Regionwide and Project-Level Outreach – The PCOR Partnership Approach

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Abstract

Public education and engagement have been integral parts of the U.S. Department of Energy Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership (DOE RCSP) Program from its inception in 2003. Public acceptance is critical to successful implementation of carbon management even though the concepts of carbon capture and storage may be unfamiliar or even disconcerting to persons outside the geological or oil and gas communities. As such, DOE mandated that project-based outreach be included in its regional partnerships.

As part of the DOE RCSP Program, the Plains CO₂ Reduction (PCOR) Partnership has developed a large, successful outreach program in tandem with its research and regulatory programs. In a region well suited for both terrestrial and geologic storage, two independent carbon capture and storage (CCS) projects were already under way in 2003 as part of enhanced oil recovery (EOR) operations, but the public knew little of them. Today, the region is home to several commercial carbon capture and CO₂ EOR operations as well as large- and small-scale research projects—all managed by members of the PCOR Partnership. Each member pursues its own outreach initiatives and activities. What is the role of outreach in the region for a group like the PCOR Partnership? What have we learned over 10 years of doing public outreach for a highly technical subject that takes place where no one can see it?

The PCOR Partnership employs a twofold public outreach and education strategy to inform stakeholders about CCS projects in its region and to deliver basic information on CCS across the region. At the outset of the program, the PCOR Partnership identified distinct target audiences: decision makers and opinion leaders, educators, and the general public. The outreach team created original materials intended to help each target audience become familiar with CCS and tested methods to deliver both general outreach regionally and project-focused information locally. The initial activities focused in North Dakota, an area with high potential for geologic storage projects. Three lessons stand out over the course of the program: 1) use established dissemination modes (and expertise); 2) document, track progress, evaluate, and iterate; and 3) put CCS in the context of energy and quality of life (make it relevant).

Outreach to educators provides an example of using established networks to deliver messages. The region has over 2600 school districts across several states and Canadian provinces. Two energy-affiliated groups—the North Dakota Lignite Energy Council and the North Dakota Petroleum Research Council—offer educator seminars which together reached approximately 200 K–12
educators annually. The fossil fuel focus of these meetings draws educators interested in energy and carbon, which gave the PCOR Partnership a natural starting point to discuss CCS and geologic storage. This recurring activity has allowed the outreach team to hone its presentation, refine messaging, test its effectiveness via audience feedback systems, and make adjustments for other presentation venues. Through this approach, the PCOR Partnership has shared information and resources with teachers from 80% of the school districts in North Dakota and 25% of the districts in the region overall.

Documenting educator interaction is one example of tracking results. The PCOR Partnership public Web site is another. The Web site provides information on CCS in general, its role in carbon management, and its relationship to individual past and current projects in the region. Written for the lay person, the Web site puts CCS in context through text, images, streaming video (30-minute documentaries and video clips), posters, fact sheets, and a regional atlas. By applying Google Analytics tracking to all items on the Web site, we are able to examine the behavior of our visitors. In 2015, for example, the site received 25,000 visits, with 6% from the PCOR Partnership region. The top pages visited included What Is CO2 Sequestration? (44%), What Is CO2? (19%), Regional CO2 Sequestration Projects (3.4%), and Terrestrial Sinks (2.6%). Global Energy and Carbon – Tracking Our Footprint was the most watched documentary. We are able to confirm that teachers do come to our Web site following presentations in the region and that the Paris meeting in 2015 coincided with an increase in page visits. This information is useful for assessment of current Web content and planning future content for Web and other outreach materials.

Our experience during the development of five original documentaries for public television in collaboration with Prairie Public Broadcasting (PPB) was instructive with respect to presenting CCS in context. When we began the first of these documentaries, our focus was describing CCS technology and profiling an existing EOR project in the area that acquired CO2 from an anthropogenic source. But a documentary needs a story with context relevant to its audience. Through interaction with the project management team and the PPB team, the focus shifted to the importance of energy on quality of life, the current reality of the energy–carbon connection, and inviting audiences to consider solutions to the big question: “How do we reduce carbon emissions and maintain energy for our quality of life?” That theme also shifted the focus from a discussion about climate change to solutions that make a difference. Feedback from educators was the genesis of turning the context into a 4-part video series entitled Meeting the Challenge focused on energy, quality of life, carbon, solutions and, ultimately, CCS.

Documenting the outreach activities is an ongoing effort. Materials distribution and outreach events are tracked, reviewed on a periodic basis, and form part of status and planning activities. The outreach team solicits feedback on its products, updates materials as needed, and with each new product or new iteration continues to ask, “Who is the audience?” and “Are we meeting the goal?” It may seem obvious, but the oft-repeated mantra should be “Know your audience.” Providing the information in a context that ordinary people relate to in their everyday lives has been critical to getting people interested to listen to the information.