
Carcass Disposal: A Comprehensive Review

National Agricultural Biosecurity Center Consortium
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Chapter

12

Public Relations Efforts

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Table of Contents

Section 1 – Key Content.....	1	3.3 – Information Collection.....	4
Section 2 – Issue Management (Short-term).....	1	3.4 – Communications Strategies.....	5
2.1 – Definition.....	1	3.5 – Resource Allocation	5
2.2 – General Considerations.....	1	3.6 – Measuring Success	5
2.3 – Information Collection	2	Section 4 – Public Relations Checklist	6
2.4 – Communications Strategies.....	2	4.1 – Issue Management (Short-term).....	6
2.5 – Resource Allocation	3	Animal health crisis media response plan, step by step	6
2.6 – Measuring Success.....	3	Section 5 – Critical Research Needs	8
Section 3 – Issue Education (Long-term)	4	References	9
3.1 – Definition.....	4		
3.2 – General Considerations.....	4		

Abbreviations

APHIS	USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service	QRT	quick response team
CDWG	carcass disposal working group	UK	United Kingdom
DEFRA	UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

Section 1 – Key Content

To assure positive public perception, decision-makers handling large-scale livestock mortality and carcass disposal events must have access to expert public information professionals and must agree to make communicating with the public a top priority. Before a disposal method is chosen, the incident commander and public information leader should consider potential public perception.

If the disposal of large numbers of animal carcasses is necessary, it can be safely assumed a disaster has occurred. Whether by natural or human means, the public most likely will be aware of the circumstances and will notice efforts to dispose of carcasses. All methods of disposal deserve consideration. No method of disposal should be ruled out in advance, because circumstances can change and locales may have conditions that favor one type of disposal over another.

It is incumbent on decision-makers to communicate quickly and often with the public via a capable public information officer. Depending on the type of disaster that caused the loss of livestock, the general public itself may already be suffering from a high-stress situation (if there has been a devastating hurricane, for example, or an act of terrorism).

While one agency will lead the effort, numerous other state and federal agencies, as well as private entities,

should be involved. Unified communication amongst the public information staffs of all involved parties is vital to shape positive public perception.

As reported after the foot and mouth disease outbreak in the United Kingdom (UK) (Parker, 2002), "Communications were extremely difficult both to and from DEFRA [Department of Environmental, Food, and Rural Affairs] during this period and this led to a complete loss of confidence from the public, local authorities and partners involved." Parker (2002) also reported "poor communications led to confusion and the perception that there was little control." Thus the most important factor is to communicate well with the public initially, throughout, and beyond the episode.

The strategy for effective communication involves two time frames: Issue Management in the short-term, and Issue Education in the long-term. These two efforts must be pursued simultaneously in three areas: factual information collection, communications techniques, and resource allocation.

This chapter provides guidance to public information professionals and helps subject matter experts and disposal managers understand the role and importance of communicating with the public about large-scale carcass disposal.

Section 2 – Issue Management (Short-term)

2.1 – Definition

Issue management involves the early recognition of signals from a sensitive public and an analysis of the likely effects on all stakeholders involved (Epprecht, 2000).

2.2 – General Considerations

Issue management (short-term) involves informing the public about various issues within the overall incident. As with most large-scale livestock operations, it is recommended that those involved should "determine what concerns exist and quickly address them. Perceptions, true or not, must be recognized (Davison, 2001)." These concerns should be the focus of a public information team.

Prior to the beginning of disposal, the public information team should begin providing facts to the public via the media. This team should include at least one public information officer from each of the agencies/entities involved in the disposal effort with one member of the team designated as leader.

Facts must be quickly gathered, appropriate communications techniques employed, and ample resources allocated to ensure that public information begins in a positive vein. To do this, the lead public information officer should have a direct link to the incident commander.

The Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development department has identified four communication principles for community acceptance (Davison, 2001). These principles can be directly applied to a large-scale carcass disposal effort. The principles state:

- The public should have a say in projects that are perceived to affect their lives. Proponents should genuinely listen to and act upon public input. They should deal seriously with perceptions and fears.
- Livestock producers should seek approvals supported by the community at large. This ensures long-term decisions will not have to be revisited.
- Proponents should seek out concerns, comments, and ideas from all those potentially affected. Decision makers should take advice from the community in determining how citizens provide their input.
- Decision makers should share all relevant information with all interested parties in a timely manner. They should inform them how their input affects the project through all phases (Davison, 2001).

A public information team can guide an incident commander through these principles.

Recognize that not all groups will want to resolve any controversies that develop. However, the agencies/entities involved will be viewed more positively if they lead an effort to deliver to the public credible, unbiased facts based on scientific data generated in the Carcass Disposal Working Group (CDWG) project or other research efforts.

Throughout the time of issue management, the public information team also should take care to maintain the perception that the various agencies and entities working on carcass disposal are unified in the effort. One of the problems in the foot and mouth incident in the UK was the "perception that there was a great deal of tension between the State Veterinary Service and Department of Environmental, Food, and Rural Affairs officials and that communication internally left people feeling frustrated" (Parker, 2002).

2.3 – Information Collection

The CDWG project summary documents are an excellent starting point for unbiased data. The public information team should have a copy of this document and future documents to expeditiously examine and continually use throughout the incident.

Additional facts tied to specific issues will be needed throughout the event. These might include the demographics and geography of the region where disposal is to occur, for example. The more facts that are immediately available, the better the public information team can gauge potential controversies. The public information team should continually identify and assess controversies within the overall incident.

2.4 – Communications Strategies

Public relations experts call it "full and fast disclosure." Agencies and businesses that have successfully dealt with negative events know it is perhaps the single-most important technique for instilling positive public perception.

The communications team should be assembled at the first rumblings of a possible carcass disposal event. The team should quickly develop recommendations for the incident managers and take immediate action to communicate to the public and to the entire disposal team, as deemed necessary, using materials previously developed and any others that become necessary. As soon as possible after the event is identified—no more than one hour from the

beginning of the episode—the team should prepare and present the facts to the news media.

The various issues and target audiences can be derived through the use of the four communications principles for community acceptance discussed in Section 2.2.

Key experts for each issue should be identified as potential spokespersons on various topics. A list of decision makers and key experts, and the role of each agency assembled for the disposal, should be provided to the public information team for use with the media. The lead public information team member should assume the spokesperson role when carcass disposal decision makers are unavailable, verifying all information through the local incident commander prior to release.

All involved should be upfront and avoid being placed in a defensive position. A "good neighbor" policy suggested for swine facilities states that decision makers should "listen to and acknowledge the concerns of neighbors, be active in the local community, and maintain an attractive farm" (Heber and Jones, 1999). This "good neighbor" policy can be applied in a carcass disposal event and presented to the news media and in public meetings with residents near the disposal site.

If a decision is made but later has to be changed, the news media should be informed of the reasons. Broken promises and poor management are said to have destroyed public perception at the Widdrington burial site in the UK's foot and mouth disease episode (Parker, 2002). On the other hand, public perception about pyre burning and the impact it was having on the UK image abroad led to the cessation of that practice (Trevelyan et al., 2002).

Materials presented to the media and public will differ for each issue and for each targeted audience but may include Web sites, printed materials, videos, flyers, or other such communications vehicles. Opinion-editorial pieces written for local, regional, or national newspapers may be considered as well. Depending on the carcass disposal location, it may seem more efficient to use only the large urban media and wire services, but local media near the incident location must not be neglected.

The carcass disposal team should be prepared to facilitate conflict resolution, preferably with a trained

mediator. If efforts have been made to work with opposition groups but resolution is not possible, the public information team should have a plan with materials (such as briefing sheets) to assure a clear statement of the views, perceptions, and reasons for decisions made by the incident commander.

2.5 – Resource Allocation

The lead agency's resources should be integrated with those of other agencies/entities participating in carcass disposal. Much of the public information work can be done in-kind or through cost-effective materials such as Web-based (print on demand) items.

A multidisciplinary team of public information specialists from the various agencies will work jointly on this issue, and their expenses for on-site issue management should be covered. Equipment can be pooled, but a need may develop for specialized equipment (satellite telephones, for example, if cellular capabilities are not available) to be made available to the public information staff when possible.

Funds also should be allocated to establish and maintain a news media headquarters for the duration of the disposal effort. This will help manage the news distribution and logistics.

Likewise, funds may be necessary to collect additional facts, retrieve information, and gather newspaper and broadcast clips about the event.

2.6 – Measuring Success

A system should be initiated by the first news release to facilitate and monitor clips that appear in the news media—both newspapers and broadcast. This should be done throughout the event. The clips should be organized in a database with such parameters as the name of the media, print or air date, reporter's name, city/state of news media, person quoted, etc. The monitoring of clips also is useful for correcting misstatements that appear in news media reports.

The public information team also should conduct a post-event critique of the public information effort.

Section 3 – Issue Education (Long-term)

3.1 – Definition

While issue management involves the early recognition of signals from a sensitive public, issue education is the continued, long-term monitoring and information conveyance to targeted audiences.

3.2 – General Considerations

How long is long-term? In some cases, this educational effort may need to continue months or even years after the last carcass is disposed. In fact, just when it is felt that the information flow can slow, that may be the time to increase the public relations effort.

The public may be interested in knowing how a region was or may be impacted due to the method of disposal chosen. And even though this information may have been provided to the best of the disposal team's ability at the time of disposal, new people may move into an area, people who were children at the time will become adults interested in the event, and new uses for the land may renew an interest in the facts pertaining to the massive carcass disposal effort.

Because of the importance for long-term education, the agency must determine at an early stage in carcass disposal what role it desires to play over time. This will set the pace for all educational activities.

Does the agency want to continue to assist and respond to traditional clientele exclusively? If so, are there new ways to assist those groups in a changing society that may perceive carcass disposal differently than in the past? Does the agency want to seek out new clientele and commit itself to developing new resources for those groups? Does the agency seek unquestioned credibility with all groups? The answers to these questions are the basis from which educational efforts will spring.

Note that issue education does not wait until the last carcass is disposed to begin. Issue education should be parallel to issue management/short-term efforts and continue beyond as needed. In fact, an ideal situation would be to start issue education long before there ever is a need for disposal of massive livestock mortalities.

Many of the same public information team who work on issue management will be a part of issue education due to the expertise they develop from having worked on a carcass disposal incident. But additional team members such as subject matter specialists should be included to develop education materials and campaigns.

3.3 – Information Collection

Just as the CDWG project summary documents are an excellent starting point for unbiased data in the issues management phase, so will they be invaluable for issue education. The public information issue education team should have a copy of this document and future documents to expeditiously examine and continually use throughout the incident.

Additional facts tied to specific issues will be needed throughout the event. These might include the demographics and geography of the region where disposal is to occur, for example. The more facts that are immediately available, the better the public information available.

Facts that are presented to the public must be well organized and easy to obtain.

Ongoing dialogue with key groups, such as a fact-finding mission, may be crucial for molding and maintaining public perception following an incident. Although the public initially accepted a burial site in Widdrington in the UK's foot and mouth episode of 2001, the perception later changed to extremely negative due to poor management and broken promises (Parker, 2002).

The issue education team should identify groups with whom they should maintain contact so that facts will continue to be readily available. A list of key contacts and public information persons for each of those groups should be maintained.

It may be useful for the public relations team to meet periodically in an attempt to predict future potential issues, discuss possible areas of concern, and identify experts who can address emerging issues regarding carcass disposal.

3.4 – Communications Strategies

It should be a high priority to strive for public confidence in leadership by remaining involved and providing information as long as there is a need. Communication with the public through every possible means and as frequently as the situation merits is a necessity. A designated spokesperson may be necessary for this to free incident managers to make decisions, but the two must work closely together.

For related issues that do not fall under the purview of the agencies/entities, public information offices may facilitate collaboration with the proper state or federal agencies to make sure the issue is addressed for the public.

In addition to ongoing communication through the news media, outreach programs that involve the community should be initiated. Additional outlets for information dissemination, such as law enforcement agencies, should be incorporated into communication efforts. Educational products aimed at points of interest gleaned from dialogue with all sides of the issue should be created and utilized.

All educational products should state the role of the various agencies involved.

Volunteer programs made up of local people trained on carcass disposal issues may be most useful in long-term education. Having a well-known local or "everyday" person (perhaps a mayor or a producer) teach about an issue may produce more positive results in public perception than having an agency

official. Success stories should be identified and highlighted. Give examples of previous incidents that used particular methods, such as the burning of carcasses in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd in North Carolina (Jordan 2003). Similarly, any criticisms or negative situations that surfaced in issue management or short-term efforts should be addressed in this phase. Often, a well-maintained, thorough, and frequently updated Web site can effectively manage massive public inquiries in the long-term. It should have all news generated by the public information team during the event plus any other related or ongoing information as it becomes available. It also should be interactive with contact e-mail addresses available.

3.5 – Resource Allocation

Consideration should be given to partnerships for the allocation of funds to enable the long-term issue education plan. Resources need to be allocated to facilitate internal communication at the same level as what is being done externally. Cooperative programs with other universities, agencies and interest groups should be developed, if appropriate, to jointly review and develop responses for the long-term strategy.

Resources also may be needed to continue some of the issue management efforts, such as monitoring news media clips. Response teams should be established with individuals designated for interviews about educational efforts.

3.6 – Measuring Success

Depending on how long issue education is needed, the type of materials may need to change over time. With the first materials produced, a survey measurement tool, including demographic content, should be included so the targeted audience can be identified and feedback can be provided as to its usefulness. Post-event critique of the public information effort should be conducted.

Section 4 – Public Relations Checklist

4.1 – Issue Management (Short-term)

The following "Animal Health Crisis Media Response Plan, Step by Step," adapted for use in a massive carcass disposal effort, was developed by a team of public information officers from various Texas agencies planning for an animal health crisis (Mayes, et al., 2001) and is a good guideline for issue management. It is strongly recommended that a Quick Response Team (QRT) be designated prior to any need. Having a team in place will enable the collection of contact information for key people in each state who could be called on to assist.

Animal health crisis media response plan, step by step

The lead time between the trigger event and the need to alert news media will be short -- perhaps only hours -- requiring rapid decisions and movement of people and resources. This makes having a well-thought-out media response plan critical.

Prior to the trigger event, the following items should be prepared and ready for use:

- Shell of news release announcing necessity of carcass disposal method(s).
- Web site for news media and general public on carcass disposal. Listings on site should include:
 - Key fact sheets on carcass disposal methods.
 - Names of experts who can speak about carcass disposal (and associated issues) in various regions, with their contact info and mug shots.
 - Links to sites with information about the cause of massive livestock mortality.
 - Streaming video about carcass disposal for general public.

- Downloadable radio public service announcements in English, Spanish, and French.
- High-resolution photos of carcass disposal methods.
- Maps of recent outbreaks.
- Develop rules of engagement, including press protocols for covering this story, and include an editor's note with initial release.
- Compile who's who of key players in carcass disposal leadership team, including photos, titles, and a brief description of each person's responsibility and role in crisis.
- Intranet Web site, protected by password, for communications use by carcass disposal leadership team, veterinarians in field and other agency/industry professionals working on problem.
- Designation of a hotline number for news media to call for additional information. (Should be included in initial press release).

First trigger event

Notification of an event has caused massive livestock mortality.

The USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) sends e-mail advisory to designated "tree" of public information officers at the appropriate agencies such as state departments of agriculture, parks and wildlife, public safety, health, mental health-mental retardation, criminal justice, natural resources, governor's office, land grant university agriculture agencies, and associated agriculture and industry leaders.

Hours 1-2

- Tree representatives or alternates notify APHIS by phone that message has been received and they are ready to implement response plan.
- APHIS sets up conference call to brief the public information officers on what has transpired.

- Complete news release and clear with carcass disposal team leadership. Translate release into Spanish; have Spanish-language capability for revised release based on existing facts.
- QRT is activated and readied to travel to site of carcass disposal. Members should be prepared for a stay of three days at least, with a second team ready to rotate. QRT lead member calls department of public safety to learn if mobile media command post is activated. QRT leaves for carcass disposal site. Travel by car if at all possible so equipment can be carried more easily. Items QRT should take to location:
 - Cell phones
 - Laptop computers with Internet connections
 - Portable printer with extra cartridge and paper
 - Printed handouts of key carcass disposal fact sheets
 - Tape recorders for interviews and tapes
 - Video camera with protective shell for shooting pool video footage
 - Nametags for press credentials
 - Extra electrical cords and surge protectors
 - Pens and notepads
 - Fax cover sheets
 - Log sheets to record actions taken (news releases, faxes sent and received, phone calls, media contacts, etc.)
- Initial news release announcing carcass disposal finding sent via e-mail and fax to media. (This list should be developed prior to an event and maintained by the APHIS public information office.)
- QRT works with carcass disposal leadership team to complete communications site plans.
- Issues that must be determined on site include:
 - How lines of communication will be established between QRT members and key people working on carcass disposal.
 - If bioterrorism is suspected, who will be investigating on site.
 - Media access to perimeter of premises where carcass disposal is ongoing.
 - Identity of affected people (owners of the livestock) and media access to them.
 - Identification and prepping of key spokespersons on site.
 - Drafting of key talking points/messages for spokesperson to use during briefing.
 - Scheduling of first news briefing and deciding schedule for those that follow.
 - Determine whether news conferences via Web cast/teleconference are feasible from site.
- A phone bank should be activated to field media calls around the clock, at least during first two days. Advanced actions needed include:
 - Determine how logistically the phone bank can happen, and whether phones can be rolled to various agencies to provide staffing relief.
 - Determine minimum staffing of phone bank and consider how to keep all coordinated and on message.
 - Develop briefing book that has key message points and facts. Provide updates through e-mail and intranet Web site. Provide someone who can converse in Spanish on phones.
 - One approach to 24/7 phone staffing issue may be to shuffle clusters of media calls to a

Hours 2-4 (or as soon as possible thereafter)

- QRT works with carcass disposal leadership to help determine appropriate site for setting up field headquarters and handling press briefings.
- One public information officer goes to the main command post in order to coordinate media/information with communicators at field locations.

Second trigger event:

Confirmation of the method of carcass disposal to be used.

phone bridge (up to 24 parties), where an expert or public information officer could field multiple questions from media without tying up phone lines with individual callers.

- Investigate whether experts could be made available via Internet on Web, with reporters asking questions live via e-mail.

That evening or next morning

- Conduct initial press briefing on site.

- Coordinate this with any statement governor or high-ranking federal official may be planning to make on the carcass disposal crisis.
- Generate maps showing location of carcass disposal.
- Monitor written and broadcast news reports, in order to correct false or misleading information generated by news coverage.
- Post the first digital and video images of scene on carcass disposal news Web site, as gathered and transmitted by QRT.

Section 5 – Critical Research Needs

Many communications tools for responding to catastrophic carcass disposal events could be prepared in advance. Doing so would relieve pressure and help steer public perception to positive acceptance if an event causes the need for mass carcass disposal. A team of communicators should work with experts who have completed this work on various methods of carcass disposal to develop materials for each disposal method that include, but are not limited to:

- Fact sheets briefly detailing how the method is done and the reasons for using that method.
- Video segments (on CD, DVD, VHS, and streaming Web) briefly detailing how the method is done and the reasons for using that method.
- Expert lists with contact information for those who can discuss the method. Include all contact information and a mug shot. Include experts who can talk about bioterrorism in general.
- High resolution photos of carcass disposal methods being properly performed.

- List of key players in carcass disposal leadership team, complete with photo, title, and brief description of each person's responsibility.
- Easy-to-follow guidelines on managing conflict and conducting public meetings for use by communicators who would be called to handle carcass disposal information and public relations.

In addition to these materials for each disposal method, the following communications tools could be developed:

- Web site to serve as clearinghouse for information with the media and general public as the target audience. Most of the above items could be available on this site, which also would have links to other pertinent sites.
- Intranet Web site, password protected, for communications use by disposal leadership teams, veterinarians in the field, and other agency/industry professionals working on the problem.
- Enhance clipping capabilities to enable public relations officials to gather, track, and assemble print and broadcast news stories about the event.

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