

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION SUMMARY TEMPLATE

Convener contact information:

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Convening organization(s) (if applicable): OREGON TOXICS ALLIANCE

Meeting location (city, state): Grants Pass, Oregon

Meeting date: 4/30/2010 Number of participants: 26

Brief description of participants and community:

Grants Pass, is the county seat of Josephine County with a population of 35,000. The city is located along the major north-south highway, Interstate 5. It is known as the gateway to the Wild and Scenic Rogue River and Oregon Caves National Monument. This area was primarily a timber-based industrial town, but has diversified to attract tourism and light industry. This area is generally politically conservative with pockets of organic farming and artisan communities. The participants were all middle-aged and some traveled from surrounding areas of Ashland, Selma and Williams. They included a lawyer, teachers, foresters, two biologists, woodworker, a nurse, a computer technician along with others whose professional lives were not identified. We broke into two groups for discussion.

Topic 1: Concerns

Participants' main concerns included: There was a very high level of concern about pollution in the environment and participants unanimously expressed their perception that toxics were despoiling the environment and wreaking havoc on human health. Many felt that diseases such as Parkinson's and cancer were directly linked to exposure to industrial toxic chemicals.

The primary concerns can be characterized in three statements:

1. The government must focus on prevention of children's exposure to toxic chemicals in environment with stronger regulation and more stringent health standards.

2. The government must depart from “risk assessment,” which uses economic forecasting to predict acceptable levels of harm; instead, apply the precautionary principle - do only what is known to be safe.
3. Disclosure & the Public’s right to know: Precautions should be made for people who are sensitive to chemicals. It should be illegal to *not* to inform the public. Easy public access to accurate information about toxics in the local community should be the way federal and state government functions.
4. Pesticides are designed to kill, and this is undesirable to healthy life, water, and growing food.

In fact, the need to reduce pesticides in the built and natural environment was a repeated theme amongst this group. This is due to the fact that people living in rural Oregon are repeatedly exposed to pesticides from both aerial forestry and agricultural uses. The problem of forestry pesticide spray delivered by helicopter over hundreds of thousands of acres is unique to the mountainous areas west of the I-5 corridor. Participants felt strongly that their domestic and irrigation well water, organic gardens and their very homes were at high risk for pesticide contamination.

Did participants disagree about certain issues:

There was no disagreement amongst the participants. Everyone agreed that industrial chemicals, including pesticides, harm the people and the environment. The only tension in the conversation was over the level of disillusionment. About three people felt completely overwhelmed and disheartened because they see that nothing is changing in government policy - that felt that monied interests always win the policy battle. Others felt that there are opportunities to create new openness to better paradigms. There was hope that the Constitution must provide for the common welfare. The citizens can take steps to make change by working in local communities. Get youth and seniors together.

Topic 2: Values

List several values that participants thought were important:

This is a full list of the values that were discussed, taken from the notes taken by the participants and the convener.

1. **The Public Good:** Reversal of polarity- have public interest in mind.
2. **Accountability for consequences,** polluters are made responsible for harm/damage.

3. **Value of truth**- Base decisions on truth and not green-washed propaganda and pseudo-science fabricated by polluters.
4. **Valuing natural ecosystems.** The government ought to make laws that give rights to natural ecosystems and communities. The people can sue and be half of protecting an ecosystem.
5. **Public Knowledge:** Public education on environmental health in institutions. End the lack of awareness.
6. **Accountability for Polluters;** Public must DEMAND that the environment is healthy. Elected officials must step up and hold polluters responsible for harm. Accountability and public protection.
7. **Value-respect for life.** Recognizing that cancer is at least 25% environmentally based.
8. **Children's Health must be the MAIN value:** There ought to be more awareness about the connection between chemical exposure and illness in the medical field. The effect of veteran's exposure to Agent Orange is well documented but a civilian's every day exposure to chemicals is not. Children's health should have first priority.
9. **Policy maker accountability.** Businesses run on economic system based on privatized profits. This becomes the "cultural norm". It is a flawed system: profits rule over sustainability. Industry writes the rules.
10. **The constitution must provide for the common welfare.**
11. **Value-Openness to new paradigms.** The government must show a willingness to change policy.

Topic 3: Roles and responsibilities

Participants noted key steps that certain groups could take, including:

1. Take the next step – regular and thorough testing our children, our schools, waters/rivers and public sites for chemicals. Information will verify chemical harm.
2. Next step-work in communities. Get youth and seniors together.
3. Local governments should adopt model programs that can be repeated at the state and national levels as soon as possible.

4. Our nation must establish higher organic standards as well as eliminating pesticides in all food.
5. All governments and institutions must apply the precautionary principle for all decision-making – as a society, we must do only what is known to be safe.

Topic 4: Learning from accounts of success and failure

Unfortunately, many of the participants had tried various projects in their communities to reduce toxic chemicals, some are devoting their whole lives to this issue. They felt that there have been very few successes. The failures are all due to the fact that there is a fundamental disconnect between the government and its citizens; “blocked communication slows progress toward solution. Government should have an emphasis on service to the people.” The root cause is believed to be that the government puts economic interests and corporate interests over human, environment and society’s needs.

Did the group make any plans for a follow up meeting about local action?

Yes, the group has invited Oregon Toxics Alliance to return in September for a follow-up meeting on these same topics. We are also going to work together to bring highly respected and well-published medical and scientific experts to speak at town hall meetings and to give presentations to our local and state elected officials. The participants want to raise the level of public awareness and make Oregonians highly informed and effective about the role of chemicals in environmental degradation and human disease.