



Communicating Wastewater

Using the SOS System to get to the Root and change people's minds



In order to identify the underlying causes of a problem so that the most appropriate messaging can be recognized and implemented, EFCWest developed Seeds of Solutions (SOS) System training and workshops. SOS is a systemic process that allows participants to understand the roots of a problem, and develop effective communications in response. In this training, EFCWest walks participants through a 5-Why process to help them identify potential root causes for their complex and complicated problems. Through the simple act of asking why, communications issues are narrowed down to their true origins, or their roots. This is followed by crafting problem and opportunity statements and then recognizing and testing assumptions. Once a communications opportunity is clearly identified, the training moves into audience targeting and messaging. The final results include an action plan that is homegrown and grounded in a systemic analysis of a complex issue.

SOS Example: Communicating Clean Water in Washington State

SOS System 5 Why:

Pet Waste is Contaminating the Puget Sound

Why? Homeowners don't think that the pet waste in their yard is affecting anyone else. Birds and wild animals poop on the ground. Why can't my dog?

Why? Homeowners think that the harm of dog poop washes away with the rain and will be filtered by soil in the environment and diluted by water.

Why? People don't know that certain pathogens may be more common in domesticated animals, and they just don't think that there is a problem

Why? The public lacks understanding of the correlation/causal relationship between pet waste, environmental health and human health.

Why? The regulatory and health agencies have not done a good job of explaining health and environmental impacts.

Whatcom County, Washington had a fecal coliform problem in their rivers and streams that ultimately drained into the Puget Sound. To address the problem, Whatcom County enlisted EFCWest to take them through the SOS System, which helped them identify why agricultural communities didn't seem to care about the contamination they were spreading. Through the 5-Whys, the county came to realize that they were likely to blame, recognizing that a high level of distrust between conservative farmers and regulators had festered for decades. Through their analysis, the County realized that they needed a new way to communicate. In response, EFCWest help the County jump from their root cause to a new outreach and communications effort.

SOS was so successful that the Washington Department of Public Health hired EFCWest to provide an additional SOS training in 2022 for four nearby counties to help them explore why people refused to pick up their dog waste. The graphic above (SOS System 5 Why: Pet Waste is Contaminating Puget Sound) presents one of their five why analyses. The root cause was pursued as the basis for a communications strategy that targeted, in part, audiences that did not understand that dog waste could make their own pets sick. The graphic to the right was developed for part of the initial messaging campaign.

