

Jumping out of the Fishbowl

Creating Connections between PIO's and Press

Breaking down what are inadvertently adversarial barriers between public information officers or press secretaries and the working press can sometimes seem daunting. It shouldn't be so.

April 4, 2022—The Society of Environmental Journalists conference in Houston this week brought together the best environmental reporters in the news business. The conference also gathered leading non-profit organizations like Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The brightest lights seemed to shine on the Biden Administration government officials who served as panelists and educators at SEJ. The PIOs were truly able to meet, mingle and provide context for their important jobs in this enviro-driven Administration.

Working together, attending field-based education events including kayaking trips on local rivers and field trips to Houston Zoo, which this author helped sponsor and coordinate to look at endangered species—the reporters and sources unified, barriers to conversation quickly dropped.

The two best panels of the event really involved the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The first was proctored by *Washington Post* Environmental Justice Reporter Darryl Fears, who has served as the lead environmental correspondent for some 20 years. The session on *Environmental Justice* addressed the stark “cancer alley” health concerns of Louisiana and Texas; industrial pollution which impacts diverse or multicultural communities in disproportionate number; and how EPA is standing up DEIJ communications within its own ranks.



Here's the amazing thing: all four panelists including Fears are graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, two from Howard. Carlton Waterhouse is deputy assistant

administrator of the office of land and emergency management at EPA; Rosemary Enobakhare is associate administrator for public engagement; and Earthea Nance is a regional administrator (RA) for the south-central region of the U.S. EPA.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan made preliminary video recorded remarks. The context for this session was a memo he sent to all EPA Communications Staff about a year ago last April, asking employees to act as transparently as possible, as if living in a fishbowl.

According to *Inside EPA*, “EPA Administrator Michael Regan is telling agency staff he wants them to work ‘in a fishbowl’ of transparency, saying openness about decision-making is vital as EPA ramps up its regulatory efforts. The agency chief made the pronouncement in an April 12 internal memo that EPA’s press office provided to *Inside EPA*.”

Rosemary Enobakhare said: “This EPA Administrator Regan and our agency is making sure that any money that leaves this Agency goes back to underserved communities. We are trying to help people and places like Cancer Alley. \$14 million of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) money must go back to the communities.”

“People are very hopeful about change,” within this Administration, she added.

“There is \$11.5 billion to replace the lead service line pipes so that folks can have clean drinking water,” said Enobakhare.

The problem said the EPA senior media staff is that the agency is understaffed today for these new EJ challenges. “It’s like a body-builder on the top with skinny legs underneath us,” said Waterhouse with a smile. “We are hiring now at EPA.”

Clearing up the Fishbowl



A second-day panel included EPA Press Secretary Nick Conger, and Lindsay Hamilton, Associate Administrator for the EPA Office of Public Affairs. The conference event was entitled: “Clearing Up the Fishbowl,” and was in response to moderator Tim Wheeler’s FOIA and other memo requests for information and interviews by EPA spokespersons. Wheeler is formerly with the *Baltimore Sun* and now an editor and reporter for *Chesapeake Bay Journal*.

Conger promised more transparency from EPA in this Administration. He said, “If we cannot meet with you, we will explain why” we are not standing for interviews. SEJ members were polled about how EPA is doing and journalists provided higher marks: though EPA’s role as “gatekeepers” in handling all interviews remained an issue.

Here is more about creating connections between government officials and the environmental media:

- EPA and other agencies generally require a science communicator and a public policy expert for all interviews. *How should agencies integrate the science message and public policy media messages seamlessly?*
- EPA is facing additional safe drinking water crisis issues in municipalities; while it works diligently to replace the lead service lines. *What is the crisis contingency planning and should agencies create graphics that show progress in marginalized communities with the end goal of replacing lead pipes under ARP and the Infrastructure Act?*
- EPA is a champion for environmental justice and Administrator Michael Regan makes EJ his top priority: *Journalists would support this idea of lead pipe replacement as an environmental justice issue.*
- EPA has been sued a great deal (often by the polluters!) and understands that sometimes “press can become weaponized.” Administrator Michael Regan at EPA is trying to change that aversion to risk. *What are some tips on how agencies may show transparency and availability to media; even triaging interview requests with some ground rules.*

Government agency PIOs should know the intention and the background on every reporter requesting interviews. PIOs and NGOs may serve as press agents to government agencies and federal contractors to help discern the best media relationships.

The old adage of, “all press is good press as long as they spell your name right,” may no longer apply in today’s 24-hour news cycle. The goal should be to create transparent two-way relationships, and serve as a sourcing resource for environmental press.

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