

Department of the Interior Departmental Manual

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Series: Information

Part 470: Public Communications

Chapter 1: General Policy and Procedures

Originating Office: Office of Communications

470 DM 1

1.1 **Purpose.** This chapter establishes the policy and procedures governing the official public communications of employees at the Department of the Interior (DOI) and identifies the laws, regulations and standards governing other public communications of DOI employees regarding the programs, operations or activities of the Department.

1.2 **Scope.**

A. The policy in this chapter applies to all DOI bureaus, offices, and employees except as provided in section 1.2 (B).

B. The policy in this chapter does not apply to the official public communications of the Office of Inspector General.

1.3 **Public Communications.** Public communications are the release of information to the public through press releases, media advisories, media events, news features, news media interviews, speeches, statements about official business for public release, letters to the editor, opinion pieces, social media, Internet and Intranet postings, and by other means.

A. Official Public Communications. Official public communications are public communications made by DOI employees in their official capacity on behalf of the Department or bureau concerning Departmental or bureau policy, actions, decisions and/or opinions.

B. Other Public Communications Regarding Programs, Operations, and Activities of the Department. Other public communications regarding the programs, operations, and activities of the Department are public communications made by DOI employees in their individual capacity. Such communications may be related to an employee's official duties or based primarily on knowledge acquired through official duties, but are not made by employees on behalf of the Department or a bureau.

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through #3263 and 02/07/78 #3480

1.4 **Policy.** The Department supports a culture of openness with the news media and the public that values the free exchange of ideas, data and information and that provides for the dissemination of accurate scientific, scholarly, technical and management information. The Department is committed to keeping its constituencies and the general public informed and welcomes public interest in its programs and activities through news media coverage and other forms of communication. This chapter is aimed at promoting broad public understanding of the Department's mission and the work of its bureaus and offices and establishes principles for excellence in public communications and provides procedures for facilitating the flow of information from the Department to the public. Accordingly, it is the policy of the Department to:

- A. Use the news media, web-based and social media products and other communications channels to report, explain, and interpret to the public the Department's policies, programs, and activities.
- B. Use clear, concise language, avoid jargon, limit to the extent practicable the use of technical terms and clearly and concisely explain any technical terms.
- C. Ensure that information provided to the news media and the public is accurate and delivered in a timely manner, and maximize disclosure consistent with requirements and intentions of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). (See 383 DM 15 for FOIA policy and procedures.)
- D. Ensure cooperation and coordination among the Department's program and public affairs communities.
- E. Uphold high standards for all public affairs employees, including:
 - (1) Be honest and accurate in all communications;
 - (2) Act promptly to correct mistakes or erroneous information, both internally and externally;
 - (3) Promote the free flow of scientific, scholarly and technical information adhering to the following practices:
 - (a) Do not alter the substance of scientific, scholarly and technical information;
 - (b) Provide for review by subject matter experts prior to issuance of news releases;
 - (4) Honor embargoed dates for publications;

(5) Respond promptly to media requests and respect media deadlines;

(6) Appropriately protect information that is exempt from disclosure or where disclosure is restricted by statute, regulation, Executive Order, or other executive branch policies and directives;

(7) Internally promote policies and actions that support the Department's mission and provide prompt, accurate, and complete information to the public.

F. Ensure that employees may speak on behalf of the Department to the news media and the public about their official work and freely and openly discuss scientific, scholarly, technical information, and, approaches, findings, and conclusions based on their official work, consistent with the provisions of this chapter.

G. Encourage bureaus to use social media tools to communicate their missions and messages with the public when there is a legitimate business case to do so.

H. Encourage the publication of scientific, scholarly and technical information produced as a result of activities related to Departmental projects or programs.

I. Abide by the Departmental Manual chapter on "Integrity of Scientific and Scholarly Activities" (305 DM 3), in dealing with matters that may concern scientific or scholarly integrity.

J. Establish a process to address and resolve internal disagreements that may arise from a decision to proceed or not proceed with the issuance of a news release or other type of official public communications.

K. Promote diversity in its publications and audiovisual productions.

L. Ensure cooperation to the extent practicable with non-governmental organizations, firms or groups requesting official communications in the form of written or graphic material, or speeches that require special preparation consistent with the procedures of section 1.6 (G) of this chapter.

M. Increase dissemination of information through suitable nongovernment media. (For procedures, see 476 DM.)

1.5 Responsibilities.

A. Office of Communications (OCO).

(1) Providing leadership and coordination for the Department's public affairs activities, promoting a culture of openness with the news media and the public, and supporting

the principles of this chapter;

(2) Establishing public affairs policies and priorities and providing guidance to bureaus and offices on communications policy and procedures;

(3) Determining which news releases and other types of public information will be issued nationwide by the Department, in consultation with the bureaus;

(4) Providing guidance and direction to bureau public affairs officers and staff, when necessary, as to the need for developing news, interviews, feature stories, briefing material, or articles and making final determinations as to the manner in which information issues of Departmental interest and/or importance are to be handled;

(5) Ensuring the accuracy of news releases and other types of official public communication by providing for review prior to release by scientists, scholars, engineers and other subject matter experts.

(6) Providing guidance on the use of social media, intranet and web postings consistent with the Departmental social media policy;

(7) Establishing and implementing Department-wide employee communications strategies, policies and products on behalf of the Office of the Secretary;

(8) Providing reviews of requests for official communications as needed and delegating reviews to bureau public affairs officers, as appropriate;

(9) Providing guidance to bureaus and offices on public communications by employees, consistent with this chapter;

(10) Working with the appropriate Assistant Secretary, bureau or office head, bureau Public Affairs Officer, and the Office of the Solicitor, as necessary, to address and resolve internal disagreements that may arise from a decision to proceed or not proceed with the issuance of a news release or other type of official public communication at the national level; and,

(11) Referring matters that concern scientific or scholarly integrity to appropriate officials implementing Departmental policy on “Integrity of Scientific and Scholarly Activities” (305 DM 3).

B. Bureaus and Offices.

(1) Implementing their communications programs, adhering to Departmental policies, procedures and priorities, and coordinating public affairs and communications activities

with the OCO and when necessary with the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs;

(2) Determining the newsworthiness of policy actions, and the manner in which the news is to be disseminated, with the concurrence of the OCO;

(3) Referring questions to the OCO that have the potential to generate significant media coverage, public interest or inquiry, particularly those involving more than one bureau or office;

(4) Ensuring the accuracy of public communications that do not require OCO concurrence by providing for review prior to release by scientists, scholars, engineers or other subject matter experts;

(5) Providing guidance to employees for the coordination of public affairs and communications activities as part of their official duties, consistent with this chapter;

(6) Providing guidance to employees on other public communications regarding programs, operations or activities of the Department, consistent with this chapter;

(7) Monitoring and managing the content employees publish on blogs, wikis, social networking websites, or other forms of social media in their official capacity.

(8) Providing guidance to employees on the use of social media, the intranet and web postings, consistent with Departmental social media policy and this chapter;

(9) Ensuring that all-employee messages from the Secretary to bureau or office-specific audiences are reviewed by OCO;

(10) Providing a mechanism to resolve internal disagreements that may arise from a decision to proceed or not proceed with the issuance of a bureau or office news release or other type of official public communications. Bureaus must determine responsibility for addressing and resolving such disagreements, providing for appeals, as appropriate; and,

(11) Referring matters that concern scientific or scholarly integrity to appropriate officials implementing the Departmental policy on “Integrity of Scientific and Scholarly Activities” (305 DM 3).

C. Employees.

(1) Keeping their supervisors and bureau public affairs personnel informed of all significant actions that have the potential to generate public interest or media attention;

- (2) Understanding the difference between official public communications made in their official capacity and other public communications regarding the programs, operations or activities of the Department made in their individual capacity, as defined in this chapter.
- (3) Maintaining a clear distinction between official public communications made in their official capacity and other public communications regarding the programs, operations or activities of the Department made in their individual capacity.
- (4) Clearly indicating to the public whether they are communicating in their official or individual capacity;
- (5) Disseminating accurate and adequate information about their work and confining statements made in their official capacity to factual material related to their area of responsibility;
- (6) Referring through appropriate bureau channels any news releases or requests for media interviews concerning policy matters, or that cut across Department or bureau lines for prior review and approval, consistent with this chapter;
- (7) Following Departmental, bureau or office procedures regarding official public communications; and
- (8) Complying with the laws, regulations and standards identified in this chapter governing other public communications regarding the programs, operations or activities of the Department.

1.6 Official Communications Review/Approval Process. The review and approval process outlined in this chapter calls for coordination among OCO, the bureaus, and employees to help facilitate public communications.

A. All DOI news releases that involve significant policy announcements or that may generate significant news coverage, public interest or inquiry must be cleared by OCO prior to release. In addition, all releases quoting the Secretary or Assistant Secretaries must be cleared by OCO. Bureaus must establish clear processes for coordinating approvals with OCO consistent with the following requirements:

- (1) An advance draft of a news release must be prepared and attached to each significant decision or action document intended for Secretarial action. The draft news release must be prepared under the guidance of the Assistant Secretary recommending the anticipated decision, with the help of a bureau public affairs officer, and must contain essential background information and rationale for the action expected to be taken.
- (2) On some issues and public awareness efforts, OCO may require a more

comprehensive communications plan or may designate an agency spokesperson to provide consistent, accurate information to the media and the public.

(3) For procedures governing advance preparation of news releases on notices and documents to appear in the Federal Register, see 318 DM.

(4) Scientists, scholars, engineers and other subject matter experts will be provided the opportunity to conduct a factual review of news releases concerning their work prior to publication to the extent practicable.

(5) In emergency situations that threaten life or property, an official communication related to the emergency may be made without first obtaining approval from OCO. Bureau public affairs offices must provide guidance during emergency situations.

B. Bureaus must establish clear processes for interview and media request approvals. OCO must be notified in advance of any media interviews, media requests or contacts that may involve significant policy announcements or that may generate significant news coverage, public interest or inquiry.

C. Bureau public affairs chiefs must determine which speeches require OCO review. All major speeches that enunciate or explain important Departmental policy are subject to prior review by OCO.

D. All non-technical articles for publication, letters to the editor, and editorial replies written by employees of the Department in their official capacities are subject to prior review by OCO. Bureau public affairs chiefs must determine when OCO review is required.

E. Departmental publications, electronic or print, must be cleared through the appropriate bureau publication approval process (314 DM). All materials that include any message from the Secretary must be reviewed and approved by OCO.

F. Bureaus must consult with OCO and the Office of the Chief Information Officer through the bureau's social media point of contact prior to creating new social media profiles and/or presences that have not been previously approved for use. Any social networking profiles or social media presences that have not been approved may be terminated.

G. Any substantive information and/or audiovisual products posted to a third-party social media website must also be provided in another publicly available format such as the Department's or bureau's website. Third-party social media websites must never be the only place in which the public can view Departmental information.

H. Bureaus and offices are encouraged to publish scientific, scholarly and technical material produced as a result of official activities.

(1) Scientific, scholarly, and technical material is not subject to OCO approval. However, when bureaus or offices determine that material to be published involves important new scientific, scholarly or other technical information, has direct bearing on policy questions, or relates to programs of other bureaus of the Department or other Federal agencies, the bureau or office must notify OCO and make a copy available upon request prior to publication.

(2) Publication of such materials may be authorized by bureau heads through professional or other journals or media in lieu of Government publication. For procedures governing utilization of non-Government publications, see 476 DM.

I. Written or graphic materials or speeches prepared by bureaus and offices in response to requests for official communications from non-governmental organizations, firms or groups may be subject to prior review by the OCO. This review will generally be delegated to the bureau public affairs chief. The following conditions apply:

(1) The preparation or presentation of material in response to requests for official communications must not impose an unreasonable burden on the staff of the bureau or office concerned.

(2) The official communications must promote better and wider understanding of Departmental objectives, policies, programs, and activities.

J. Prior approval must be given by OCO for creation of new positions, appointments, details, transfers, or termination of existing positions or termination of employment of professional level employees, excluding adverse employment actions, in the following types of positions: public affairs officers, public affairs specialists, information officers, information specialists, other positions in the information series, and any other positions performing similar functions including those in external affairs.

K. OCO may obtain assistance directly from bureau public affairs and information officers on any public affairs project and, when the occasion arises, may request to detail bureau personnel to OCO for work on special projects. In the same manner, OCO personnel may be detailed to a particular bureau or to the staff of the Secretariat for specific projects.

L. The Director, OCO may issue instructions to bureau public affairs and information officers to carry out the assigned responsibilities of OCO.

M. It is the general policy of the Department not to use paid advertising in any publication in connection with its programs and activities, except where special legal requirements and authority exist. In the event that any bureau or office believes paid advertising is necessary because of the significant benefits it affords in enhancing public participation, the following apply:

- (1) Paid advertising requires prior written approval by the bureau public affairs office or OCO, in consultation with the Office of the Solicitor.
- (2) No paid advertising will be approved or authorized without strong justification that supports a critical program or activity.
- (3) Bureau public affairs offices must determine when review is required by OCO. OCO can relieve the bureau public affairs office of approval authority upon discovery of inappropriate or improper justification.
- (4) The prohibition of paid advertising does not apply to sponsorship of conferences in which an agency advertisement may be featured in conference materials or to the use of paid advertisements for recruitment purposes.

1.7 Other Public Communications Regarding the Programs, Operations and Activities of the Department. Employees may engage in public communications regarding the programs, operations, and activities of the Department, including matters related to their official duties, or based primarily on knowledge acquired through official duties, provided that:

A. They do not disclose information protected from disclosure by statute, regulation, Executive Order, or other Executive Branch or Departmental policies or directives, including classified information and controlled unclassified information such as personally identifiable information, and information protected by the Trade Secrets Act, 18 USC § 1905, Privacy Act, 5 USC § 552(a), and Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (FOIA). For example, Exemption 5 of the FOIA permits agencies to protect from disclosure pre-decisional and deliberative information, which may include certain drafts, reports, and other information. Therefore, unless information has already been published or otherwise publicly released by the Department or bureau, employees must seek guidance from their supervisor before engaging in public communications regarding the information.

B. They do not violate Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, 5 C.F.R. §§ 2635.101-902, or the regulations governing DOI employee responsibilities and conduct, 43 C.F.R. Part 20. For example, pursuant to the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, employees communicating in their individual capacity may not use or permit the use of their official titles or positions in such a way that a reasonable person would believe they were communicating on behalf of the Department or bureau. Therefore, when employees engage in public communication in their individual capacity regarding the programs, operations, and activities of the Department they must clearly indicate that they are not representing the views of the Department.

C. They do not violate the Department's Limited Personal Use of Government Office Equipment and Library Collection policy at 410 DM 2, which limits the personal use of government equipment such as computers and copiers by employees. For example, use of

government equipment must not interfere with official business, involve commercial gain, and the expense to the Government must be negligible. Therefore, when employees engage in public communication in their individual capacity regarding the programs, operations or activities of the Department, they must do so within the limitations of 410 DM 2.