

Dr Kate Hughes

Ecology Data Bank Services, Australia

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Adequate but with room for improvement: Experts' communication about PFAS risks

Abstract

This session presents some findings from a 2020 doctoral research project about the capacity of Australian remediation experts to communicate effectively with non-experts. Findings are around the quality of textual and visual language used by experts to explain empirical risks of hazardous substances, including PFAS. Evidence was gathered from in-depth interviews with remediation experts and from a focus group with non-experts living in a community affected by a PFAS-contaminated site.

The interviews provided insights into experts' understanding of the psycho-social and socio-political context of PFAS pollution. Experts recognised the ethical aspects inherent in the time lag between the identification of a risk and regulatory action to mitigate it. They could explain why the level of uncertainty about PFAS risk changes over time, and provided their views about formal expert texts and imagery where PFAS risk was in play. Findings included those about the quality of expert imagery, including maps, which were identified as a preferred form of visual language, provided they are designed with the end-user in mind.

The focus group explored how non-experts experience and understand risk messages delivered by experts. Participants responded to text and imagery that provided scientific content about the sources of PFAS contamination and the risks they pose to human health. Non-experts, whilst sometimes sceptical of the information, recognised both good and bad aspects of expert risk messaging and identified areas for improvement. A key finding was on the importance of using proven design principles when generating maps for use in risk communication.