



# Office of Inspector General U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

## At a Glance

21-P-0223  
September 9, 2021

### Why We Did This Audit

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Inspector General conducted this audit to determine whether the EPA is communicating sampling results or other indicators of human health risk in a manner that allows impacted communities to make decisions about managing their risks of exposure to harmful contaminants or substances. The audit covered eight contaminated sites.

According to the EPA, risk communication is intended to provide community members "with the information they need to make informed, independent judgements about risks to health, safety, and the environment." The EPA has made risk communication a priority.

#### This audit supports an EPA mission-related effort:

- *Cleaning up and revitalizing land.*

#### This audit addresses these top EPA [management challenges](#):

- *Communicating risks.*
- *Integrating and leading environmental justice.*

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## ***EPA's Office of Land and Emergency Management Lacked a Nationally Consistent Strategy for Communicating Health Risks at Contaminated Sites***

### What We Found

The EPA did not consistently communicate human health risks at select sites being addressed by Office of Land and Emergency Management, or OLEM, programs in a manner that allowed impacted communities to decide how to manage their risks of exposure to harmful contaminants. OLEM did not consistently adhere to existing guidance on risk communication, including the EPA's *Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication*.

**As part of its mission to protect human health, the EPA communicates risks from contaminated sites to the public. Without accurate, clear, and timely information, residents living on or near contaminated sites cannot take precautions, if necessary, to protect their health and safety.**

At the eight contaminated sites we reviewed, OLEM struggled with risk communication because it lacked specific guidance to provide EPA personnel with best practices for addressing environmental justice concerns, timeliness, coordination, and clear communication. Inefficiencies in the EPA's risk communication resulted in communities not being able to consistently rely on the EPA as a credible source to manage their risks. Absent a national strategy, OLEM's risk communication is not consistently integrated and applied across programs and regional offices, including for sites in the same program, in similar locations, or with the same contaminants. Also, without a measurable definition of "timely" risk communication, OLEM does not have deadlines for how long it should take to communicate site risks and sampling results to affected communities.

### Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that OLEM implement internal controls to (1) achieve OLEMwide, nationally consistent risk communication to improve public awareness and understanding of risks; (2) monitor its risk communication efforts; and (3) provide community members with information to manage their risks when exposed to actual or potential environmental health hazards. All recommendations are resolved with corrective actions pending. We also revised our report where appropriate based on technical comments provided by the Agency.

### Noteworthy Achievements

The EPA hired a senior risk communications advisor in November 2019. In December 2020, the EPA developed and launched a "premier, scientifically-grounded risk communication training platform."