making; incorporate a communications element into performance appraisal plans for key managers; measure the effectiveness of existing communications tools; and provide timely and adequate information and responses to stakeholders, including local, state, and tribal governments (Recommendations 2006-06 – 2006-10).

The Assistant Secretary accepted all five recommendations and directed his staff to initiate and monitor their implementation. For example, almost immediately after the Board's August meeting, EM created a Senior Communications Advisor position, which was filled by October 2006. In 2007, EM decided to further expand this communications function by establishing the Office of Communications and External Affairs (OCEA), which is headed by a Director who reports directly to the Assistant Secretary. EMAB's Communications Subcommittee provided input on the proposed OCEA Director's position description, which included duties and responsibilities. The OCEA Director position was filled in late 2007. In addition, a communications element was added to the performance appraisal plans for members of the Senior Executive Service in 2007 and incorporated into all managers' appraisal plans in 2008.

During EMAB's September 2007 meeting, the Communications Subcommittee updated the Board on EM's progress in implementing the recommendations made in FY 2006. Board members also had an opportunity to dialogue with the Assistant Secretary about communication tools being used in the private and public sectors; suggestions offered included the use of internet surveys, suggestion boxes, and interactive town hall meetings

that can be held via conference call. The Communications Subcommittee also presented three recommendations to EMAB, all of which were later adopted by the full Board and submitted to the Assistant Secretary for approval. The recommendations directed EM to:

- Continue to improve internal communication through the use of creative communication tools and methods, in addition to measuring the effectiveness of the program's current practices (2008-06);
- Continue to actively monitor external communications with the stakeholder community and general public (2008-07);
- And, further promote EM's programmatic successes (2008-08).

In FY 2008, the Assistant Secretary charged EMAB to continue identifying useful and creative communications tools that could be adapted to EM. Furthermore, he directed the Communications Subcommittee to provide counsel and continue an open dialogue with the OCEA, specifically with regard to its strategic planning and other related functions.

During EMAB's May 2008 meeting, the Director of the OCEA provided an update on his office's activities and priorities, and spoke of the need for a strategic plan that would address the development of core messages and the application of best corporate practices. The OCEA Director also emphasized the importance of broadening EM's public and stakeholder outreach in ways that will encourage greater participation and foster public trust and program acceptance.

The Assistant Secretary has identified the topic of communications as a high priority for EMAB and specifically asked for the Board's input with regard to tools (e.g., plain language) and strategies that will allow EM to be proactive in its communications, and particularly in those dialogues concerning site closure. Additionally, the Assistant Secretary asked EMAB to work with the OCEA to institutionalize communications in the EM program and serve as a resource for the further development of OCEA functions and strategic planning mechanisms.

### **Findings and Observations:**

The recommendations identified below are the products of discussions held with the OCEA Director as well as informal reviews of various EM communications tools, such as the EM portal and website. Due to its members' affiliations with various external groups, including the regulatory and local government communities, the Communications Subcommittee has also had the opportunity to observe firsthand how organizational changes at EM have affected communications with stakeholders, regulators, and the general public.

The Communications Subcommittee is impressed with the Assistant Secretary's willingness to embrace the challenge to move away from a reactive 'defense' mode to a proactive 'engage the constituency' mode. Obviously, the Assistant Secretary recognizes that when the sites' mission transitioned from weapons production to cleanup and environmental remediation, the need for secrecy lessened. The establishment and organizational placement of the OCEA has set the right tone and represents one of the

critical building blocks needed to aid EM's transformation from a culture of secrecy to one that fosters open communication.

EM should also be commended for the progress it has made in implementing each of the recommendations contained in EMAB's previous communications reports. These recommendations should be viewed as logical first steps in strengthening EM's communications capabilities and should be further developed over time. Once adequate staffing for the OCEA is complete, EM will be in a position to take each recommendation to the next level of implementation, and is strongly encouraged to do so.

### **Recommendations:**

To further aid the Assistant Secretary in his efforts to improve communications, the Communications Subcommittee offers the following recommendations:

#### **Recommendation 2008-12: Develop a strategic communications plan, or roadmap, in preparation for the next administration.**

With less than 18 months having elapsed since the OCEA was established, it is unlikely that the Office will be completely functional before the end of the current administration. Therefore, in order to reduce the risk of EM losing its momentum in institutionalizing changes that continue to improve communications, it is important that the OCEA develop a strategic communications plan, or roadmap, before the beginning of the next administration and make it available to incoming officials. This roadmap should include detail regarding the OCEA's functions, communications strategies, structure and management, and any existing internal and external communications-related policies and procedures. In addition, the roadmap should define the OCEA's outreach initiatives (both existing and planned), which are designed to broaden EM support from external groups (e.g. Congressional constituencies), and identify any tangible results.

#### **Recommendation 2008-13: Expand outreach efforts to build support for, and acceptance of the EM program.**

When its mission changed from weapons production to nuclear waste cleanup, EM did not take advantage of the opportunity to promote its charge and make its mission a national priority. For example, members of Congress without sites located in their districts are relatively unaware that EM manages the largest environmental cleanup program in the world.

Similarly, EM's nuclear waste cleanup mission should be a priority and major concern for environmental groups; however, the messages that might appeal to these groups were either never adequately disseminated or were crafted in such a way that they did not resonate with the organizations' missions. Unfortunately, the implication of this breakdown in communication with external groups is that EM has never been considered a priority for much of the Congress. Ultimately, this makes it difficult for EM to obtain the level of support needed to ensure the timely success and completion of its work.

In order to raise the level of awareness and promote EM's mission, the OCEA Director has begun an initiative to significantly broaden EM's outreach efforts to both members of Congress and external organizations. Increased support from external groups will add legitimacy and importance to EM's programmatic efforts and in turn, should have a positive effect on the Congress as it considers funding for EM.

The Communications Subcommittee also believes that early stakeholder involvement will lead to greater acceptance of the program and increase the likelihood that EM's decisions will be effectively implemented. Therefore, in support of EM's goal to broaden stakeholder outreach, the Subcommittee has assisted the OCEA by providing contact information for external groups whose interests are consistent with program's environmental cleanup mission, and stands ready to continue to support this initiative as needed. These groups included the Council of State Governments, Southern States Energy Board, and National Conference of State Legislatures.

**Recommendation 2008-14: Update publications and other informational materials that help promote EM's mission.**

EM needs compelling informational materials to help tell the program's "story." The OCEA has recognized the need to better explain and promote EM's mission and is in the process of developing a number of basic materials, such as the recently completed "EM Story" brochure and video. Additionally, an update is underway for two of EM's important publications, *Linking Legacies: Connecting the Cold War Nuclear Weapons Production Processes to Their Environmental Consequences* (January 1997) and its companion piece, *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom* (January 1996). Once the revised informational materials are published, copies should be widely disseminated and made available to the public through a variety of forums, including conferences and other events. The broad distribution of these materials is consistent with the OCEA's mission to reach new audiences and gain programmatic support. EM should continue to support this practice and seriously consider distributing its publications to all groups that have a stated interest in environmental cleanup.

**Recommendation 2008-15: Encourage efforts that promote and institutionalize the use of plain language in all communications.**

The overuse of acronyms in both written and oral communications is pervasive throughout EM, as is the inappropriate use of technical language. The Subcommittee recognizes that limiting the use of technical language is a difficult feat to achieve. However, the widespread use of such language often confuses the public and acts as a barrier to effective communication. All reasonable efforts that promote the use and institutionalization of plain language must be considered and adopted, especially as EM and the OCEA work to expand knowledge and support for EM programs among the general public and external organizations. Even with the full support of the Assistant Secretary, implementing and institutionalizing this practice will require vigilance on the part of all employees.

**Recommendation 2008-16: Develop Standard Operating Policies and Procedures for the Office of Communications and External Affairs.**

Standard Operating Policies and Procedures, if carefully drafted, will promote consistency and uniformity in written communications both at headquarters and in the field, thereby setting the standard for EM documents and publications (e.g. press releases) and ensuring the use of corporate best practices (e.g., use of plain language). By providing guidance to EM staff regarding how communications will be handled, the SOPP will also become a key tool that the program can rely on in its efforts to integrate communications into all aspects of decision-making.

Until recently, the OCEA has not had the opportunity to develop a SOPP due to inadequate staffing levels. However, with the latest increase in OCEA personnel, this challenge should no longer be an issue. The Communications Subcommittee recognizes that as a new organization, the OCEA may have difficulty balancing the difficult task of setting up a functional organization while simultaneously responding to its day-to-day needs and responsibilities. Nonetheless, the EMAB Communications Subcommittee hopes that the development and completion of a SOPP will become a priority for the OCEA prior to the end of the current administration.