

Recommendation 328

Limiting the Use of Acronyms in Presentations Provided to the Public

Background

On November 15, 2011, the Savannah River Site Citizens Advisory Board adopted Recommendation #283, “Revising the Department of Energy Websites & Using Plain Language to Communicate with the Public More Effectively.” In this recommendation the phrase “using plain language” was used because there was an initiative underway at the Department of Energy in response to an updated version of the “Federal Plain Language Guidelines” in May 2011. These “Guidelines” include a chapter that describes how the elimination of acronyms can be used to improve written and spoken communication.

In the response from the Department of Energy on January 18, 2012, it was stated that the “Department appreciates and agrees with the CAB’s position that releasable information should be written in reader-friendly, understandable language and also be made readily available to the public in a timely manner.”

As a result of the recommendation cited above and the Department of Energy’s positive response to it, there was a heightened awareness by the Department, its contractors and liaisons to the Citizens Advisory Board that resulted in a dramatic drop in the use of acronyms during verbal presentations to the public. This change resulted in an enhanced level of understanding and communication with the public.

Unfortunately this year, this trend has been reversed. A few facts will illustrate this point.

- During calendar year 2014, there were 47 presentations given during the six Citizens Advisory Board full board meetings.
- During these presentations acronyms were used over 300 times.
- The method of introducing these acronyms varied.
 - Some presenters provided a list on a single slide at the beginning of the presentation, others provided the acronyms within each slide, and still others provided the list of acronyms on a single slide at the end of the presentation.
- When acronyms are used, sometimes each letter is spoken, such as the acronym for the Environmental Protection Agency, is stated as “E”, “P”, “A”. In other cases, the acronym is spoken as if it is a word, such as the acronym for Resource Conservation and Recovery Act is RCRA and is pronounced “rick rah.”

Comments

The use of extensive acronyms greatly hinders the process of comprehension during a verbal presentation. Unlike a written piece, where a reader can take the time to go back to a previous paragraph where an acronym is defined or to an earlier page where a list of acronyms is presented, a listener often must be able to have instant recall of an acronym to understand what is

being said. Obviously, this is not possible in many cases. This results in a lack of understanding and hinders the ability of the public and the Citizens Advisory Board members to ask timely questions and to provide meaningful input to the Department of Energy on issues that are important to the cleanup mission of the Savannah River Site.

Recommendations:

The Savannah River Site Citizens Advisory Board recommends that the Department of Energy:

1. Ensure that all verbal presentations given to the Citizens Advisory Board during committee meetings and full board meetings be free of acronyms, except those that are known to the public at large, such as SC, GA, SRS.
 - a. Work with the Citizens Advisory Board Executive Committee to develop a list of such acronyms.
2. Assign the responsibility of reviewing all presentations for the use of acronyms before the presentation is sent to Department of Energy Headquarters for review and approval.