CAP members optimistic about industry

Members of Community Advisory Panels (CAPs) across the industry are speaking favorably of their experience as panel members. Such positive reaction from panels supports the growing industry commitment to the CAP process.

The information is contained in a study completed last August by the Wirthlin Group of 252 CAP members from 43 panels in 17 states.

According to Lew Winters of Chevron, chairman of the Public Opinion Research Task Group, "Panel members believe that their most important task is to share their experiences as panelists with the public. And, they believe their role also includes bringing community concerns to chemical plant management."

Presently, panel members are much more optimistic than residents of plant communities and especially the general public. In its study of 15 plant communities during the past two years, the Wirthlin Group found that 64 percent of those residents thought things in their communities were on the right track, while 27 percent believed things were going wrong.

The numbers for CAP members are 90 percent "right track" and only 6 percent "wrong track." "Obviously," says Winters, "these people are far more optimistic than the rest of the citizens in their community."

In comparing a list of industries, CAP members rate the chemical industry very favorably and much higher than the general public rates the industry. For example, 86 percent rate the industry "favorable," and only 10 percent rate the industry "unfavorable." Other studies show that a majority of the general public rate the chemical industry "unfavorable."

"This clearly shows that CAPs are an effective way of establishing dialogue with neighbors in a plant community. It also demonstrates the importance this dialogue plays in building the public's confidence in the chemical industry," according to Richard Doyle, CMA's director of Responsible Care®.

"We have seen a significant jump in the number of CAPs formed by CMA members over the past year, and this trend is expected to continue. This will pay tremendous dividends for the chemical industry," he said.

The overwhelming majority (95 percent) of members say they are satisfied with their participation on panels. Major reasons: opportunity for them to be active in the community (24 percent); seeing the company's involvement in the community (23 percent); and the program's responsiveness to needs, questions and concerns of the community (22 percent).

Importantly, panel members also believe that four primary objectives of the CAPs are being met. They are to:

- Identify ways to improve communications with the company;
- Provide input to the communities from the plants about plant operations and company or plant concerns;
- Provide feedback from the community about plant operations and community concerns; and
- Serve as a means to educate community leadership about plants.

Although general awareness of Responsible Care® is relatively high among panel members, there is still room for improvement. Only four in ten members could say they are extremely or very aware of the program.

While the majority of members feel that objectives are being met, the single most cited recommendation for improving the CAPs is to get even more information out to help improve public understanding.

It is extremely important that the CAPs continue to search for ways to improve communications with the public, panel members say, stressing that this would remain a two-way communication—feedback from the communities about plant or company operations and concerns as well as input to the communities about plant or company operations and concerns.

To help achieve this, panel members said companies should become even more involved in community programs that acknowledge the community's environmental and health concerns and tell the community even more about what they are doing.

To boost company-community relations, CAP members recommend even more involvement in community programs and events. The most important of these are educational programs, panel members believe.

Contact Melissa Anthony at (202) 887-1156 for additional information about the study. CMA

How to get involved in your community

There are a lot of different ways that plants and corporations are or can be active in a community. Here is a list of activities that CAP members say are most important.

- *Plant tours and open houses*
- *Presentations to community groups*
- *24-hour telephone hotline for residents*
- *Support for community schools*
- *Citizen advisory committees*
- *Plant projects to meet community needs*
- *Employee involvement in community projects*

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