

Superfund Basic Research Program Annual Meeting
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COMMUNICATING SCIENCE: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Nancy Serrell, Dartmouth Toxic Metals Research Program, moderator; Robert K. McLellan MD, MPH, Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center; David Tirrell-Wysocki, Associated Press Reporter; Cindy Cook, Adamant Accord, Facilitator for the Elizabeth Mine Community Advisory Group; Cameron P. Wake PhD, Climate Change Research Center, University of New Hampshire

Science translation is a critical component of the Superfund Basic Research Program's core mission of producing scientific knowledge that can be applied to the improvement of public health. For science translation to occur, however, the findings and expertise of program scientists must be communicated not only to scientists but to people in other sectors of society. The standard model of science communication in the public arena assumes a linear transfer of knowledge from the scientific expert to the "knowledge deficient" public. However, research that directly examines how scientific information is exchanged and used in specific situations — the contexts in which scientific knowledge becomes real for people — challenges the underlying assumptions of this model and its implications for scientists. This work indicates that the conventional image of the "public" as a homogeneous mass, passively receiving science messages through the media is an impediment to effective communication. The research provides evidence of many and varied "publics" for science. These publics are like shifting sand — attentive to different issues and different information channels at different times, according to the perceived relevance of the issue, the accessibility of the channel and the trustworthiness of the source. Members of this panel will offer perspectives on the expectations and information needs of several constituencies that constitute the public for environmental health knowledge.