

Communications Workgroup | Needs Assessment

February 2018

Mission

Our current mission pushes us in two directions. On one hand, we are asked to support the internal Chesapeake Bay Program (by providing professional guidance to its Communications Office and expert advice and recommendations to its groups). On the other, we are asked to support external Chesapeake Bay Program partners (by providing a collaborative forum to discuss communications issues, meet communications needs and conduct public relations with the media, the public and other critical audiences). We don't seem to have the capacity to serve both of these audiences, and external Chesapeake Bay Program partners have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of emphasis we have placed on Chesapeake Bay Program work.

Note: The fact that neither internal nor external groups know what they can ask of (and get out of) this workgroup could be a contributing factor to members' lack of enthusiasm around recent efforts to establish coordinated and collaborative messaging around particular issues or at particular times of year.

According to our charter, our workgroup should address the communications needs of Chesapeake Bay Program groups when we are asked to do so, but internal groups (e.g., the Management Board, advisory committees or Goal Implementation Teams) rarely make this ask, and external partners (e.g., state agencies) have not in recent memory made such a request. When asked, jurisdictions have indicated a reluctance to bring their products to the workgroup for review because doing so would (a) require more time than their deadlines would allow, and (b) unnecessarily complicate their own review processes.

Need: A clearly defined mission that is supported by the workgroup.

Membership

According to our charter, our workgroup should be comprised of communications and public relations professionals, but in some cases, we have not been able to attract the appropriate experts from partner agencies and organizations. *For example: Our New York representatives include a research scientist and an environmental engineer; our West Virginia representatives include a program manager and a stormwater specialist; and our Washington, D.C., representatives include a pollution prevention coordinator and a program analyst. Note: This problem is not limited to our jurisdictional partners, and could be a contributing factor to our inability to get an accurate picture of members' future communications plans and strategies (even in the near-term).*

Some partner agencies and organizations are not represented on our workgroup at all. *For example: We do not have members from the Commonwealth of Virginia, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Park Service or the Chesapeake Bay Commission.*

Some critical members fail to attend our meetings on a regular basis.

If the right people were at the table, our workgroup would:

- Be aware of critical news stories before they are published.
- Be able to plan and deliver coordinated and collaborative messaging around Chesapeake Bay issues.
- Have additional capacity and appropriate expertise to work on communications projects and products (although it is important to note that many of our member agencies and organizations have limited capacity to complete their own initiatives).
- Be able to form action teams to complete work that may not be relevant to all members.

Need: The “right” people at the table and consistent member attendance.

Partnership Role

Our relationship to and intended interactions with the Management Board are unclear.

We do not possess authority within the Chesapeake Bay Program. Internal teams release publications without informing (much less involving) the workgroup. *For example: The Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Workgroup hired an outside marketing and public relations firm to promote the publication of a Chesapeake Bay Program paper rather than asking the Communications Team or Communications Workgroup about our interest in or capacity to complete this work.*

Need: A clearly defined role within the Chesapeake Bay Program’s organizational structure.

Resources

Partner agencies and organizations seem hesitant to pool their resources in the context of this workgroup. The reason for this problem seems unclear. Is it because members don’t want others to benefit from their hard work? Is it because they don’t think their work is relevant to people outside of their agency or organization? Or is it another reason entirely? *For example: Many members have expressed interest in having access to a shared media list, but no one has volunteered to share their own such information.*

Our ineligibility to receive GIT Funding limits the resources we have to offer support to GITs who have expressed clear communications needs. *For example: Conducting effective outreach to private landowners is a factor influencing multiple outcomes, but our proposal to research the needs of and understand the most effective messaging for this audience was not accepted. We also have limited funds to support training sessions (which have proven a key factor in increasing attendance and involvement in the workgroup) or to print reports, brochures and other publications.*

Need: Additional available resources to support communications projects and products.