

KEY ELEMENTS OF RED TIDE MESSAGING AND MODES OF COMMUNICATION GLEANED FROM MULTIPLE FOCUS GROUPS

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Red tide in Florida, caused by the dinoflagellate *Karenia brevis*, occurs almost annually in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and challenges both public health and the economy. Public health issues arise from the suite of neurotoxic brevetoxins which when aerosolized can cause acute respiratory irritation, and when ingested in seafood, can poison consumers. Economic challenges arise from both real and perceived health and quality-of-life impacts. On the recommendation of the Florida Harmful Algal Bloom Task Force, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute funded a study to develop a state-wide red tide communication strategy aimed at empowering the public to protect their health and quality of life. Led by Florida Sea Grant, and in partnership with the Gulf of Mexico Coastal Ocean Observing System (GCOOS), the project team solicited input from more than 1,100 people to inform best communication practices and enable the use of actionable, science-based information in decision-making during Florida red tide events. One element of the research was conducting 11 focus groups to better understand the human dimensions influencing decision-making. In-depth focus group conversations were divided into three audiences: 1) natural resource and human health professionals; 2) public information officers, and media, tourism, small business and hospitality industry professionals; and 3) the general public. These conversations provided better understanding of the emotions, values, thoughts and opinions driving personal behaviour, and enabled the team to develop a Red Tide Communications Plan for Florida that aligns practitioner (i.e., agency) needs with end-user (i.e., resident and visitor) content, format and delivery mode wants. This presentation will highlight both the process used to develop and implement the focus groups and key findings of the research analysis.

PRESENTER BIO: Elizabeth Staugler is NOAA Harmful Algal Bloom Liaison with Florida Sea Grant where she coordinates HAB forecasting input, feedback and training opportunities between NOAA and Sea Grant programs across the nation. She has more than 20 years of experience planning, designing, and implementing comprehensive stakeholder engaged coastal ecosystem related projects.