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CSIRO Guidelines on Public Comment

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Contents

CSIRO Guidelines on Public Comment	1
What is public comment?	2
Public comment on scientific issues	2
Media announcements	3
Scientific opinion	3
Cooperative Research Centres	4
Commercial collaboration	4
Non-scientific issues	5
Personal comment	5
Public inquiries	6
External bodies	7
Laws and Policies	8
Hints on Handling the Media	9
Media Skills Training	11
Hints for Public Reports and Media Releases	11
CSIRO National Media Release Procedure	12
Speech/Presentation Hints	13

CSIRO Guidelines on Public Comment

CSIRO is committed to excellence in science. We are also committed to delivering outcomes based on our science and to communicating our science.

Communication is part of our charter. It is encouraged by CSIRO and it is essential for the successful adoption of the outcomes of our research by industry, government and other stakeholders. It is vital to the national debate.

"CSIRO's claim to be the nation's leading provider of excellent science will only be convincing if we continue to provide Australia with examples of what we are achieving," says Chief Executive Dr Malcolm McIntosh.

"CSIRO only exists because of community sanction," George Littlewood, a long-standing industry adviser to CSIRO says. "In relative terms, you are doing very well at the moment – but make sure you never lose that sanction, because, once lost, it is far, far harder to build it back."

The standing of CSIRO in the wider community gives the Organisation scope to influence Australia towards scientifically literate policies. It also induces far-sighted and competitive industries to use the results of our research. That reputation rests significantly on public awareness and approval of our scientific achievements.

CSIRO staff are encouraged to communicate with industry, government, the public and media, effectively and responsibly. These guidelines, which replace those issued in 1989, are designed to help you. The CSIRO Code of Conduct and the Commercial Practice Manual also contain policy statements on communication issues.

What is public comment?

Public comment includes speaking engagements, submissions to public inquiries, comments on radio and television and in the newspapers, views expressed in letters to the press, in books, journals, in brochures or on the Internet – in other words wherever it is likely that publication of comment will flow to the community at large.

The guiding principle is that public comment should take account of the need for constructive relations with stakeholders in industry, government, the community and within CSIRO, and not injure CSIRO's scientific reputation or standing in the community.

Public comment on scientific issues

CSIRO staff have a responsibility to communicate with the public about scientific aspects of their work. CSIRO encourages this, subject to various laws and policies (see later). Effective public communication is included in staff evaluation and promotions.

CSIRO encourages its staff to contribute to the public debate on scientific issues within their area of expertise. Comments should always be tempered by judgment and tact.

It is not expected that staff will comment on scientific matters outside their expertise or on non-scientific matters (eg. economics, politics, religion) unless they are authorised to do so or they are quite clearly commenting in a private capacity.

Divisional Chiefs are formally accountable for judgements exercised on matters of public comment within their Division.

Media announcements

Official media announcements are made through CSIRO National Awareness (CNA), Divisional Chiefs and Communicators, the Executive Committee and Board Office.

If you have a subject you consider suitable for national announcement or comment, discuss it with your Divisional Communicator and/or CSIRO National Awareness.

Media releases will be drafted either by your divisional communicator or CNA staff in consultation with you, then cleared by the relevant officers in the Division and research collaborators. As timing can sometimes be crucial, your help in keeping the clearance procedure swift and accurate is appreciated.

Scientific opinion

There will always be issues on which CSIRO staff hold differing scientific opinions. This is the basis of international peer review systems; it fosters healthy debate and helps CSIRO to develop a balanced position. However the community often expects a "CSIRO view" on a topic and so, sometimes, we must reconcile scientific views or else form a judgment on their merits.

CSIRO staff can use internal communication, including close collaboration between managers, to resolve differences of view. Public debate in the media should be part of a planned strategy to help the community understand that differing scientific views exist and further research is required to resolve uncertainties.

Respect for the work of colleagues is very important. It is sensible to ensure you are aware of all the CSIRO interests involved in an issue and check with your supervisor or a communicator before committing yourself to a public statement.

If the issue is sensitive or controversial, please inform your Chief, program leader or communicator about your intended public comments. This enables them to provide supporting comment if approached by the media, and also to brief you on aspects of which you may be unaware.

Where you are aware of diverse views on the topic within CSIRO, you should alert your Chief to those views and where they are held, with an expectation of making such groups aware of your own perspectives.

Cooperative Research Centres

CSIRO staff working in Cooperative Research Centres need to be careful to note that although working at a CRC, they are still regarded as CSIRO employees, and are bound by CSIRO ethics and rules.

Commercial collaboration

Take care not to disclose unauthorised information about a company, government agency or other organisation collaborating with CSIRO or which has contracted CSIRO to do research. Its release might cause embarrassment or financial loss to the other party, may constitute a breach of contract and could harm CSIRO's standing as a reliable provider of research services.

Should you be asked to comment on the activities of any commercial or collaborating organisation, contact that organisation before making comment. Make sure nothing you disclose is subject to a confidentiality agreement, verbal or written.

Should the organisation not wish you to disclose what you consider to be facts which CSIRO has a duty to disclose, refer the matter to your Chief. Don't disclose those facts unless authorised to do so.

Non-scientific issues

Sometimes public statements on non-scientific issues are made by CSIRO officers as part of their duties. This responsibility will be given to you by your supervisor, who should brief you on all relevant matters and ensure you are kept informed. You are accountable to your supervisor for statements made and for informing colleagues who need to know what has been said.

CSIRO provides objective scientific information. Though it may contribute to formulation of policy by government, it does not publicly comment on adopted government or opposition policy.

Personal comment

If you want to publicise your own views on an issue but are not authorised by CSIRO, you may do so freely as a private individual. However you must state plainly it is a personal opinion and not an official or unofficial view of CSIRO, and help the media to understand the distinction.

Staff whose duties include advising on, or implementing aspects of government policy should avoid public comment which might conflict with those duties.

If you have any doubts or concerns about expressing a personal opinion it is both sensible and a courtesy to run them past your communicator or manager. It is also advisable to inform your Chief if your views are likely to stimulate public debate.

Senior staff need to take particular care when making public comment in a private capacity as, despite their insistence that they are speaking privately, they may not be able to escape identification with CSIRO.

Don't use CSIRO letterhead, envelopes, fax headers or e-mail systems for correspondence expressing private opinions. The use of any form of CSIRO's name will convey an impression your comments are authorised.

Public inquiries

Staff are at liberty to make personal submissions to public inquiries with the same qualifications that apply to public comment: do not disclose confidential information without authority, consult your supervisor and make it clear that your views are privately held. Don't use CSIRO stationery or hardware.

Official submissions, which address matters on which CSIRO has acknowledged expertise and authority, should be forwarded to the Deputy Chief Executive responsible for your Division.

If you are asked to appear as a witness before a Parliamentary Committee, contact the Manager, Ministerial and Parliamentary Liaison (ph 02/6276-6682), for guidelines that will assist and protect you.

External bodies

CSIRO staff are often asked to serve on external bodies such as committees of inquiry, and reviews of organisations or laws or as members of community organisations. First, establish whether you are being invited as a representative of CSIRO, or as an expert individual.

If you represent CSIRO, make sure so far as possible your comments are consistent with CSIRO policy and corporate knowledge on that topic. The task may call for careful differentiation between formal CSIRO policy, a consensus position among CSIRO staff and the need to use your own professional judgement. As you represent the whole Organisation, you should consult colleagues who may be able to contribute information that will help you.

If the external body wants you in a personal capacity, make your private status quite clear and insist that nothing the external body says or publishes is attributed to CSIRO. You should also tell your program leader or Chief.

Your first point of contact on any aspect of public comment is your Divisional or Sector Communicator. If you would like advice from CSIRO National Awareness, the contacts are (02) 6276-6451, -6244, -6615, -6250 or -6478.

Laws and Policies

The Federal government has guidelines on public comment, which apply to CSIRO staff. Details are in Chapter 6 of the Public Service Board's Personnel Management Manual Volume 3, Guidelines on Official Conduct of Commonwealth Public Servants, 1987.

Various other laws and CSIRO policies can apply to public comment by CSIRO staff:

The Science and Industry Research Act: Section 9(1) (b) states that one of CSIRO's functions is to 'encourage or facilitate the application or utilization of the results of (its) research'. Section 9(1) (h) states that another function is 'to collect, interpret and disseminate information relating to scientific and technical matters'. These provisions give CSIRO the legislative mandate to make public comment on scientific and technical matters.

Crimes Act 1914: Section 70 prohibits a Commonwealth officer from publishing or communicating information that it is her/his duty not to disclose. It applies, in practice, only to matters of grave national importance.

Privacy Act 1988: requires employers to keep confidential any personal information about employees unless the circumstances fall within a narrow band of exceptions (e.g. consent of the individual concerned, use of information to enforce the criminal law, or lessen a threat to life or health).

Terms and Conditions of Service: paragraph 20A states that an officer should not communicate official information or disclose the contents of official papers

except in the course of duty or with the authority of line management.

Defamation: the law allows a person whose reputation has been wrongfully attacked to bring a legal action.

Contractual Arrangements: Many contracts entered into by CSIRO require the contents of the contract and the material produced under the contract to be kept confidential.

Intellectual Property: Material that is copyright must not be published without the permission of the owner of the copyright. Research material that could lead to a registered patent should not be publicly disclosed until after publication of the material by the Patents Office.

Commercial Practice Manual: CSIRO's policy is that staff should initially treat all information produced in the course of their employment as confidential to CSIRO unless advised otherwise. The CP Manual also gives best practice guidelines for dealing with commercial information.

ADVICE Hints on Handling the Media

Before you accept a media interview, it is a good idea to discuss it with your Chief, your Divisional communicator, or someone from CSIRO National Awareness. This will help you to marshal your arguments and effectively handle sensitive issues. The following suggestions will also help:

- 1** Establish clearly what the media story is about, and what your role in it is likely to be.
- 2** Keep your message simple and brief. Don't let yourself be diverted.
- 3** Write down your main points, and make sure you make them.
- 4** Craft your message to the audience.
- 5** Help the media to "get it right" by providing a concise written summary of your work. This could be a copy of your project description or a scientific abstract.
- 6** Explain why your science is important, its value to society or industry and how it might benefit or affect Australia.
- 7** Don't say "no comment". If you cannot comment, explain why.
- 8** Don't tell a journalist how to write a story or insist on "clearing" it. Offer to check it for scientific accuracy – but remember the media has pressing deadlines, sometimes only minutes away.
- 9** Avoid too many facts and figures, qualifications and technical terms which may confuse or mislead your audience. The media will use only a part of what you tell them – the clearest part.

- 10** If a media story contains an error, a sensible approach is to seek a follow-up story which clarifies or amends the mistake. Demands for retractions or legal threats antagonise the media and don't help science communication.
- 11** Provide the media with other authoritative scientific, government or commercial sources of comment.

ADVICE Hints for Public Reports and Media Releases

- 1** Put the conclusion first. Keep it clear and simple and strive for impact.
- 2** Explain the relevance or application of the science to the general public.
- 3** Indicate, where possible, the economic or social value of the science.
- 4** Describe the science simply. Avoid technical language and bureaucratese. Avoid scientific terms which have a different meaning in general usage.
- 5** Write short, crisp sentences. Strive for clarity. Limit the number of ideas conveyed per sentence to one. A staccato effect increases impact.
- 6** Use the active voice rather than the passive.
- 7** Support written material with clear graphics, tables, diagrams or pictures where possible.
- 8** Use an eye-catching heading that will arrest the reader.

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11

- 9** If the report is for media use, include direct quotations which can be attributed to you or your colleagues.
- 10** Ensure your report has a point of contact: preferably phone, fax and email. Include an after-hours or mobile number where possible.
- 11** Provide contact numbers for research collaborators and other relevant parties.

Media Skills Training

Media skills courses, both basic and advanced, are available to CSIRO staff through CSIRO National Awareness and are held at major sites throughout the year.

If you are interested, contact your Divisional communicator or ring (02) 6276-6520.

CSIRO National Media Release Procedure

The CSIRO National Awareness (CNA) media release system can target more than 800 media outlets and individual journalists across Australia. It includes national and regional TV, radio and newspapers, industry publications and specialist writers. It is at your service. The following steps will help you to communicate your science successfully:

- 1** The Division's Chief, communicator, program leader or responsible scientist identifies the opportunity to make a national announcement.

12

2 The Divisional Communicator drafts the release, or requests CNA staff to do so.

3 The communicator forwards the draft to CNA, which provides advice on:

- newsworthiness and angle
- timing for optimum impact
- target audiences
- content and style

CNA edits the draft, if needed, and sends back to the Division a copy on media release letterhead for clearance.

4 The Communicator clears the release through the Division and other relevant organisations and returns it to CNA with any changes. CNA will advise if the changes have adversely affected its impact or effectiveness.

5 CNA issues the release by broadcast fax or email to specific media groups and outlets as discussed with the Communicator.

ADVICE Speech/Presentation Hints

Effective presentations by CSIRO staff are important to the standing of CSIRO. They can be a powerful way to:

- ▶ inform and educate
- ▶ persuade or motivate
- ▶ initiate a policy discussion
- ▶ review
- ▶ entertain

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"Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them". This is much more important in speech than in writing, where a reader can go back and re-read.

Presentations must be logically organised and signposted. The words in the presentation should give the audience visual images that emphasise the messages you are trying to convey.

ADVICE Every good presentation involves a number of steps:

- 1** Analyse your audience
- 2** Set your objectives
- 3** Marshall data, ideas and material to support your objectives
- 4** Arrange the material in a sequence which is clear, commands attention and is persuasive
- 5** Prepare an introduction which sets the purpose and the signposts
- 6** Focus on the take-home message for your conclusion
- 7** Prepare visuals and fit them to the talk
- 8** Read and rehearse the full presentation, including variations in voice, gestures, body language
- 9** Check the venue: projection facilities, microphone, lectern etc
- 10** After delivery, review and evaluate. Obtain helpful criticism.