

# Communications Briefing

## Rules of engagement with reporters

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### WHEN A REPORTER CALLS:

#### *Tactics*

- Get the reporter's name, number and e-mail (write it down).
- Ask what their deadline is.
- If you are not ready or able to talk, ask what they specifically want to talk about and say you will call them back in a few minutes (or later, depending on their deadline). This will give you time to put your thoughts in order, and write your key messages out on paper to have in front of you.
- If you don't know the answer to a question or don't feel comfortable discussing a topic, tell the reporter you want to check some facts and will get back to him/her before deadline – then do it.
- Ask the reporter who else they have talked to so far (or who they plan to talk to); know your opposition's argument so you can respond to questions with the appropriate message.
- Make sure you understand the questions asked of you. Ask for clarification if you don't.

#### *Strategy*

- If you already know the call is coming, be prepared to talk.
  - ✓ Know your subject
  - ✓ Anticipate the likely questions
  - ✓ Write down your key points and stick to them---stay on message
- Correct misinformation with facts (and references whenever possible).
- Don't argue, but be clear about the basis for differing opinions.
- Be positive and solution-oriented in your responses. A reporter's agenda is often to highlight conflict, and they want you to help them reach that objective.
- Listen as much as you talk. An old trick of good reporters is to ask light-weight questions, get you talking and then sit back and let you "babble on," saying things you wish you hadn't. Be economical with your words, and be thinking about what you are saying and how you say it.
- Help the reporter get to good sources. If you have a solidly on-message person who can speak to the issue from a personal perspective, refer the reporter to them along with contact information; then call that person immediately and brief them.

#### CONTACT

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- If you want to talk to a reporter “off the record” or just provide information and not be quoted, get that agreement over the phone. Make sure you hear them say that they agree to the conditions. Remember, nothing is ever really off the record.

### ***Language***

- Be a teacher—help others understand your issue. Make sure the audience will understand what you say, and speak in simple, non-technical terms.
- Never “spin” the facts.
- NEVER say “no comment”. Instead, say that you are considering the information that you have.
- Keep answers short, to the point, and in plain language.
- Use common words, not insider jargon or acronyms that only professionals understand. If you do use an acronym, define it. Example: WUI—the wildland urban interface where development meets wildlands.
- Don’t let anyone put words in your mouth. If a reporter asks, “Do you mean to say blah, blah, blah,” then state your message again, in your own words.
- Reporters come back to people they can trust as good sources. Be truthful and accommodating, and you’ll go into their list of contacts.