

Insights into Media Coverage of Climate Change and Severe Weather Events in New Jersey

A Media Survey for the New Jersey Climate Adaptation Alliance

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Insights into Media Coverage of Climate Change and Severe Weather Events in New Jersey

A Media Survey for the New Jersey Climate Adaptation Alliance

Members of media outlets who cover news about severe weather and climate change in New Jersey participated in interviews for this survey in the fall of 2013. Participants included reporters, editors, and managers at influential print, online, radio, and television outlets. The participants are referenced as media stakeholders or stakeholders throughout this paper. These stakeholders answered questions about their experiences covering severe weather events including Hurricanes Sandy and Irene, and about covering stories that address preparing for and adapting to climate change.

The survey responses provide insights into the media's ability to deliver news to the public about severe weather events and the media's ability to access critical information about these events. The survey also revealed useful insights into media coverage of climate change adaptation. In addition, the survey identified important sources of information for reporters and methods to effectively communicate information to the media. Insights from this survey provide lessons to improve information sharing during future severe weather events and to increase public understanding and awareness of issues related to preparing communities for climate change.

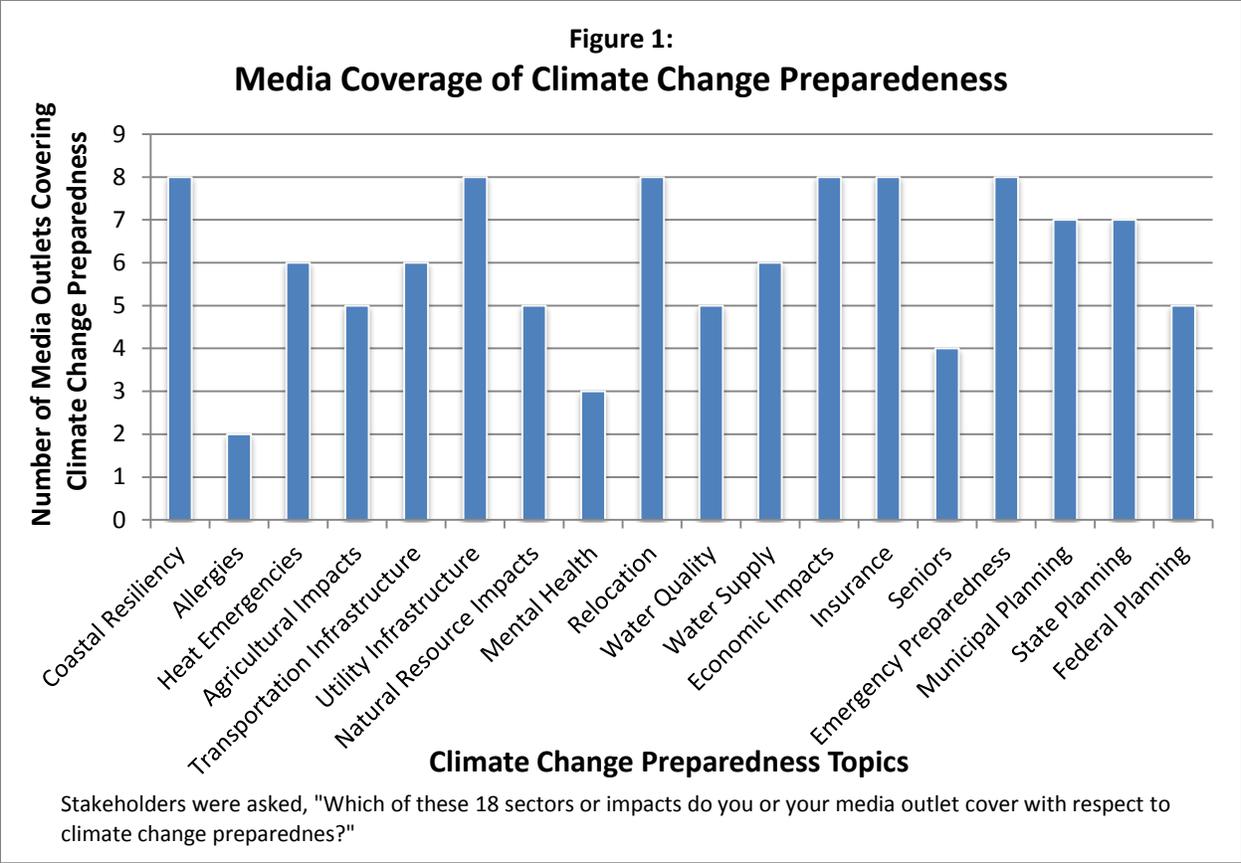
The survey was developed for the New Jersey Climate Adaptation Alliance by Rutgers University and the Georgetown Climate Center and was administered by the Georgetown Climate Center. Interviews for the survey were conducted on a voluntary basis with members of eight media outlets.¹ This assessment of the survey findings examines the results as a whole and does not reflect any single participant's response unless noted.

Media Coverage of Preparedness and Making the Climate Connection

Hurricane Sandy sparked a new focus in New Jersey on protecting and preparing communities for severe weather impacts. Media stakeholders noted that Sandy's impacts resulted in steady media coverage of these issues for more than a year, whereas the media typically cover the effects of severe weather events for a brief time and move on to other news. This media spotlight may serve as an opportunity to increase public understanding and awareness of climate change adaptation issues in New Jersey.

Most stakeholders found their media outlets covered climate adaptation on a monthly basis or more frequently, with such coverage often appearing weekly. This includes stories about housing relocation, safeguarding coastal areas, the economics of climate impacts, and protecting utility infrastructure from severe events, among other topics. Figure 1 shows 18 topics related to climate change preparedness and the number of media outlets that cover them based on the survey results.

¹ Survey participants work at the following media outlets: InsideClimate News, New Jersey Public Radio, New Jersey Public Television, NJ Spotlight, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Press of Atlantic City, The Record, The Star-Ledger.



Beyond the immediate effects of Sandy, stakeholders identified longer term climate impacts including sea-level rise, flooding, high heat, and severe storms with strong winds and heavy precipitation as conditions they consider in the context of preparing for and adapting to climate change impacts. Location plays a role in adaptation coverage, as stakeholders noted that drought or wildfires would receive more of their attention if these impacts raised significant concerns in New Jersey as they do in western states. Issues such as whether sand dunes can protect the Jersey Shore in future storms or potential changes in insurance rates due to increasingly severe weather risks also attract media coverage in the context of climate adaptation. To get published or broadcast, climate adaptation stories must be meaningful to the average person without using jargon or buzz words, stakeholders said. The topics “need to matter to grandma,” according to one stakeholder.

Continued public interest in Sandy recovery efforts create unique opportunities for more extensive media coverage about preparing over the longer term for impacts like sea-level rise and powerful storms. Some stakeholders said the media can do better at explaining whether New Jersey is rebuilding for the longer term with future storms in mind or continuing to build in at-risk areas. As one stakeholder noted, however, the media covers politicians’ decisions that are often more concerned with shorter-term results that align with the election cycle.

Stakeholders said they make the connection between severe weather events and climate change in their media coverage. Some stakeholders placed significant importance on making the connection, when

credible, between impacts and climate change. Other stakeholders expressed greater reluctance to regularly emphasize this connection in their reporting, though they noted that it is important to make an accurate link when broadly discussing climate trends in New Jersey or nationally. One stakeholder made the point that the media needs to be more straightforward in addressing credible links between impacts and climate change, but the decline in science journalism has left fewer reporters with the necessary understanding of climate science to make this connection.

Stakeholders noted the challenge of not being able to connect single events to climate change, but said that scientists could improve the public's understanding by providing clearer explanations of the relationship between weather events and climate change. Advocacy groups are found to be eager, though not always credible, when connecting impacts to climate change, whereas scientists are often reluctant to share their views or default to bland responses about what is generally expected from climate change. Experts who provide direct and insightful information, while maintaining credibility, can capitalize on important moments to inform an engaged public.

In fact, some stakeholders said they are most compelled to make a connection between impacts and climate change in their stories when the link is raised in interviews or at events by credible sources like climate scientists or expert government officials. With several major impacts in recent years occurring in New Jersey, including Hurricanes Sandy and Irene and the June 2012 derecho, stakeholders found more people paying attention to impacts in the context of climate change. Moreover, 70 percent of New Jersey residents are concerned about climate change impacts in the Garden State, according to a Rutgers University poll conducted after Sandy.² Additional factors of economics and safety also have the public seeking more details from the media about whether severe weather impacts are indicators of a changing climate. Stakeholders said Sandy created a greater demand for information about rebuilding in resilient ways to ensure new structures can withstand future impacts and safeguard people.

In making the connection between severe weather events and climate change, stakeholders also noted the media's need to present both sides of the issue to their audience. While stakeholders found that ignoring climate change while covering severe events would fail to tell the whole story, they said that other views must also be presented. This does not mean all media stories need to include viewpoints refuting information supported by climate science, but stakeholders identified that differing opinions need to be presented to their audience from time to time.

Reliable Sources: Where the Media Goes for Information

For news stories about adapting to climate change, stakeholders identified academic experts, particularly those in New Jersey, as the most credible sources of information. Scientific experts, including the state climatologist and experts at Rutgers University, were cited by multiple stakeholders as among the most preferred sources of information. Experts in government agencies in non-political positions were named by stakeholders as the next most credible sources for climate change adaptation information. These include experts at the National Weather Service and at state agencies such as the

² M. Greenberg, M.D. Weiner, R. B. Noland, J. Herb, M. Kaplan, and A. J. Broccoli, Public Support for Policies to Reduce Risk after Hurricane Sandy (2013), in review.

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, flood plain managers, engineers, and planners. Environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, were also identified as common sources of information for the media. Stakeholders noted that information from non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups often emphasize one side of an issue.

Despite concerted efforts to interview government experts about climate change adaptation, a primary stakeholder complaint was their lack of access to government officials, especially to state-level officials in New Jersey. Though recognizing the importance of gathering information from government officials, some stakeholders emphasized these sources often lack credibility because their information is politicized. Stakeholders found New Jersey officials can be restricted from using certain terms like climate change and sea-level rise in media interviews when discussing New Jersey's increasing vulnerability, which complicates efforts to share reliable information about these topics.

Some stakeholders also identified a dearth of information about climate change impacts and adaptation efforts specific to New Jersey. Climate experts often have a national or global focus, stakeholders found, whereas the media covering New Jersey's response to climate change would benefit from more experts with a state focus.

Reliable information also often comes from the media itself. One stakeholder identified that much of the leading news in New Jersey is produced by the newspapers, namely *The Star-Ledger*, *The Record*, and *The New York Times*, and found this the case regarding Sandy. Certain radio stations also carry strong credibility across New Jersey newsrooms, but news leads followed by the rest of the media often originate from these newspapers. Getting more stories about impacts and climate adaptation published in these newspapers can amplify the issue, such as by generating TV news coverage about the issue and spreading the story across other websites and social media.

Tip Line: Best Ways to Reach the Media

Reaching the media effectively is critical to sharing the most timely, accurate information about severe weather events or efforts to prepare for climate change. Stakeholders identified email as the best contact method, especially during events like severe storms when the media cover multiple stories about the event. Information provided by email is easily organized for use in the appropriate news story. In particular, stakeholders noted that sharing complex information by email, such as scientific explanations, helps the media because the material comes in a form that is easier to disseminate. Despite email's advantages, stakeholders also identified its weaknesses including the inability to access email when systems crash or during power outages. Some stakeholders said they use multiple email addresses to overcome such problems and gather multiple email addresses from their key sources of information. Posting important information online, rather than sharing it by email, can also help ensure such material is available to the media, stakeholders said. Multiple reporters often cover the same stories, especially during severe events, so providing key information online can be more efficient and avoid losing the information in the wrong email inbox.

Stakeholders identified social media as an effective means of sharing information with the media, particularly for breaking news. With Sandy, stakeholders found that information and images shared over

Twitter and Facebook provided important and often instant details to the media. Stakeholders noted the power of mobile technology that enabled people to capture and share dramatic, instant footage of Sandy's impacts, and the media used this to inform their coverage. One stakeholder noted that New Jersey emergency officials used social media in a broad way during Sandy for the first time, and it proved effective. Social media updates from the National Weather Service also assisted media coverage.

Direct contact with reporters by phone remains a critical method for communicating with the media, stakeholders said. Determining the right reporter to contact about a topic is important in order to generate interest in the information. With severe weather events and climate change impacts, the media seek interviews with experts prepared to address the specific issue, such as a flood, hurricane, or heat wave. The efficiencies of using email and social media are beneficial, but the media seek to communicate directly with key sources to deliver detailed news reports.

Text messages, timely website updates, and police scanners were also found by stakeholders as useful ways to provide information to the media.

Getting the Media's Attention

Attracting media attention with key findings or information related to the response and recovery from severe events such as Sandy can prove challenging. Stakeholders shared insights for generating media attention, which apply to departments and organizations that provide immediate aid after a severe event and for groups offering long-term disaster recovery assistance.

Presenting reporters and editors with information that tells a compelling story is one of the most effective ways to generate media interest, stakeholders said. Connecting information to a specific newsworthy topic and relating it to the local audience also grabs reporters' attention. Stakeholders encouraged organizations to openly and clearly share information, as maintaining a transparent flow of information enhances credibility with the media.

Newsrooms are consistently inundated with announcements from a range of departments and organizations. Communicating this information to the media in clear, direct ways increases the likelihood of it being reported, according to stakeholders. Stakeholders said departments and organizations can better position themselves to gain media attention simply by knowing the correct reporter to contact. For instance, emailing a news release or fact sheet about post-Sandy mental health services directly to the reporter covering this issue is far more effective than sending the information to a general newsroom email address that may never be checked. This step is frequently overlooked, stakeholders said, but organizations that identify the reporters covering their issues are far more likely to attract media coverage when sharing compelling information. Organizations may also be able to coordinate with trade associations or other networks to maintain up-to-date media contact lists.

The Media as an Effective Communicator

In Sandy's immediate aftermath, members of the media, like everyone in the storm's path, faced unprecedented conditions. Despite the challenges of working without electricity, waiting in hours-long lines for gasoline, and other hardships, stakeholders said they believed the media as a whole performed somewhat effectively or very effectively in distributing news and information during this period. Stakeholders said a growing awareness by media outlets about climate change and impacts like extreme storms better prepared them to cover storms of Sandy's magnitude. In many cases, stakeholders said news organizations are ramping up efforts to provide more detailed climate change-related coverage.

These insights identify the media as an important conduit for sharing critical information during severe weather events in New Jersey. Officials and organizations that cultivate relationships with the media in advance of such events can be better positioned to reach broader audiences with their key messages.

The most common and disruptive problem for the media regarding Sandy was the loss of power, which showed the communications impact from a vulnerable electricity system. Unlike other recent severe storms, such as Hurricane Irene, or other impacts like heat waves, Sandy caused widespread power outages that affected about 7 million people across the state³ and forced members of the media to get creative to perform their jobs. With power out in their newsrooms, some worked in corridors of other office buildings with electricity in order to keep their laptops and cell phones charged. Reporters wrote stories by candlelight or set up mini offices in their cars or at friends' homes with electricity. In our wired world, keeping smartphones charged and securing an Internet connection proved vital to receiving and distributing the news. Stakeholders compared these communications challenges after Sandy (albeit on a greater scale with Sandy) to conditions during the June 2012 derecho. The derecho's damaging winds caused power outages that disrupted communications for several days, again demonstrating the electricity system's vulnerability to severe weather.

Keenly aware of the power outages affecting nearly the entire state after Sandy, media outlets knew many people could not access television news. Social media and online news stories provided a lifeline for many people seeking information about the storm's impacts, response efforts, and how to get help. Reporters found Twitter particularly useful for receiving rapid updates about significant impacts in Sandy's immediate aftermath and for quickly disseminating critical information. Images and videos shared through social media also provided valuable real-time information to reporters. Meanwhile, the traditional media used social media to share compelling stories and images of Sandy's impact.

But reporters also noted that many people, especially in devastated areas of the Jersey Shore, were cut off from the Internet and social media in Sandy's immediate aftermath because they did not have power to charge their smartphones and computers. In these cases, newspapers were particularly important information sources. One stakeholder emphasized that despite the importance of digital media, many people only have access to information produced in print during disasters (and even then on a more limited basis). Another stakeholder highlighted the importance of radio as a widely-accessible

³ Gov. Chris Christie's 2013 State of the State Address As Prepared for Delivery (Jan. 8, 2013) <http://www.state.nj.us/governor/news/addresses/2010s/approved/20130108.html>.

communications medium that provided vital information to many residents after Sandy. These insights offer valuable tips for deciding how best to effectively inform communities that lose power during severe weather, as well as for informing many seniors and low-income residents who may not use digital media.

The Media's Challenge: Accessing Credible Information

The media needs access to credible, reliable information to serve as effective communicators. Most media stakeholders found it somewhat challenging or very challenging to access credible sources of news and information in Sandy's aftermath. Stakeholders identified particular difficulty in gathering clear information from government officials, including many officials in Gov. Chris Christie's administration, who declined to share information or give interviews on the record, stakeholders said.

Conflicting stories from state officials and municipal officials about Sandy evacuation orders also complicated the media's task of providing the public with accurate and timely information. New Jersey's home rule structure of government that creates different rules across local governments was raised by some stakeholders as a contributing factor to this problem. Additional confusion existed regarding information provided by emergency officials about areas that could be accessed in the days after Sandy. Greater coordination between emergency officials and the media would improve communication efforts, and stakeholders identified a need for emergency officials to improve their ability to share information more quickly and accurately so the media can better inform the public.

In Sandy's aftermath, the media experienced noticeable differences in its access to reliable information across different towns and counties. In many counties, emergency information lacked detail about the number of flooded homes and the extent of the damage. While counties shared useful information about where people could find assistance, stakeholders found that counties need to improve their coordination of information about the extent of the damage from severe weather events. One stakeholder found that severe damage in communities that did not receive sufficient emergency aid immediately after Sandy was under-reported in the press because most media outlets were not aware of the problems in these areas. More information tended to be available about the needs of the Jersey Shore, which attracted more of the media coverage, the stakeholder said.

Beyond Sandy's immediate aftermath, the media continued to experience difficulty obtaining reliable information from government officials. Stakeholders said the lack of access to information resulted in significant miscommunication about how residents could apply for Sandy recovery aid. This problem existed more than a year after the storm. Information about flood maps was also unclear and caused additional confusion as residents tried to start rebuilding homes.

Improving Information Access

Stakeholders noted that Sandy's unprecedented impacts caused confusion for everyone, including the media, and reporters had to be realistic about the information they could obtain. Power outages affected the normal flow of information, and reaching emergency officials was an understandable challenge. To help overcome these difficulties in the future, stakeholders said public officials, especially

at the state and local levels, should provide more information via the Internet during severe weather events. Sharing important figures and data online, such as numbers of displaced residents and details of damaged areas, and providing comments from key officials online can eliminate some of the time-consuming exchanges between government officials and the media during a crisis.

Press conferences with key officials, which took place after Sandy, also remain important as stakeholders noted that the media want to hear from public officials. Reporters value the opportunity to question officials directly to gather details and new insights, stakeholders said. Nevertheless, providing key information online can also improve efficiency. Stakeholders found some federal government websites, such as the National Weather Service and National Hurricane Center websites, delivered useful Sandy-related information.

Another notable insight from the media's experiences covering Sandy is that localities that prepare to communicate about a severe weather event are more effective at sharing useful information with the media. In hindsight this insight may seem obvious, but stakeholders found noticeable disparities among localities' readiness to communicate with the media after Sandy. Providing the media with credible information and access can help generate important stories, stakeholders said. For instance, officials in Seaside Heights, NJ, led media tours just days after Sandy ravaged the town to get out the message that help was needed. Officials were concerned with the immediate damage and the longer-term impacts on summer tourism. In providing good media accessibility, the story of the town's destruction reached millions of people, including the iconic Sandy image of the demolished Seaside Heights roller coaster standing in the ocean.

Sandy also demonstrated that severe weather events are not all alike for the media. For instance Hurricane Irene caused significant and costly destruction in much of the state, but in the words of one media stakeholder it was "like an organized evacuation drill." The media had access to the necessary information after Irene and required fewer sources to tell a full story. With Irene, the general reporting formula of getting critical details from experts and local and state officials was not disrupted, stakeholders said.

Unlike Irene, Sandy's devastation across the metropolitan area directly affected the numerous media outlets based in New York City as well as those in New Jersey. The scale of Sandy's impacts required reporters to develop new sources of information and presented greater challenges for accessing information than stakeholders had previously experienced with severe weather events. Reporters typically get fatigue from covering the same type of stories after a crisis, stakeholders said. But Sandy's impacts continued to provide new stories that propelled media coverage.

Looking Ahead: Improved Media Coverage Can Improve Climate Change Understanding in New Jersey

To improve media coverage of future severe weather events in New Jersey, stakeholders called for increasing the number of reporters in the field to provide more live reports. They found that more coverage of an event's human element and less reporting that describes the storm itself would provide the public with more relevant information. This includes producing media stories that place greater emphasis on the impacts to people, such as housing damage, impacts on children, and overall risks to

health and life. With events as large as Sandy, stakeholders said providing more statewide coverage would also offer a more complete picture of the impacts. Concentrating only in areas where most of the media is staked out prevents the full story from being told through the media. During Sandy, for instance, when most media focused on the impacts at the shore, families housing relatives in less damaged parts of the state were being affected in different ways. Many stories could be told about the effects on these families and their communities that helped the thousands of residents displaced from their homes for extended periods of time.

Stakeholders also identified a danger for the media going forward would be to treat every storm like Sandy. While major storms and other severe weather events present clear risks, the media also faces a significant risk of losing credibility with the public by overhyping these events. Weather forecasters regularly battle this concern of accurately describing what the weather will bring without overstating its impacts. As more reporters cover a range of issues, such as public health, transportation, and housing, and grapple with concerns about preparing for climate change impacts, it becomes increasingly important to get timely, accurate, and accessible information to the media. Providing this information to the media can lead to greater public understanding and awareness of the current and future challenges of a changing climate in New Jersey.

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