

RISK COMMUNICATION

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***Summary:** The OIE Regional Commission for the Americas decided to conduct a survey of the countries in the region to find out what progress had been made in applying risk communication. This article analyses the factors involved in effective risk communication and presents the results of the survey. It also takes up the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Group on Risk Analysis of the OIE Regional Commission for the Americas on risk communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the WTO's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures entered into force, risk analysis has become a decision-making tool in the area of animal health, especially for the process of importation and exportation of animals and animal products. Risk analysis comprises four inter-related phases: hazard identification, risk assessment, risk management and risk communication¹⁰.

Risk communication is one of the phases of the risk analysis process that has been developed the least. In view of this, the OIE Regional Commission for the Americas decided to conduct a survey to find out what progress had been made in implementing this phase of the process.

A questionnaire was drawn up and the OIE Central Bureau sent it to the countries of the region. Of the 29 member countries of the Regional Commission, the following 15 countries replied: Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, United States of America and Venezuela.

The principal factors involved in proper risk communication are analysed below and the survey results are presented. One country invalidated its reply by returning four questionnaires with different answers.

2. RISK COMMUNICATION

Risk communication is an integral part of the risk analysis process and has been defined as an interactive process for exchanging information and opinions between risk evaluators, risk managers and other interested parties^{3, 10}. According to Chapters 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code, risk communication is the process by which information and opinions regarding hazards and risks are gathered from potentially affected and interested parties, and by which the results of the risk assessment and proposed risk management measures are communicated to the decision-makers and interested parties in the *importing and exporting countries*. Risk communication is a multidimensional and iterative process that should ideally begin at the start of the risk analysis and continue throughout¹⁰.

A joint FAO/WHO expert consultation identified the goals of risk communication as follows⁵:

- To promote awareness and understanding of the specific issues under consideration during the risk analysis process, by all participants.
- To promote consistency and transparency in arriving at and implementing risk management decisions.
- To provide a sound basis for understanding the risk management decisions proposed or implemented.
- To improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the risk analysis process.
- To contribute to the development and delivery of effective information and education programmes.
- To foster public trust and confidence in decision-making institutions.
- To promote the involvement of all interested parties in the risk communication process.
- To exchange information on the knowledge, attitudes, values, practices and perceptions concerning risks.

In general *Veterinary Services* have tended to focus on such aspects as the scientific validity of research, the results of epidemiological surveillance, epidemiological studies and vaccination campaigns. However, they have placed little emphasis on direct communication with the public, for the most part leaving the job to the press and others who translate scientific journal information for the lay person⁶. To provide the required transparency for a risk analysis process, the *Veterinary Services* must put in place a communication strategy targeted at all the sectors involved.

The communication process must clearly identify the target audience to which the information is to be communicated, the message, the source and the most efficient communication channel. In many cases, effective communication requires multiple strategies and communication channels⁶.

Most of the countries that replied to the survey (10 countries: 71%) begin communication at the start of the risk analysis process, whereas 14% (2 countries) begin communication when a risk analysis is complete. A further two countries begin communication when the regulations are being developed. Only one country begins communication when the regulations are complete.

Communication is a two-way process. Nine countries (64%) have a formally established process for communicating new regulations. This does not necessarily mean that the other countries do not have such a process, but that this is not stipulated in the operational procedures. This process includes receiving comments from national and international users. However, only 50% (7 countries) are obliged to consider and answer the comments they receive. Most countries stipulate a 60-day period between the receipt of comments and the proposed regulations.

3. IDENTIFICATION OF THE AUDIENCE

Part of the communication strategy is to identify the various stakeholders and to establish the bases for communication, taking into consideration the characteristics of each audience (general public, consumers, risk analysts, legal analysts, risk managers and other interested parties). It is important to clearly establish who the stakeholders are right from the beginning of the communication process, and indeed from the start of the risk analysis process, and to heed their concerns. Stakeholders can be grouped into three categories:

- Official sector.
- Importation beneficiaries.
- Risk recipients.

The sectors involved in each case must be clearly identified. This can be done by answering the question: Who shoulders the risks and who reaps the benefits?

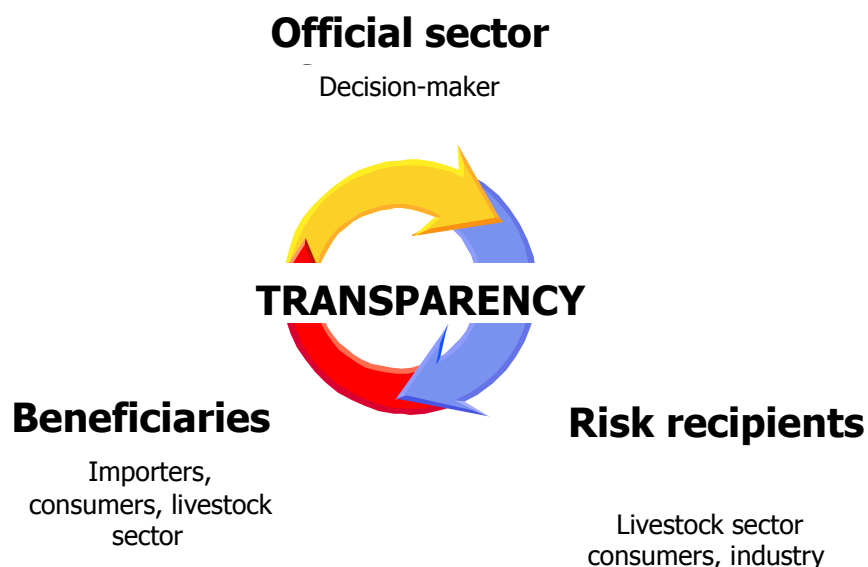


Figure 1. Stakeholders involved in risk communication.

Generally speaking the sector suffering the risk is the livestock sector, which is why it is necessary to identify the representatives of producer organisations and industry and to set up a permanent communication mechanism. Sometimes the general public and consumers are also risk recipients. Risk recipients can be divided into those that are directly affected, those that are indirectly affected and those that are interested but not affected (e.g. Victoria Bridges from the USDA, personal communication).

The importation beneficiary is usually the importer or group of importers. In the case of import decisions on live animals, semen and embryos, the livestock sector is both the beneficiary and recipient of the risk. It is important to establish a communication strategy aimed at ensuring that all sectors are involved in, and informed of, the decision-making process. The survey identified the following stakeholders:

Stakeholders	Countries	Percentage
<u>Official sector</u>		
Veterinary Service managers	14	100%
Sub-national managers of the animal health system	9	64%
Other government bodies	7	50%
<u>Beneficiaries</u>		
General public	6	43%
Producers	14	100%
Exporting country	12	86%
Industry	1	7%
Consumers	1	7%
Importers	1	7%
<u>Risk recipients</u>		
Producers	14	100%
General public	7	50%
Consumer associations	2	14%
Industry	3	21%
Other	1	7%

4. THE MESSAGE

When targeting the general public and the various interested groups it is necessary to analyse the factors involved in risk perception, as this allows the message to be targeted more efficiently at each group^{7,2}. Table 1 details the qualitative factors involved in risk perception.

For communication to be effective, it is suggested that for every risk analysis study, three types of report should be drawn up to target different audiences:

- A full and detailed report containing the full text of the study, references to scientific literature, data used and conclusions. Quantitative studies should include the probability model used and the values and distributions for each parameter. The full report is targeted at other analysts and must enable them to understand the scientific basis of the study and its conclusions, and must be sufficiently detailed to allow the model and its results to be reproduced.
- An executive summary targeted at decision-makers containing the most important aspects of the study and the recommendations.
- A report targeted at the general public and at sectors interested in the decision. The text must be clear, concise, unambiguous and comprehensible to any reasonably educated lay person, whether or not they have scientific knowledge.

Most countries (13 countries, 93%) state that they produce a detailed report of the risk analysis process, as well as an executive summary. Eight countries (57%) also produce a report for the general public.

Table 1. Qualitative factors modulating risk perception and assessment (taken from NRC, 1989)⁹

Factor	Conditions arousing greater public concern	Conditions arousing less public concern
Catastrophic potential	Fatalities and injuries grouped in time and space	Fatalities and injuries scattered or random in time and space
Familiarity	Unfamiliar (little known)	Familiar
Understanding	Poorly understood mechanisms or processes	Understood mechanisms or processes
Controllability	Risks not under personal control	Under personal control
Voluntariness of exposure	Imposed	Voluntarily accepted
Impact on children	Risks disproportionately affecting children	Children not specifically at risk
Effects / manifestations	Delayed effects	Immediate effects
Impact on future generations	Risk to future generations	No risk to future generations
Identifiability of the victims	Identifiable victims	Statistical victims
Dread	Effects dreaded	Effects not dreaded
Institutional trust	Little trust	Trust
Media attention	A lot	Little
Accident history	History of severe and occasionally minor accidents	No history of severe or minor accidents
Fairness	Unfair distribution of risks and benefits	Fair distribution of risks and benefits
Clarity of benefits	Unclear	Clear
Reversibility	Irreversible effects	Reversible effects
Attributability	Attributable to human actions or failings	Attributable to natural causes (“acts of God”)

5. COMMUNICATION SOURCE

In the context of risk analysis regarding animal health, the official sector, namely the *Veterinary Service*, is the entity responsible for establishing the communication strategy. While the success of communication depends on a variety of factors, the relationship between the information source and recipients, in other words credibility and confidence, is one of the factors - if not the most important factor - in effective risk communication⁴.

6. COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

Even the best-crafted message is useless if it fails to reach the intended audience⁶. The survey identified the communication channels most frequently used in the countries of the Americas. Eleven countries publicise regulations using one or more channels, ten countries (71%) use the official journal or equivalent and the majority (9 countries, 64%) use the official website of the Veterinary Service or the Ministry of Agriculture. A minority use the press (2 countries, 14%) and specialised journals (1 country, 7%) as communication channels. Forty-three percent (6 countries) hold meetings with the sectors concerned.

The content of publications varies from one country to another. Fifty percent (7 countries) only publish the regulations, 29% (4 countries) publish regulations plus a risk analysis summary, and 14% (2 countries) publish the regulations and the full risk analysis. One country does not publish the full risk analysis but makes it available to users on request.

7. SCIENTIFIC CRITIQUE

It is desirable that risk analyses are submitted for impartial peer review⁸. The range of reviewers can vary according to the nature and complexity of the study. Scientific critique ensures consistency of the study prior to its release to the general public. Eleven countries (79%) submit their risk analyses for impartial peer review. Of those, five (36%) do so internally within the Veterinary Service and six (43%) do so both internally and externally.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Risk communication is possibly one of the most difficult phases of the risk analysis process to carry out effectively. Effective communication calls for dedication and effort and is not something that happens by itself. Merely disseminating information without regard for communicating the complexities and uncertainties of risk does little to ensure effective risk communication. A well-managed communication strategy will ensure that messages are constructively formulated, transmitted and received.

Once a decision has been taken it is important to communicate it. If those concerned understand how a decision was reached they are more likely to accept it, even where they disagree with it. This makes communication the cornerstone of transparency.

One of the duties of the risk analysis working group of the OIE Regional Commission for the Americas is to analyse the chapters of the Code relating to risk analysis. With regard to risk communication, the group recommends⁸:

- Changing the heading of Article 1.3.2.7 of the Spanish version of the Code to read: "*Principios de la comunicación sobre el riesgo*", replacing the former Spanish word "*información*" by the word "*comunicación*" in the rest of the text to accord with the English version. The Spanish version of the Code currently uses the term "*información sobre el riesgo*" to refer to both risk communication and risk information in the English version.
- The Code mentions only risk communication principles. The group proposes to develop a section dealing with risk communication components, recognising that the support of communication specialists will be needed. It was suggested that the OIE should convene an ad hoc group to carry out two tasks:
 - a) To draw up a proposal for adding an Article 1.3.2.8. on risk communication components.
 - b) To draw up a more detailed guide for use by countries.

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