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After a massive chemical spill fouled drinking water in West Virginia early this year, it took nearly a week for a *Charleston Gazette* reporter to get an interview with someone at U.S. EPA.

That's far from the transparency the Obama administration has promised, according to journalists who track the agency.

And it's just one of many examples of EPA dragging its feet, skirting questions or failing to respond at all to reporters' inquiries, says an opinion piece published today by officials at the Society of Environmental Journalists.

"Sadly, such communication delays by EPA are not limited to crises. Journalists frequently report waiting for days and in some cases weeks to get EPA to respond to routine requests for information or interviews," wrote Beth Parke and Joseph Davis of the Society of Environmental Journalists. The piece was published by the nonprofit organization Environmental Health Sciences.

The association of environmental reporters has accused the administration of failing to comply with its own pledges of boosting transparency. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy and other top agency officials have consistently touted the importance of sharing information with the public.

Members "have seen an agency that for much of the 1980s and 1990s was considered one of the most open in the federal government become incredibly secretive, especially under the Obama Administration," they wrote.

"[N]owadays EPA in many cases simply fails to answer questions posed by journalists on behalf of the public -- even some that are routine and non-controversial. When the agency does respond, a favorite tactic is to wait until just before or even after a reporter's deadline and then mail a short written statement that does not answer the questions."

SEJ contrasted EPA's actions with statements from top officials. "The more we can get our story told and the information out, the better we all are," McCarthy said in a recent interview. "Facts should speak for themselves, and we should get them to you as quickly as we can."

The group pointed to several other cases so far this year where reporters said they didn't get sufficient responses.

In January, reporter Dan Telvock of the *Investigative Post* news service in Buffalo, N.Y., sought more information about an EPA official's public statements about environmental risk in a low-income neighborhood. EPA provided unrelated information and an interview with someone who couldn't address Telvock's original question, SEJ said, and he didn't have enough information to write the story.

Independent journalist Gary Wilson asked the Chicago regional office for routine information on federal funding for fighting invasive Asian carp in the Great Lakes but didn't get the figures until eight days later, after reminding the agency. And he still hasn't gotten an answer to an inquiry he made last fall about the impact of the government shutdown on toxic cleanup in the region.

And in Portland, Ore., journalist and author Elizabeth Grossman contacted EPA for information about the agency's regulation of contaminants and emissions from dairy operations for a *Yale Environment 360* story. Nearly three weeks later, she had gotten a nonresponsive one-sentence statement and a link to an EPA website, but no detailed answers to questions she had posed, SEJ said.

EPA spokeswoman Liz Purchia today said those accounts aren't entirely true, adding that SEJ hadn't contacted the agency about the piece before it was published.

"While the op-ed contains several inaccuracies, timely response remains a priority for EPA," she said in a statement. "EPA works daily to ensure that any information we share with the public is timely, accurate, and reflects all of the necessary facts."

Purchia added, "We reiterated our commitment to improved communication recently both in-person and in writing with the Society of Environmental Journalists and we stand by that commitment to transparency and helping reporters and the public understand the Agency's work to protect public health and safeguard the environment."

This isn't the first time SEJ has criticized the agency's handling of media requests. The group last year declared EPA "one of the most closed, opaque agencies to the press" (*Greenwire*, April 11, 2013).

The group also criticized public access to information about the West Virginia spill in a January letter to officials at EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tom Reynolds, who heads EPA's communications office, replied later that month, defending the agency's responses.

"EPA began receiving and responding to media inquiries regarding the spill on January 10," Reynolds wrote. "Since then, we have responded directly and in a timely fashion to inquiries from more than two dozen media outlets, providing information on a wide range of issues, including the agency's role in the response, known information about the chemicals spilled, and EPA's regulatory authorities."

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