

# Communications Subgroup

## Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

2:00 – 3:00 pm

Via Zoom



## Meeting Summary

### ***Welcome and Introductions***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan welcomed the group and introduced two new Extension NLR Staff, Amanda Christenson, Outreach Associate, and Emily Steele, Media Communications Manager.

### ***Old Business from Communications subgroup meeting in 2021***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan reviewed two old-business discussion items from the 2021 Communication subgroup meeting. Raelynn Parmely reviewed a media reach report from our last Biennial Report Press release in fall of 2021. Joan reviewed the Land to Water: Nutrient Explorer.

### ***Biennial Report Streamlining Results and communication-related feedback***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan shared communications-related feedback from a Biennial Report Streamlining Survey conducted in 2022. Members discussed the current communication products revolving around the Biennial Report release, including the press release, legislative letter, and common message power point. Then members identified a need to evaluate NLR communication products and planning approaches.

### ***Communications Plan discussion***

Joan talked about the Communication subgroup charge, the NLR target audiences, and community-based marketing approaches. Amanda shared communication strategies designed to impact behavior change. Members discussed continuation of the press release, legislative letter and common message PowerPoint facilitated by the NLR Steering Committee. Members discussed examples of target audience communication product development during non-biennial report years.

### ***Communications-related Partner Updates***

Megan Baskerville told members about an upcoming Communications Training targeted to conservation planners working with agricultural producers.

## Meeting Minutes

*In attendance: Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy; Amanda Christenson, Illinois Extension; Albert Cox, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Joan Cox, Illinois Extension; Rachel Curry, Illinois Extension; Christine Davis, Illinois EPA; Robert Hirschfeld, Prairie Rivers Network; Layne Knoche, Illinois Extension; Mila Marshall, Sierra Club IL; Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau; Trevor Sample, Illinois EPA; Emily Steele, Illinois Extension; Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture.*

### ***Welcome and Introductions***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan welcomed the group and introduced two new Extension NLRs Staff, Amanda Christenson, Outreach Associate, and Emily Steele, Media Communications Manager.

***Old Business from Communications subgroup meeting in 2021***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan reminded the group of the discussion at the October 2021 Communications subgroup meeting. She noted that we will talk about the legislative letter and common message PowerPoint at the next communication meeting later this year. We focused on two old-business discussion items, the media reach report from our last Biennial Report Press release in fall of 2021 and updates to the Land to Water: Nutrient Explorer.

Raelynn Parmely at Illinois Farm Bureau ran a communications marketing report and they found 37 earned media hits related to the [Illinois NLRs 3rd Biennial Report Press Release](#). During the month after the release, media reached a potential audience of over 145M, and the coverage was worth over \$1.3M in advertising value equivalents. The report tracks the potential reach; it isn't the perfect measure but does provide an estimation of the worth of the original press release. A few outlets that most impacted and furthered this topic's reach included Yahoo! News, Corn & Soybean Digest, and The Farmer. Other local news outlets make up the bulk of the hits. Success was made possible with the help of NLRs partners who helped to extend the press release's collective reach.

Joan re-introduced the [Land to Water: Nutrient Explorer website](#) and provided an update. This is a searchable inventory of NLRs-related education and outreach products which focuses on K-12 and public audiences. Many of the approximately 140 records were shared by Illinois NLRs partners. She shared use statistics. In 2022, we had 240 unique views averaging of 6 minutes on the page with a 67% bounce rate. In 2023 year-to-date, we had 52 unique views with an average of 8 minutes on the page with a 60% bounce rate. This website has recently been updated to fix broken links. She encouraged NLRs Partners to continue to send new, digital education and outreach products to [illinoisnlrs@gmail.com](mailto:illinoisnlrs@gmail.com) so they can be added into this database which was produced and maintained by Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant.

***Biennial Report Streamlining Results and communication-related feedback***

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan began by sharing communications-related feedback from the September 2022 Policy Working Group meeting in which results from a Biennial Report Streamlining Survey were shared. She briefly recapped the Survey results which focused on the report's uses and content feedback. Responses detailed how partners use the report from personal perspectives and from a member organizations' perspectives. Responses also included opinions on the target audience of the report, and favorite features. She focused on identifying target audiences and demonstrated some ways to group target audiences into fewer segments, such as stakeholder groups, government officials, landowners, and the broader public. Joan emphasized that communications products vary widely depending on target audience with respect to language used, composition, formatting, and design elements. It is difficult to create a single report that is tailored to each of these audiences. Rather, the NLRs in Illinois relies on the partner organizations that work in different sectors to develop these types of targeted materials. Joan went on to mention communication-related requests from the 9/1/23 Policy Working Group meeting discussion. Requests included: an NLRs Communication product that is smaller [more concise] and more accessible for use at a public meeting or city council meeting; Punchy, actionable steps shared in factsheet

format to help the public; Three talking points for the executive summary and for each chapter; and an improved NLRS communication plan.

Discussion summary:

Participants asked if we had a communication plan, and discussion ensued regarding what we have done in the past. NLRS Steering Committee has coordinated the publication of the report, a press release, a legislative letter, and a common messaging PowerPoint. It was recommended that we go farther this time around. The usefulness of the common message PowerPoint was discussed, and we found that it is being used by partners and reaches about 50 organizations. The group identified a need for evaluation of our current communication products to better understand their uses and effectiveness. Consensus was that we could do more with our communication plans moving forward.

### ***Communications Plan discussion***

Joan reminded us of the communication subgroup charge, noting that this committee has identified four target audiences; elected officials, government or professional staff, business community members, and residents throughout Illinois. She noted that the target audience responses from the Biennial Report Survey results could also be organized within the four target audience segments in the subgroups charge. She then showed an example process for community-based social marketing from NOAA Sea Grant Extension. She emphasized that the first step is identifying your target audience and then going through the process. Amanda then focused on communications strategies and provided some examples of tools and products designed to impact behavior change. She emphasized that the Illinois NLRS relies on partners to create these communications strategies for specific target audiences.

Discussion summary:

It is important that our partners continue to communicate NLRS messaging to their individual stakeholders. Partners have become trusted messengers, building relationships and influence with their stakeholders. The NLRS Communications Subcommittee can facilitate a common message but will continue to rely on partners to refine the message to specific audiences. Participants mentioned that the suggestions from the Policy Working group resonated with them. Local Watershed planning groups were mentioned as an example of an audience that could use a tailored message. The group was asked to share success stories regarding NLRS partner communications. One NLRS Factsheet spearheaded by Rachel Curry was highlighted as an example product tailored to an agricultural producer audience segment, which is a shared target audience among partner organizations. Emily is working on identifying three talking points of each chapter as suggested by Policy Working Group members. She is planning to incorporate these into each chapter of the Biennial Report. Timing of the press release, common message PowerPoint and legislative letter were discussed. With the release date moved back to December, the following questions were posed. Should we meet earlier than planned to be sure those items are done at the release of the report? Would it be possible to release a fact sheet with the press release package or is that too much? Consensus was that it would be too much to publish at the same time and that focusing on supplemental fact sheets in non-biennial report years could be a good alternative. Timing will be looked at by NLRS Steering Committee, and partners will be notified if we need to change the date of our next meeting to accommodate production of any communication products.

***Communications-related Partner Updates***

Megan Baskerville shared an opportunity for professional development with the group.

Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership is hosting a hybrid [Grow More Training](#) on April 12 from 1-3 PM. This training is designed to help ag and conservation professionals learn and implement outreach and messaging that more effectively engages middle adopters. The training is provided in partnership with the Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council and the National Wildlife Federation. Find [more information and register here](#).