

Communicating the WFD

How to convey the water framework directive to the public?



In an evaluation of the Norwegian effort to reach the goals in the water framework directive in 2016 the main feedback from stakeholders and the public was that we needed to be better at communicating what we do, how we do it and what the results show. In an open hearing for the next period of plans in 2025, the feedback is the same. What can we do to better explain the changes in water quality, why they happen and what we can do to a group as diverse as the public?

Vannteam Øst is a regional cooperation consisting of 4 river basin sub-districts that consist of a total of 25 municipalities. Each sub-district has only one full time employee, and as a single district communication was always a down-prioritized task, where time needed to be divided on many tasks. The beginning of the communication was to establish the informal cooperation Vannteam Øst, with its own platform for joint low threshold and simple communication out through social media. This has expanded from only facebook, to youtube, linkedin and now recently a new Norwegian neighborhood based social media app.

The next step is to make more of the knowledge we produce, more of the benchmarks we use and more of the results that we see more available to people. The WFD is neither fun nor easy to understand in itself, so using out political boards within the sub-districts we tested out a slogan “Det e’kke bra før det er GØT” which loosely translates to “Its not well before it is good”, but with the extra meaning that GØT, a local

slang for good also stands for Good Ecological Status.

After the effort to simplify and to make a more engaging way to talk about the water framework directive, the slogan started being referred to by politicians and other in the administration of local, regional and national authorities.

The span of communication has since become more diverse, with many projects directed towards children and young people, with a childrensbook about a glacial relict species in freshwater, a song with the same slogan taken further and a music video. On a more serious end projects on how to communicate collectively on water, where several agencies, authorities and regions are working on the same topic; for example, the Oslofjord.

Within on a more specific topics, there are projects on how to communicate the need for large national and local investments in upgrading the grid and treatment plants for wastewater. Large investments are largely paid by the users, the public, and is therefore a topic often avoided by politicians. Stricter regulations and negative developments in waters in recent years have put the pressure on municipalities to do more to ensure less wastewater loss in natural recipients and expansion to include nitrogen treatment in their systems.

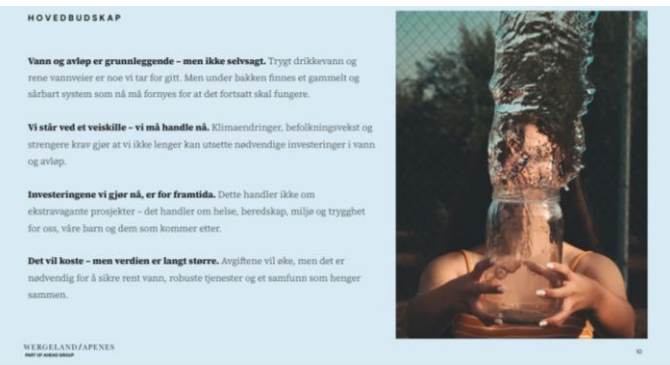


Developing a way to communicate for non-pr personell

Most of the people working in public management with water have little to none experience in pr or communication in a theoretical sense. It is usually a mix of biologists, natural resource managers and other natural science backgrounds. The feedback from the sub-districts within the district has been that they take little interest in social media but still see the potential in increasing their reach. They have low technical skill sets so web pages, using new tools for changing up and widening the way they communicate is also not prioritised. Withing the water district there has therefore been several courses with communication as topic, with focus on communication in a lleadership position, presentation techniques and group dialogue facilitation.

“Environmental communication” is a term being used and within the water district we are developing a handbook for sub-district managers to assist them in the daily work in how to think communication, what to priorities and how to evaluate the message towards different stakeholders. The handbook tool will be one part, with a resource bank which all sub-districts add on to, will be a joint effort to improve the communication as a whole within the region.

The handbook and the resource bank is building on a project by Västerhavet water district in Sweden, that has gathered several communication tools. We aim to learn from and build a similar tool-box with strategies, figures and other materials and tips.



Target groups

Different channels, platforms and messages often have different target groups. We are therefore trying to diversify the communication and the forms in how we do them. Films and shorter clips have been the format that usually reaches the most people, but with a broad target group; the general public. Short clips are very easy to share and be far reaching, but we have also seen success with sharing longer more informational videos. More and more of our events, seminars and courses have a digital option and the extra work to tape them is minimal. In doing so the reach is expanded.

We have increased the number of platforms we use, whereas LinkedIn has become a channel for more factual communication, where reports are shared, developments on projects and results from seminars and conferences. A more proactive strategy of writing press releases and sending it to local and regional media has also increased the visibility, where a lot of the small scare media houses have little time and resources, and therefore welcome finished materials.

A new platform with the focus on local neighborhoods and activities nearby is in development in Norway. It is still small scale but being there early and making sure to start small groups and channels there, might become valuable later, if or when the platform gains users.

With simple pictures we tend to get a lot of traction, but low impact on informational value. But increasing the love of nature and maybe simple messaging on how beautiful pure nature is, is not to be discarded as not an important part of engaging the public in appreciating water quality and increase the willingness to for example pay for better infrastructure on wastewater treatment or preventing run off.

Possible partnerships

We have a need to constantly improve our communication and to further advance the reach of who we manage to inform, engage and involve in the work with the water framework directive. We have much to learn and good communication demands a lot of focus and resources. We are therefore looking for sister-regions or living labs where environmental communication is developed or in process of being developed, to learn, share and create new ways to ensure involvement of a wide range of stakeholders.

We have direct contact with several stakeholders and local authorities, that can be involved in focus groups or workshops and have started gathering data on the reach we have on different platforms to look at what kind of information is of more interest than others and what demographic do we meet on different platforms.

