# Operation Mighty Mo: Managing the Flood of 2011 Through Strategic Communications

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Northwestern Division (Missouri River Joint Information Center), Jan 1,2012

**Summary:** 2012 Silver Anvil Award Winner — Crisis Communications — Government

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regulates the Missouri River mainstem reservoir system, the largest in the country. In May 2011, heavy rains in eastern Montana and the Dakotas caused unprecedented runoff, forcing the Corps to release historic amounts of water. Communities from Fort Peck, Mont. to St. Louis, Mo. suffered months of record flooding. Public outreach through a temporarily established, proactive communications center kept the region informed. Efforts resulted in public education, rumor-mill management, a robust social media following, and positive feedback from media and stakeholders.

"Crisis communications" includes programs undertaken to deal with an unplanned event that required an immediate response. Government includes all government bureaus, agencies, institutions or departments at the local, state and federal levels, including the armed forces, regulatory bodies, courts, public schools and state universities.

**Full Text:**

## SITUATION ANALYSIS

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Northwestern Division, regulates the largest reservoir system in the United States, the Missouri River mainstem system. In May 2011, heavy rains (three to six times normal) in eastern Montana and the Dakotas caused unprecedented runoff, forcing the Corps to release historic amounts of water. **Communities across a 1,771-mile stretch** from Fort Peck, Mont. to St. Louis, Mo. suffered record flooding. To provide timely, accurate information to the public through a central communications hub, the Corps established the Missouri River Joint Information Center. Through the center, the Corps facilitated critical, proactive communications and public outreach to keep the Missouri River region informed. The Northwestern Division Commander named the effort "Operation Mighty Mo." Mighty Mo is a moniker for the Missouri River recognized by the majority of stakeholders in the basin.

The Flood of 2011 **broke every standing record of flooding** along the Missouri River since the inception of detailed record-keeping by the Corps in 1898. A three-month span of runoff from May to July led to sustained high water throughout the basin. People were displaced from their homes, farms were flooded and whole communities were threatened. Despite the hardships, the mainstem dams and levees in high-risk areas performed well under rigorous and protracted conditions. Through the temporarily established communications center, the Corps engaged in a rigorous information campaign to keep the region informed. Efforts resulted in public education, rumor-mill management, a robust social media following, a solid rapport with the media and positive feedback from stakeholders. The total cost of communications came to $723,300, **just 1 percent of the total flood fight cost**. The team's use of in-house talent for video production **saved approximately $869,800**.

## RESEARCH

**Primary research** conducted included personal interviews with subject matter experts such as the Chief of Water Management Division, a **27-year Corps veteran**, and fellow veteran project

managers familiar with the Missouri River. Team members also relied on personal experience gained through responding to previous flood events within the division's area of operations.

Primary research efforts helped the team conclude that:

1. There was minimal understanding about the way the Missouri River mainstem system is designed and operated;
2. There was a lack of understanding of the Corps' role in providing emergency response during a flood fight; and
3. There was a lack of understanding of the Corps' river regulating authority.

**Secondary research** included a review of fragmentary orders, internal and external documents, communications plans, Continuity of Operations Plans, past news releases, public affairs guidance, Annual Operating Plan meeting transcripts, comments and questions, Corps' library archived materials from past floods, past news articles and articles published just prior to and during the first week of the Corps' warning to communities about the imminent threat of flooding.

Secondary research efforts helped the team conclude that:

1. Rumor mill information in the public and the media suggested the flood was purposefully orchestrated by the Corps to sustain threatened and endangered species;
2. Some members of the public believed the Corps should and could have released water from the Missouri River mainstem system sooner and was to blame for the flooding as a result of failure to do so;
3. Some members of the public viewed the Corps as a monolithic government agency and mistrusted information coming from the Corps; and
4. Past communications efforts had been plagued by jargon, acronyms and technical terminology that made it difficult for the public to understand.

## PLANNING

Due to the crisis communications nature, fast-paced environment and magnitude of the event, planning did not focus on meeting or exceeding specific objectives outlined. Rather, goals were identified, variables were assigned to those goals and operational definitions were used to measure progress. The idea behind this approach was to develop a foundation or set a benchmark from which to work in the future.

An audience analysis was conducted and specific objectives were assigned to each target audience. Those specific objectives were carefully nested with the broader goals used for measurement.

**The five primary goals were to**:

1. Gain and maintain public trust and confidence;
2. Clearly communicate to the public the cause/prompt for dramatic changes to the Corps' original reservoir release forecast;
3. Educate the public about the design, safety and operation of the mainstem system and the Corps' adherence to the master manual;
4. Monitor and measure public perception; and
5. Manage and mitigate flood-related rumors.

Strategies included maintaining openness, transparency and timely responsiveness throughout the flood event. Three of the most powerful communications tools employed included the call centers (one for the public/one for the media), the nightly call-in press conference and the power of social media.

## IMPLEMENTATION

During peak flooding, the Corps responded on average to about **80 public** and **30 media queries per day**, working regularly with local, regional and national media including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, CNN Online, Thomson Reuters and Dow Jones. **More than 900 media contact**s were documented. **Thirty one** videos were produced and posted to YouTube, drawing **more than 57,000 views**. The region's social media following grew to 37 times its previous following. Staff produced and distributed **110 news releases**. A total of **91 call-in press conferences** were organized, with follow-up audio posted to the Web within two-hours of the conclusion of each call. Freedom of Information Act requests were approved, with the Corps releasing more than **3,000 internal emails**. Two special edition magazines were produced and distributed in both hard copy format and online. Articles were written and pitched externally, with **44 articles accepted for publication**. B-roll footage was posted to the Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System for reporters.

All communication tactics used were designed to align with the overall communications strategy of openness, transparency and timely responsiveness.

## EVALUATION

The team referred to its identified variables, assigned operational definitions and measurement to conduct evaluation. Due to the magnitude of the event and limited number of staff, the team measured its progress in meeting goals as opposed to the identified individual objectives.

**Goal 1.)** P.R. Measurement guru K.D. Paine has admitted that trust is difficult to measure. The team tracked the public's coming to the Corps and fanning the Corps on social media to gauge it. Each site showed a steady uptrend throughout the event. By the middle of the event, Facebook views totaled more than **9.6 million**.

**Goal 2.)** Clear communication was key to success. Microsoft Word Flesch Reading ease levels of 8th grade or below helped the team keep communications clear. Analysis of television news clips revealed that **30 percent** of the clips included clear, successful delivery of the Corps' key messages and talking points.

**Goal 3.)** The Corps received much criticism from the public due to lack of understanding of the circumstances surrounding the cause of the flood. Educating the public helped lead to a better understanding of a complex reservoir system and comments that have ultimately led the Corps to ensure it continues a stance of open, frequent and transparent communications. To date, the Corps has incorporated many of its lessons learned into its communications practices. Currently, a twice monthly call is held to keep the region informed.

**Goal 4.)** Regular monitoring of Facebook posts and concerns coming into the call center helped the team gauge public perception. Surveys results from stakeholders and the media revealed that the daily call provided much-needed information.

**Goal 5.)** The process of tracking rumors coming into the call center (and in the media), and immediately correcting misinformation on the daily call proved effective in managing the majority of rumors and mitigating others.

Providing accurate, timely information to the identified target publics served the Corps well. Email kudos came in from a number of stakeholders after the Corps' declaration of the end of the flood, commending the Operation Mighty Mo efforts, including emergency response, communications efforts and the Corps' overall responsiveness.