

2012

NASA PLANETARY PROTECTION PROGRAM COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Precis

NASA's Planetary Protection Program has adopted a strategy for communication with its various internal and external audiences and constituencies. This strategy establishes communication is an integral element of program planning and activities. The Planetary Protection communication strategy supports an organized communication initiative for planetary protection that can meet the needs of specific audiences and adjust to changes in social context over time. The Planetary Protection Program establishes and maintains direct and continuous communication with its various audiences, building and sustaining credibility and trust, by:

- Ensuring full and timely disclosure: providing complete, accurate, and comprehensible information using all available media and networks.
- Getting to know audiences: developing and sustaining relationships, giving people what they need.
- Acknowledging uncertainty and legitimating fears.
- Keeping promises, or not making them if they cannot be kept.

The scope of communications about planetary protection is broad, encompassing terrestrial and extraterrestrial biology; disease control; environmental protection and ethics; engineering and technology development; national and international law, regulation and policy; risk assessment; and more. Issues in planetary protection include forward and back contamination; technology requirements for containment and analysis; and legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks. Communication about planetary protection must extend not only beyond space science to the broader science and technology communities, but also to governmental and nongovernmental organizations, interest groups and other public audiences. The basic approach to communication about Planetary Protection is to “tell ‘em early and often.”

The present environment for communication about planetary protection is excellent. Opportunities to inform various audiences about planetary protection are plentiful, in conjunction with NASA exploration missions, scientific conferences, and other public events. However, current events can quickly change the context for communications about the risks of biological contamination and risks associated with nuclear heating, at any time and without warning, for better or worse. The Planetary Protection Program must acknowledge the broadest possible range of possibilities, planning for the worst while hoping for the best.

The goal of this communications strategy is to help the Planetary Protection Program identify its various “publics,” establish and maintain trust with them, and aid fulfillment of NASA's statutory function to “provide for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination

of information concerning its activities and the results thereof” (Sec. 203 (a) (3), PL85-568, National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958). The Planetary Protection Program must work effectively and efficiently with NASA’s Communications Office on communications with the media and public, the Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs Office on communications with Congress and the White House, and the International and Interagency Relations Office to work with foreign national and international organizations and other concerned audiences. This strategy advances NASA’s mission by engaging and informing the public about solar system exploration, the search for signs of extraterrestrial habitability and life, and the steps being taken to protect both extraterrestrial and terrestrial environments from forward and backward contamination by exploration missions.