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## Colorado-Wyoming Society of American Foresters Communications Guide Working with the Media

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### **Introduction**

Working with local media is the most cost-effective method that foresters can use to convey the forestry message to mass audiences. While not everyone is comfortable talking to a reporter, you don't necessarily have to be media savvy to work effectively with your local news media—you just need to know some basics.

Here is some information on effective strategies to help you:

- Understand your role with the media;
- Understand different media formats; and
- Hone your skills for a successful interview.

### **Your Role with the Media**

The SAF national office works with national media—major newspapers and the television and radio networks. SAF members across the country are much better suited to work with media in their own communities because most local media are more interested in hearing from their listeners or readers. It's that simple. Your goal as a forestry communicator is to make local journalists aware that you are a source of information when they prepare forestry-related articles or broadcast segments on radio or television. To accomplish that goal, you need to establish relationships with journalists so that they can trust you and other foresters to provide sound,

scientific information. The following are some techniques to help you become the media's window to forestry.

### **Maintain Contact Information with the Media**

Contact information for media in your area is available through:

- Your phonebook is a starting place to find contact information for newspapers and radio and television stations.
- Internet searches will turn up media outlets.
- Media directories are maintained by SAF state or regional communications chairs. Rather than keep an updated list the Communications Chair for Colorado-Wyoming SAF surf's the internet for the most recent information. Here is a website that lists many newspaper outlets for Colorado and Wyoming:
  - [http://www.meatnpotatoes.com/newspapers/colorado\\_news.html](http://www.meatnpotatoes.com/newspapers/colorado_news.html)
  - <http://www.dailyearth.com/USNews/wyoming.html>

Develop media lists and keep them up-to-date. Add new names as you meet new people. Read publications and add the names of new journalists you encounter. Learn about the media services in your area and find out which other areas they serve. Media markets are usually served by more than one television, radio, or wire service, or news "feed." Small local stations contract with a larger service, such as the Associated Press, to get stories for them in other cities. Remember that your story may have interest for another area where a similar issue is being addressed.

You'll want to maintain two lists:

1. Mailing list. This list should contain the name of the publication, station, or network, its address, and the names of people that you know at each. Send releases to the assignment desk (where editors assign stories to reporters) but also to the reporters who cover forestry and with whom you have already developed or want to develop an ongoing relationship. This helps to build trust on both sides of the relationship. It is perfectly acceptable to send multiple releases to the same place.
2. Call list. Your contact list will probably be considerably smaller than your mailing list, but it can include wire services, local newspapers, local television and radio stations, and network news as appropriate.

### **Develop Relationships with Journalists**

There is no magic to developing relationships with reporters, but there are tried-and-true techniques. Here are some tips you can use to enhance your relationships with local media.

- Know the media outlet. Research media outlets before you contact their editors and reporters. You will look like an amateur if it becomes apparent to a reporter that you know nothing about the publication, radio, or television she works for.
- Introduce yourself to journalists before you need them. Once you've identified journalists with whom you want to establish a relationship, call and ask for time to chat. Tell them you want to learn more about the stories they cover and how they like to work. Do not pitch a story idea the first time you talk unless asked; instead, focus on how you can be helpful in the future.

- Contact them the way they want to be contacted. Reporters have their individual preferences for receiving information. Today, most prefer e-mail, but some want to talk by phone or receive faxes. Always ask how a reporter prefers to receive information and then deliver it the way he wants it, regardless of what you prefer.
- Be of service. Consider how you can be helpful to a reporter, rather than the other way around. If you see yourself as her ally, she will think the same of you.
- Provide relevant information. Most reporters cover specific beats and need ongoing information and data about their topics. When you see information in association newsletters or trade or professional journals that is relevant to a reporter's subject area, send it with a short note, such as "Thought this might be useful to you." The Colorado and Wyoming forest health issues are big and of interest to the media's public. Figure a new twist to capture interest such as "What can be done with bark beetle infested wood?" or "Does blue stain affect the quality of the wood?"
- Be sensitive about deadlines. Give reporters as much notice as possible about upcoming events. Don't abuse the relationship by calling at the last minute and pleading for coverage. Always respect reporters' time and deadlines.
  - Daily morning newspapers are busy late in the day, so contact them in the morning.
  - Weekly newspapers are busy as they approach their weekly deadline; find out when they put the issue to bed and avoid contacting them on that day.
  - Television news stations are busier as the day progresses as they prepare for evening news programs, so call the assignment editor early.
  - Radio stations have irregular schedules.
- Return calls promptly. Reporters are usually under deadline and need accurate information in a timely manner. If you become a quick, credible source of information for reporters, you will receive more calls in the future. If you are slow to return calls, they will find other sources for their stories. If you delay more than a few hours in getting back to a daily reporter, you'll probably miss his deadline and, in effect, lose your opportunity for press coverage. If you have a cellular phone, give the reporter your number, this way they can contact you more readily.
- Be credible. Always shoot straight with reporters and avoid small talk and gossip about others. It is a reporter's job to dig up information, and your job is to be a trusted source of information about forestry and the profession. Never mislead a reporter and compromise your credibility.
- Explain the value of your story. Communicate why your press release or announcement will make a good story. For example, if you're announcing your views about forestry legislation, explain how the legislation will have an impact on the future of the forest and nearby communities.