



Focus on **Plain Talk at Ecology**

What is Plain Talk?

Plain Talk is a new agency-wide resource, created with the goal of making Ecology's written communications clearer and easier for the public to understand. Members of the Plain Talk Team are available to meet with Ecology staff and managers to review and revise written pieces in any format, including form letters, information sheets, legislative and technical reports, and Web pages.

How did the Plain Talk Team come about?

Ecology's Plain Talk Team is modeled after a clear writing program of the same name, developed and managed by Dana Howard Botka for the Department of Labor and Industries (L&I). In early 2003, Ecology's Environmental Program Management Team (EPMT) invited Ms. Botka to present an overview of L&I's Plain Talk program. EPMT saw the value in the project, and an Ecology Plain Talk pilot project was established.

For the pilot, letters from three programs were selected as "trial runs." A small group of Ecology staff, trained by Ms. Botka in Plain Talk principles, worked with program employees to rewrite and revise letters sent to Ecology customers. The results of the pilot project were presented to EPMT in the Fall of 2003. After hearing about the process and viewing "before" and "after" letters, EPMT gave its approval for the Plain Talk Team to be further refined and become a permanent Ecology resource.

How will it work?

24 Ecology employees with appropriate writing and facilitation skills were recruited and trained in Plain Talk Principles. These individuals formed Ecology's Plain Talk Team. When agency staff and managers identify written communications they want to improve, they can contact the Plain Talk Team for assistance. The section manager will appoint a "Point Person" for each project or subject area the Plain Talk Team is working on. The Point Person is responsible for identifying the appropriate staff to work with the Plain Talk Team and establishing any exceptions to the rewrite process. They also make decisions regarding process issues as they relate to the rewritten document or budget issues related to the rewrite.

What are the benefits?

Benefits of Plain Talk can include:

- Clear and consistent communication with the public.
- Better relationships with our interest groups, including lawmakers.
- Improved compliance with our regulations and permits.
- Opportunities to clarify the internal processes and assumptions underlying our documents.

How much will it cost?

Ecology made the decision to use existing resources to implement Plain Talk by composing a team of staff volunteers.

How will we know we have improved the documents?

Plain Talk rewrites will go through “usability testing.” Revised documents will be reviewed by actual users/recipients for ease of reading, clarity of purpose, and completeness. To accomplish this, we will conduct in-person interviews with interested parties, as well as mail out surveys for customer feedback.

What are our customers saying?

During our pilot project, we asked gas station owners and managers in the Vancouver area to participate in a usability test on an underground storage tank letter. The majority were very impressed with the Plain Talk version of the letter. Some of their comments on the revised letter include:

- *“ . . . told me what to do and makes it sound easy, instead of getting lost in jargon.”*
- *“ . . . is more simplified and direct, I know exactly what to do. . . I like it, this format is very clear and easier to read.”*
- *“easily organized and understand, much more complete.”*

How can I get more information?

For more information on Plain Talk at Ecology please contact Bari Schreiner at 360-407-6998 or bsch461@ecy.wa.gov.