

Doing a Good Job Is Not Enough: You Need to Let People Know

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Background/Objectives. A groundwater investigation conducted with the oversight of a sister agency brought to light the unexpected detection of chlorinated solvents near a gas station in a small agricultural town located in the Central Valley of California with a large Spanish-speaking population. These detections initiated a series of stepwise investigations and ultimately to the discovery of groundwater and soil gas contamination related to dry-cleaning operations. The highest contamination was found to be a couple of miles away from the origin of the investigation, in a downtown area that includes a mix of commercial and residential dwellings, including a church with annexed day care center, and various medical facilities.

Approach/Activities. Step-wise investigations led to the discovery of multiple dry cleaner-related releases in the soil gas and groundwater that have the potential to impact indoor air. Several elements were instrumental to the overall ongoing success of the risk communication for this project:

- A) intensive canvassing by the project manager and public participation specialist of the potentially-affected area;
- B) availability of technical experts (e.g., engineer, geologist, and toxicologist) to explain face-to-face concerns, investigation results, and planned future steps;
- C) availability of interpreters and printed materials in multiple languages to facilitate communication with non-English speaking members of the community;
- D) direct consultation/involvement of a local interest group;
- E) well-planned public meetings;
- F) participation of executive-level representatives of the Department.

Results/Lessons Learned. Being open, transparent, and proactive in the communication about all phases of the work were instrumental in establishing good working relations with the community in the area of the investigation and obtaining access to the properties that needed to be investigated. The ability of the project team to clearly explain perceived missteps and delays went a long way to gain trust and collaboration of the community which in turn allowed for a smoother progress of the project.