

## Research Update

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### Bottom Line

This research project surveyed Reclamation employees in the Lower Colorado Region to examine communication and feedback processes between regional personnel and agency stakeholders, partners, and the public.

### Better, Faster, Cheaper

Stakeholder and public feedback helps Reclamation management formulate and steer both short- and long-term policies and procedures. Reclamation needs to explore emerging technical capabilities for communicating efficiently and effectively.

### Principal Investigator

Douglas Clark  
Physical and Social Scientist  
Emergency Management and GIS  
Technical Service Center  
303-445-2271  
drclark@usbr.gov

### Research Office Contact

Ronda Dorsey  
Programs Information Specialist  
303-445-2624  
rdorsey@usbr.gov

## Two-Way Communications With Stakeholders

*An examination of the Lower Colorado Region's two-way communications with stakeholders*

### Problem

Fostering stakeholder and public dialogue with all levels of government is vitally necessary to address western water and power challenges. Increasing public awareness and understanding of Reclamation's mission and responsibilities will help the agency work together with a wide variety of stakeholders; partners; and tribal, local, State, and Federal Government entities. Two-way communications with the public and partners can help identify solutions.

In this changing age of social media and communication strategies, Reclamation needs to understand how and what its employees are communicating, as well as what information they are receiving back. What is working? What is not working? How can two-way communications be improved?

### Solution

This Reclamation Science and Technology Program research project worked with the Public Affairs Office in Reclamation's Lower Colorado Region (LC Region) and social scientists from Reclamation's Technical Service Center to survey LC Region staff. The survey was pretested and then deployed using Survey Monkey, a web survey utility, in the fall of 2014. Results were tabulated and reported in fiscal year 2015. Questions explored included:

- Who are the primary and secondary recipients of Reclamation's communications?
- What types of messages are being sent and received?
- What communication methods are being used?
- What communication methods would staff and managers like to use that they are currently not using?
- What methods are viewed as most effective or impactful?
- What communication successes and challenges exist?
- What laws and policies pertain to agency communications?



*LC Region's Public Affairs Officer, Rose Davis, and Ron Smith from the LC Region's Power Office waving to students during an interactive presentation on hydropower via webinar.*

## Application and Results

Approximately 60 percent (%) of LC Region survey respondents indicated that they communicated information to the public, and about 40% said that they received feedback *from* the public. Government agencies comprised 50% of the external entities with whom LC Region survey respondents communicated. Direct customers comprised 26%, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and environmental interests each represented 6%, and the general public comprised 10%. Additional recipients of communication included suppliers, contractors, and the media.

Predictably, agency personnel made near-universal usage of traditional modes of communication such as face-to-face contact (100%), phone calls (98%), and email (97%). Moderately to highly used methods included Reclamation's websites (82%), public outreach (76%), public meetings (75%), webinars (67%), and educational outreach (65%). With the exception of visitors' centers (34%), remaining (and currently less used methods) could generally be characterized as electronic innovations: idea gathering (43%), electronic surveys (36%), text messaging (29%), social media (19%), and web blogs (8%).

The survey asked participants to list what they hoped to achieve in their communication efforts. Survey respondents listed *conservation*, primarily referring to water conservation; expeditious distribution of *information and data* to target users; improvements in the understanding of Reclamation's *mission* in the minds of the public; increased general awareness and appreciation of the agency's *capabilities and trustworthiness*; and, finally, improved *constituent* and *partner collaboration* with Reclamation initiatives.

One major finding was that "high-touch" (i.e., personal) communication methods, especially face-to-face contact, were considered as the most effective and impactful. Nevertheless, many new "high-tech" communication venues were of interest to LC Region staff. Respondents wanted to use these methods, but had not yet done so. In rank order, these included social media, webinars or video conferencing, Reclamation websites, text messaging, and IdeaScale. In addition, many respondents viewed a mixture of high-tech and high-touch methods as optimal.

## Future Plans

It is recommended that the researchers revisit the current survey and develop a new one that could be disseminated throughout Reclamation. The current research findings may be a springboard for a comprehensive review of communications practices in the LC Region, and perhaps for other regions, to make sure that the agency is using the best mix of high-touch, high-tech, two-way communication best practices to effectively transmit its message and to achieve desired outcomes.



LC Region's Public Affairs Officer, Rose Davis, receives a framed photograph of 66 participating international military officers from Lieutenant Commander Ben Miller, U.S. Navy, after her presentation on Reclamation and the LC Region's mission and operations to the group at Hoover Dam (Nevada/Arizona).

***"While survey respondents felt that 'high touch' methods like face-to-face contact and phone calls were still the most effective communication methods, they showed interest in a broad array of 'high tech' methods such as video conferencing, webinars, IdeaScale, and social media."***

Douglas R. Clark  
Physical and Social Scientist,  
Reclamation's Technical  
Service Center

## Collaborators

- Reclamation
  - ◇ Lower Colorado Region
  - ◇ Lower Colorado Region's Public Affairs Office

## More Information

<http://www.usbr.gov/research/projects/detail.cfm?id=2055>