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BALANCING THE RELEASE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION DURING AN ANIMAL DISEASE OUTBREAK

*Melanie Wilt**

I. INTRODUCTION

Breaking through the “red tape” of bureaucracy to access information can be challenging for the average citizen. While government has come a long way thanks to the internet’s ability to provide a continuous flow of information, the plethora of government information and the knowledge needed to obtain it keeps me employed as a public information officer for the Ohio Department of Agriculture. In this role, my job is to assure access to vital records and information for Ohio’s taxpayers on a daily basis and, most importantly, in the midst of a crisis.

At the Ohio Department of Agriculture, our mission is to provide regulatory protection to Ohio farmers and consumers; educate the public about agriculture; and promote Ohio’s multi-billion dollar food and agriculture industry. More than ninety-three percent of the department’s budget is dedicated to regulatory work, so the bulk of our promotion and education is directly related to explaining our regulatory programs to the public directly and through the media. Our department is unique because it touches the lives of all Ohioans: if you eat, your life has been touched by this department.

The department has ten divisions and programs: (1) Animal Industry, (2) Amusement Ride Safety, (3) Consumer Analytical Laboratory, (4) Dairy, (5) Enforcement, (6) Food Safety, (7) Livestock Environmental Permitting, (8) Meat Inspection, (9) Plant Industry, and (10) Weights and Measures. Regulation is the primary mission of all but one department..

On a typical day, we receive anywhere from one to a dozen calls from reporters including general media outlets, agricultural trade press, and various “new” media sources. While most questions are mundane, we constantly prepare for the extraordinary. An outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease or avian influenza would cause the number of media calls to skyrocket and could even require the activation of a Joint Information Center through the State Emergency Management Agency to access “a little backup” for the department’s five-man communication shop.

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II. WORST-CASE SCENARIO

In Ohio, we have thirty six “reportable animal diseases,” or those that a farmer or veterinarian is required by law to report. The most crippling of these diseases for the agriculture industry would be foot-and-mouth disease, which devastated the United Kingdom in 2001. You may recall news clips of burning cattle carcasses and the mass slaughtering of sheep in order to control the disease. We have not had a case of foot-and-mouth disease in the United States since 1929 because of our strong monitoring and enforcement of animal health regulations, but there is always the possibility it could slip into the country on the clothes of a traveler who failed to declare being on a farm.

Hundreds of questions arise when the “manure” hits the proverbial fan and an animal disease breaks out. We must consider key audiences, including the public, farmers, media, and legislators. In addition, we must take into account special audiences such as non-English-speaking residents and the Amish, both of whom are key stakeholders, but not easily reached via traditional communication channels. Messages about our actions would be provided to each audience through the media, agricultural trade press, and industry organizations. Some of those messages would include: (1) foot and mouth disease is not a public health concern—it is an economically crippling disease of the livestock industry; (2) I am a hog farmer myself and would not be happy to see my livestock taken, but I understand that in order to prevent the further spread it must be done; and (3) the animals are being euthanized according to humane practices and they will not enter the food supply.

III. PUBLIC INFORMATION DILEMMAS

In the beginning stages of an animal disease outbreak, we would be very proactive in the release of public information. At this stage, we would be actively reminding farmers and agribusinesses to take common sense precautions to prevent the spread of the disease and asking them to report any suspicious activity on their farms. We would also be communicating with the public through the news media to let them know how they can help prevent the spread of the disease and to assure them that this is a disease that only affects cloven-hooved animals and that their food is safe to eat.

A. How Do You Determine Whether to Release Unconfirmed Test Results?

Before any public information about a disease outbreak is released, it is important that test results are confirmed by a lab certified to do such testing. Particularly in the case of foot-and-mouth disease, only the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) laboratory at Plum Island can

confirm a case. If it is reported there is foot-and-mouth disease in the United States and that turns out to be wrong, there could be serious economic ramifications to the tune of billions of dollars in losses to livestock farmers (and the crop farmers who supply their grain) across the country.

Once we sent a "highly likely" sample to Plum Island, we would not necessarily make an announcement that this has been done. However, if a reporters question whether there was disease in Ohio, we would be prepared to explain the process to them and help them to frame a story that would not cause unnecessary economic damage to our livestock industry. Upon receiving the first reporter inquiry, we would thoroughly answer questions and explain the current situation. Next, we would include the information in a news release to distribute widely to all news media outlets throughout the state. If we did not receive a call from someone suspecting disease, we would wait to send a news release after a positive confirmation from the USDA.

B. Dealing with False Accusations

During "The Fifth Plague" conference at Case, there was a mock news story that alleged the department's activities were "shrouded in secrecy." This is a serious allegation and one that I hope is never made of the department. Part of my job as communication director is to prevent such allegations from being made and to help reporters and the public understand the process we take to investigate and protect the public. As presented, this scenario assumes I have failed in my ethical responsibility to provide timely and transparent information to the media.

C. Public Information and Terrorism

We would be able to release facts as we know them about the animal disease investigation. However, facts about the terrorism investigation would be unavailable to me or the public until such time as the FBI was willing to release that information. It is protected from release by law.

IV. ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Public information officers are the voice of reporters within the agency. They must think a bit like reporters and ask the questions of the agency decision-makers early in the process. When a new question arises, the public information officer's job is to be an advocate for the public in getting an answer. Sometimes, the answer may not be known until further investigation can be conducted, because our investigations often delve into the same types of questions reporters are asking. In addition, we have to balance that with the responsibility to factually and positively represent the actions of the department. On occasion, we also have to be sensitive to the fact that the release of certain information could violate trade secrets or a

person's medical privacy rights. Because there should be a legal review before any questionable information is released, state agencies are afforded a "reasonable amount of time" to respond to the request.

There is never a need to block information a reporter is specifically requesting if it is clearly public information. A public information officer should never become part of the story. The story should be about the news of an animal disease outbreak and how the public should react to protect their families. The public information officer should never cause the news to shift from what is important to something potentially damaging to the agency, such as the mishandling of public information.

V. CONCLUSION

There is a delicate balance to the handling of public information. Too little information could potentially put the public or the agriculture industry in danger of mass hysteria or economic destruction. On the other hand, too much information can overwhelm an audience and dilute important messages. Public information officers should be reporters' sounding boards and advocates within an agency to help them get to the heart of the issue, access the information necessary for a fair and balanced story, and suggest stories and interesting angles that might be helpful for the public.