



Communicating Climate Change to Agriculture and Forestry Audiences

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The following recommendations for communicating climate change to agriculture and forestry audiences were developed by the 25x'25 Alliance Adaptation Communications and Engagement Work Group after an analysis of best practices from peer-reviewed studies. The Communications and Engagement Work Group, composed of leading agricultural social scientists and communications experts, was tasked with identifying audiences and developing strategies, tactics, and tools for engaging various stakeholders and supporting groups through 25x'25's Adaptation Initiative.

Know your audience

Consider what the audience cares about. What concerns do they have? Who do they trust as reliable sources of information? Talk about local impacts and connect the dots between climate change and what they are experiencing on the ground, such as increases in extreme weather or changes in local phenology like blooming dates, migrations, etc. Acknowledge your audience's need to balance climate change with other concerns. Avoid jargon, complicated scientific terms, and acronyms. Use metaphors, analogies, narrative, and points of reference to make concepts or numerical results more meaningful.

Communicate that climate change is happening now

People typically perceive immediate threats as more relevant and of greater urgency than future problems, yet the threat from climate change is often portrayed as a future rather than present risk. The problem with this approach is that people tend to discount the importance of future events. Many social scientists believe that this is one of the top reasons why it is hard for people to connect with climate change.

Opinion leaders are key

There is a largely invisible and dormant, but exceedingly powerful resource in every community that can be harnessed to promote climate change adaptation goals: opinion leaders. If activated, popular opinion leaders – not necessarily famous media figures such as Oprah Winfrey but rather the person down the block, the person many people in a particular community turn to for advice when making the right decision really counts – are potentially important assets in accelerating understanding and changing behaviors. This critical target audience should become a priority for engagement efforts.

Use local messengers to deliver messages and increase responsiveness

Research also suggests that local “messengers” (both individuals and institutions) may be more likely to get a response when communicating about climate change than emissaries from distant locales. People are more likely to act when they feel a strong sense of affiliation with the individual or institution making the request. Communicators from “out of town” may want to enlist someone locally known to help create a connection with their audience.

Allow ample time for discussion in meetings

When organizing meetings with a diverse group of stakeholders, the most vital thing to remember is to allow ample time for formal and informal discussion. Not only will it draw them into the conversation and make them more invested in the process, it will provide opportunities for you to learn and better connect with them and their concerns. Consider beginning by asking them what changes they are experiencing and how they addressing them. Ask them what they need in order to succeed. Personal accounts and vivid imagery are more powerful than statistical evidence.

Don't use a “one size fits all” approach

Experience from many fields suggests that public information campaigns have limited effects when a “one size fits all” message is directed to an undifferentiated audience. Rather, communicating is much more effective when audiences are sub-divided, or segmented, into groups with similar beliefs, values, and interests, and when public engagement efforts are specifically designed to speak to each group’s unique situation. In other words, our messages and materials must be customized to reach different audiences within the agriculture and forestry sectors.

Offer solutions

While it is important to convey a sense of urgency, it is also important not to present a message of doom and gloom that may turn your audience off. The chances that the public will hear and accept what you are saying are improved if positive messages about our ability to solve the problem are included. Messages that may invoke fear or dismay – as projections of future climate under business-as-usual scenarios often do – are better received if they also include hopeful components.

Early participation from stakeholders is vital

Eliciting participation from all of the various stakeholders is extremely important when trying to reach audiences. Stakeholders who feel like they were part of the decision-making process are more likely to support the outcome. Early participation in the decision-making process is also a vital step in identifying the key problems that require solutions.

Don't be overly reliant on one medium

We should not over-rely on one medium or channel over another but recognize that the best informed are those motivated to seek information broadly. There is no one media “magic bullet” for informing your audience. In reaching our audience, we should use a broad range of channels, including websites, webinars, social media as well as more traditional formats such as presenting at producer events and to key opinion leaders. It is important to have a consistent message, however, even when it spans media and is audience-adjusted.

Identify and focus on what information is most worth knowing

Craft simple, clear messages that are memorable. Don't overdo the level of detail because it leads to difficulty sorting out what is important. The more you say, the less people hear. Careful attention must be paid to determining what information is most important for your audience to learn (i.e., what information is most worth knowing). In any topic as complex as climate change, not all knowledge has equal value in informing the important decisions that people face. Because of the inherent limits of communication in improving people's knowledge of any complex issue, communication planners must make every possible effort to identify the information most worth knowing and focus their communication outreach accordingly.

Work with people in groups to increase their understanding

Studies suggest that people may understand probabilistic information better when it is presented to a group (churches, schools, clubs, etc.), where members have a chance to discuss it, rather than as individuals who have to try to understand it alone. Group processes allow individuals with a range of knowledge, skills, and personal experience to share diverse perspectives and work together on a problem.

Group affiliation influences cooperation from individuals

Research suggests that group affiliation may influence whether an individual decides to cooperate in a group decision or not for several reasons:

- Group affiliation can activate social goals (i.e., concern for others, maximizing the good of the group);
- Participating in a group allows group norms to exert a stronger influence on individuals;
- Participating in a group also leads to greater intrinsic reward for individuals when group goals are achieved.

Start with the smallest scale before moving outward

When communicating with an audience it is important to discuss first their unique experiences and concerns before moving outward into a larger discussion of the science or changes going on across the nation or world.

Use a risk management frame

Present responses to climate change as options for risk management, not as self-evident responses to a predictable future. To combat skepticism of scientific consensus, assert that uncertainty should not be a reason for not acting.

Use participatory processes in gathering and disseminating information

Participation and feedback from potential audiences can both increase awareness and dissemination of information, and strengthen the process. It is also expected to increase the likelihood of adopting adaptation practices. One study of farmers found that the greatest *quantity* of feedback was obtained through informal dialogue, interviews, and a web survey. The greatest *quality* of feedback came from the web survey, workshops, interviews and informal dialogue. Participatory processes provide a measure of accountability, legitimacy and convey the idea that the stakeholders are on an equal level to the communicators.

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Additional Resources

Richard C. J. Somerville and Susan Joy Hassol, [“Communicating the science of climate change.”](#)

Baruch Fischhoff, [“Nonpersuasive Communication about Matters of Greatest Urgency: CLIMATE CHANGE”](#)

Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, [“CRED’s Climate Communications Tips”](#)

Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, [“The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public.”](#)

Norman E. Breuer, Clyde W. Fraisse, and Peter E. Hildebrand, [“Molding the pipeline into a loop: The Participatory process of developing AGROCLIMATE, a decision support system for climate risk reduction in agriculture.”](#)

Elke U. Weber and Paul C. Stern, [“Public understanding of climate change in the United States.”](#)

Anthony Leiserowitz, Edward Maibach, and Connie Roser-Renouf, [“Global Warming’s “Six Americas” An Audience Segmentation.”](#)

Sabine M. Marx et al., [“Communication and mental processes: Experiential and analytic processing of uncertain climate information.”](#)

Edward Maibach and Susanna Hornig Priest, [“Science Communication - No More “Business as Usual”: Addressing Climate Change Through Constructive Engagement.”](#)

Chris Mooney, [“Do Scientists Understand the Public?”](#)

9th Annual Climate Prediction Applications Science Workshop, [“Workshop Report.”](#)

About Solutions from the Land: *Solutions from the Land is a nonprofit corporation focused on land-based solutions to global challenges. Its mission is to identify and facilitate the implementation of policies, practices, and projects at a landscape scale that will result in land being sustainably managed to produce food, feed, fiber, and energy while protecting and improving critical environmental resources and delivering high value solutions to combat climate change. The president is Ernie Shea (eshea@SfLdialogue.net). For more information, see www.sfldialogue.net/what_is_sfl.html.*