



ColoSSoS Communications Plan

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1. Introduction – outline of project and the need for a Communications Plan

The Collaboration on Sewage Surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 (ColoSSoS) Project seeks to establish if and how sewage testing can be an important tool that complements existing measures such as clinical testing to help provide a clearer picture of the presence of COVID-19 in the Australian community both now and in the future.

ColoSSoS as its name suggests is a large, ambitious, high-profile, complex, time-sensitive project being delivered by a large number of project partners, across the whole of Australia at a time (at least initially) when people and organisations are working in a socially distanced way and are primarily focused on maintaining healthcare and essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While initiation of ColoSSoS has been made possible by the leadership of Water Research Australia and the extraordinary levels of commitment, goodwill and collaboration between its members, it is vital that this level of collaboration is coordinated and extended more broadly within current partner organisations and beyond so that the project can maintain momentum and achieve its ultimate goals. Clear, appropriate and timely communications are essential to this.

2. Objectives of Plan

The overall objective of the Communications Plan for the ColoSSoS project is:

- ***to help secure and retain the awareness and support needed to enable successful implementation of the project Australia-wide and across all delivery phases.***

The key to effective communication is to develop, at the outset of the project, a comprehensive strategy. As part of this process, stakeholders are identified, key messages are defined, clear responses to contentious issues are developed and there is an agreed plan for communicating with stakeholders.

The detailed objectives for this Communications Plan for the ColoSSoS Project are therefore to:

- Establish a framework for project communication with external and internal stakeholders, and broader communities of interest.
- Outline the processes and mechanisms for communication with these stakeholders. The design, implementation and facilitation of the communication program will use existing channels where possible.
- Create the first drafts of a range of communication tools to be used during the communication strategy. It is emphasised that those contained within this document are drafts only and will require substantial input from the project partners.



This draft Communications Plan encompasses immediate actions (Immediate Action Plan – Attachment 1) and an overarching strategy including:

- A risk analysis which addresses major issues.
- A suite of key messages which can be used as the basis for a variety of documents.
- A stakeholder analysis.
- A summary of key tactics which will be important to the success of the project.

3. Who will develop and use the Communications Plan?

Led by the ColoSSoS Task 4 Expert Group on Communications comprising representatives from water utilities, health departments, project management and communications specialists, the ColoSSoS Communications Plan will be developed in collaboration with project partners.

In turn the Plan will be used by the WaterRA Project Management team, Task 4 Expert Group, and project partners (including the communications teams within their organisations).

4. Guiding principles for communication

Guiding principles have been developed for any public communications relating to the ColoSSoS Project, in relation to who will approve the messaging when water utilities and health departments are involved and how it is then communicated.

In all project phases, communication relating to detections or non-detections of SARS-CoV-2 in sewage will be reviewed and approved by both health departments and water utilities/departments of the relevant governments, who will also guide any broader public communication. Water utilities and/or other agencies directly involved must be consulted prior to any ministerial directive and further communication. This consultation will be undertaken by the portfolio leading the communication initiative.

In making any public communications regarding the project, consideration is to be given to the implications that any publicity might have on other states/territories and project partners. Utilities and/or agencies directly involved should be asked to approve messaging, along with the option of providing a nominated spokesperson.

A major goal is to find the right balance to avoid undue fear (if results are +ve), undue complacency (if results are -ve) and misunderstandings (if results are contradictory or uncertainties and methodological limitations are not understood).

WaterRA must be notified of any media queries or requests. Key messages which can be used to answer questions from the media or other non-technical interested parties will be developed and provided to project partners and collaborators at key phases of the project. Project Manager, Dr Dan Deere will act as the media spokesperson on behalf of WaterRA.

5. Risk analysis and strategies to counter

This project is attracting a high level of interest especially from the media, researchers, and technology/service providers. There are a range of risks associated with the project which, if left unmanaged, have the potential to significantly impact the implementation of the project.



An initial summary of the significant issues and mitigation strategies includes:

No.	Issue	Mitigation Strategy using Comms
1	Researchers who may or may not be part of the ColoSSoS team, undertaking research using inappropriate methods that generate inaccurate and/or unreliable results.	Develop 'Appropriate' Practice Guide and disseminate and promote to research organisations and customers of research.
2	Researchers who may or may not be part of the ColoSSoS team, releasing unreliable results publicly that may differ from ColoSSoS findings and thereby undermine confidence in the approach.	Raise awareness among researchers of the potential negative impact on use of sewage surveillance as part of the COVID-19 response by releasing results outside of the official communication channels.
3	Time spent engaging with technology/service-providers, diminishes capacity of project team to deliver.	Develop polite response for distribution by email - directing enquiries to the website where a list of capability/resources required will be displayed and/or to Isle Utilities who are evaluating technologies.
4	Lack of funding to progress Phase 2 or Phase 3.	Continue to seek avenues to raise funds at state a national level.
5	Phase 2 identifies analysis is not sensitive or specific.	Currently levels of SARS-CoV-2 in sewage are very low and while sewage testing may not be sensitive to detect such low levels, the analytical methods will continue to be optimised for sensitivity and specificity. Furthermore, as the levels of COVID-19 changes in the community sewage testing may prove to be an important tool.
6	Inconsistent communications between stakeholders such as government departments or water utilities.	Communications plan developed and communications guidelines with key messages provided to project partners.
7	Availability of laboratory supplies nationally to support timely analysis of sewage samples.	WaterRA coordination of laboratory supplies (as required).

6. Key messages

Key messages will be developed for the project, and state nodes (to the extent that they are different) at each phase of the project.

A critical first step in the development and evolution of the Communication Plan has thus been to agree key messages for the project for the current Inception and Methods Development project phases, as follows:

- This is a national project coordinated by Water Research Australia bringing together health departments, water utilities and researchers.
- Sewage testing may prove to be an important tool that could complement existing measures such as clinical testing to help provide a clearer picture of the presence of COVID-19 in the community.



- The task is complex and there are multiple phases in this innovative project, starting with Rapid Development of Reliable Methods followed by Scale-up to Routine Monitoring.
- Within the ColoSSoS project, health departments are working with water utilities and researchers to understand results and to determine if results may help inform governments in their COVID-19 response.
- Detection of virus fragments is a sign that sewage testing may be an effective tool to understand COVID-19 prevalence in Australia.
- We are currently putting efforts into ensuring the detection methods are robust, sensitive, specific and comparable across the nation.
- We are also developing epidemiological research frameworks to determine how to interpret results in the context of the epidemic and determine whether and how the project could inform the public health response.
- Fragments of the COVID-19 coronavirus have been found in sewage and there is no evidence that this poses any danger to workers or could cause reinfection of the public.

7. Target audiences/stakeholders

Initial stakeholder list includes:

- State and national health departments, other departments and peak bodies:
 - enHealth
 - AHPCC
 - State health departments including water units, clinicians and epidemiologists
 - Chief Health Officer
 - Minister for Health
 - Department of Environment Land Water and Planning
 - EPA
 - Department of Premier and Cabinet
 - Crisis Council of Cabinet (CCC)
- Federal Government stakeholders
 - Chief Medical Officer
 - Australia's Chief Scientist (Dr Alan Finkel)
- Water industry
 - Water utilities
 - Councils with sewage collection/treatment responsibilities
 - Water Services Association Australia (WSAA)
 - Water Industry Operators Association (WIOA)
- Researchers and research laboratories
 - VIDRL
 - WEHI
 - University sector – across all 4 tasks
 - Hospital sector
- Routine testing laboratories
 - Within project partners
 - Outside project partners



- International collaborators o Global Water Research Coalition (GWRC)
 - o Canadian Water Network
 - o The Water Research Foundation (US)
 - o US CDC
- Other
 - o Laboratory equipment suppliers/manufacturers

8. Communication tactics

This Communications Plan will be developed to include a comprehensive list of types (e.g. written, graphic, audio) of mechanisms and channels for communication appropriate to stakeholder groups and project stage.

Consideration will be given to a range of proactive and reactive tactics including:

- Stakeholder newsletters/brochures
- Open stakeholder briefings
- Proactive media – releases, launches and events
- Website information
- Targeted stakeholder briefings
- Reactive media responses
- Conversation articles on relevant topics
- Short explanatory videos (e.g. use SA Health video on sewage)
- Interview/story on television news or science shows.

9. Communications Matrix

A draft Communications Matrix identifying the audiences, measures, responsibilities and timelines has been developed in consultation with the project team (see attachment A)

10. Timeline

As per the Summary Project Plan, the timeline for the 4 phases of the project and high-level communications tasks are as follows:

1 Initiate February to April 2020	Phase 2 Develop April - May 2020	Phase 3 Operationalise May – Dec 2020 & beyond	Phase 4 Review Post pandemic
water utility and health departments. Respond to media and stakeholder interest. Develop Communications Plan and delivery infrastructure – includes set up of project website, and identify organisations or individuals that are trusted by all project stakeholders to be project spokespeople and are competent to communicate complex concepts in lay terms.	Formalise agreements with communications specialists. Announce the formal, funded, start of the project and identify the key contributors and advisors. Develop communication material explaining the method developed from the above three Tasks. Develop FAQs and answers and host those on the internet and gradually expand that list. Announce the start of the routine program.	Provide regular updates to communicate the findings of the program. Respond to questions from the public and media and communicate responses. Expand the FAQs & answers.	Produce final project reports and fact sheets. Acknowledge all project contributors. Capture and publish lessons learnt for use in future pandemics. Promote scientific publications by project participants.



11. Budget

Consideration needs to be given to the immediate and long-term resource needs of implementing the Communications Plan. Issues to consider include:

- Costs of implementing immediate action plan
- Establishing a budget for developing and implementing the whole Communications Plan across multiple geographic nodes and multiple phases
- Tracking and reporting against budget and objectives

12. Outcomes – evaluation and reporting

The success of the project will depend on the rigour of its methodologies; the confidence that can be placed in testing results; the development of trust, mutual understanding and respect between water and health sectors; the quality of the integrated information being generated and clear lines of communication and authority to speak.

The Communications Plan is designed to monitor the performance of the Project's communications and strengthen the flow of information from the project team to its target audience and other government stakeholders.

This Communications Plan will be implemented in May 2020, during the second phase of the project and then reviewed upon Phase 4. Evaluation of the communication processes will be undertaken in conjunction with the project team. The results of the evaluation will be transparent and made available to project partners.

Attachment A: Immediate Action Plan – Phase 1 - 2 Inception and Method Development

The following is an outline of the key actions to be commenced immediately to ensure the ColoSSoS project is supported to deliver on its major milestones.

Actions include:

1. Detailed stakeholder analysis and communication channel mapping.
2. Finalising this draft Communications Plan especially for Victorian Node including sign-off on key messages for Phase 2, risk analysis, resource commitments and evaluation framework. The final communications matrix and plan will include clear objectives to ensure coordination of messages and prevent duplication of effort across Government departments and water utilities.
3. Finalising and implementing access channels to up-to-date information for project partners and other stakeholders e.g. dropbox, page on WaterRA website linked to from partner websites.
4. Agreement on spokespeople with training provided as necessary.
5. Communication material(s) developed explaining results of method development including production and promotion of 'Appropriate' Practice Guide.
6. Briefings to enHealth/AHPCC?, Health Department staff especially clinicians, water industry personnel and NCCC.
7. Development of FAQs and answers for ColoSSoS Phase 2



ColoSSoS Key Messages – Update 15 July 2020

- This is a national project coordinated by Water Research Australia which brings together health departments, water utilities, laboratories and researchers.
- The multi-phase ColoSSoS project aims to generate reliable results of sewage testing for fragments of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that can be integrated with health data for COVID-19 to support governments' response to this and future pandemics.
- Viral fragments may be shed in stool for a number of weeks by persons infected with SARS-CoV-2 with an overlap with the infectious period and a longer non-infectious shedding period.
- Early work has confirmed that sewage testing is feasible and shows promise as a tool to complement existing measures such as clinical testing, so that together they may provide a clearer and more timely picture of the presence of COVID-19 in the community.
- The project has been successfully initiated with rapid development of sampling, processing and laboratory testing methods for sewage surveillance.
- The project is continuing to ensure initial detection methods used across the nation are robust, sensitive, specific and comparable, while also identifying any improvements that can deliver greater efficiency and ease of implementation.
- Work is ongoing to establish how sewage sampling results may be combined with the established epidemiological surveillance data to contribute to the COVID-19 response. Health departments together with the ColoSSoS team have developed epidemiological research frameworks to determine how best to interpret sewage testing results in the context of clinical and other epidemic information.
- Initial analysis of results for samples stored from the height of the pandemic together with known case data will be critical to determine the sensitivity and specificity of sewage testing methods. This will inform the future interpretation of both positive and negative sewage test results including the detection threshold for viral fragments and its potential utility in different regions and settings.
- Through consultation with health departments the project is seeking to define the optimal contribution sewage testing data may have in the evolving Australian context including for routine surveillance and event driven targeted surveillance.
- All sample results will be reviewed and analysed by the responsible health jurisdiction who will also communicate findings as appropriate.

Other Background and Response Messages that can be used

What is ColoSSoS?

The ColoSSoS Project – Collaboration on Sewage Surveillance of SARS-COV-2 — is tracking and monitoring the presence and persistence of fragments of the virus that causes COVID-19 in the Australian sewerage network, providing information on where the disease is currently or recently present in the population. Led by Water Research Australia (WaterRA), ColoSSoS is a collaborative Australia-wide investigation that aims to integrate reliable results of sewage testing for the SARS-CoV-2 virus with health data for COVID-19 on a national basis to support governments' response.

Why ColoSSoS?

The ColoSSoS Project seeks to establish if, and how, sewage testing can be an important tool that complements existing measures such as clinical testing to help provide a clearer picture of the presence of



COVID-19 in the Australian community both now and in the future. This major collaborative effort sees national experts in health, microbiology, laboratory testing, wastewater-based epidemiology and policy communication, across water utilities, health departments and research, all working together while drawing on international expertise through the Global Water Research Coalition and The Water Research Foundation in the US.

WaterRA is involving all Australian state and territory health authorities both individually and through the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) to ensure that the project can readily inform national COVID-19 control efforts.

Implications for the Australian community

An immediate practical application of project findings could be the early detection of increased cases of COVID-19 (e.g. second wave), a cluster of infections, or potential threats from specific sites (e.g. cruise ships).

More broadly, the findings may inform government policy regarding tightening or loosening of disease control measures such as limits on gatherings and travel; and enable effective targeting of investment and disease control efforts for the current and future outbreaks.

Implications for the global community

Australia and New Zealand have had opportunity to develop collaborative programs for sewage surveillance. The optimisation of methodology and application in conjunction with clinical and other data is of potential benefit to the global community.

Expected outcomes of the ColoSSoS Project

The ColoSSoS project will establish the feasibility of sewage monitoring of SARS-CoV-2 and its potential for use as a diagnostic tool that can be integrated with epidemiological frameworks to help inform a public health response.

The project may support metropolitan, rural and remote areas, as well as disadvantaged and at-risk communities where health infrastructure is limited, by assisting governments to best target their response efforts and investment.

In the longer term, a routine approach to sewage surveillance for this and other pathogens will be developed which may provide an early-warning system and enable governments to implement response actions quickly and efficiently.

Implications for water sector workers

It is possible that SARS-CoV-2 may be present in wastewater where COVID-19 infections are present. Importantly, the same is true for a wide variety of pathogens, such as other viruses, bacteria and protozoa. The controls already in place to protect persons working around wastewater are based on keeping workers safe from much more readily transmissible and established faecal-oral pathogens (such as norovirus, adenovirus, hepatitis A virus, *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia* and *Campylobacter*). The key point is that existing, standard approaches, already used for working safely with wastewater, still apply, and no special or specific changes need to be made due to the SARS-CoV-2.

The SARS-CoV-2 is just one of many pathogens including viruses potentially present in wastewater. Exposure to all pathogens in the workplace and in wastewater should be managed by 'business as usual' hygiene practices especially use of appropriate PPE and increased hand hygiene.

How utilities are helping



COVID-19 is an unprecedented global pandemic and significant investigation and research is needed to find solutions. Being a part of this initiative means your organisation is helping to build a critical tool to inform the current national COVID- 19 response and build preparedness for future disease outbreaks.

Utilities involved are contributing their unique knowledge of their sewer networks and expertise in managing wastewater. These inputs assist with the identification of optimal locations and practices for the collection of sewage samples which are then analysed by laboratories looking for traces of COVID-19. All data will be provided by the laboratories directly to health departments for interpretation.

Any media enquiries can be directed to WaterRA and respective health departments.

WaterRA and respective health departments will provide periodic updates to water utilities on how their specific efforts are contributing to the COVID-19 response.

Comms	Objective	Audience	Format	Frequency	Desired goals	Task manager
Project update	Update on progress of the project, key phases and milestones, task group and node updates	1	EDM (electronic direct mail)	Fortnightly	5	TBD
Media release	Public project update	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 + mainstream media	electronic	As requested by health departments	1, 2, 3, 4	TBD
Open stakeholder briefing	Update general stakeholders with significant milestones, activities & project undertakings. Also update with any significant research findings.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Webinar (or in person where appropriate)	Midway point and end of project	1, 2, 3, 4	TBD
Targeted stakeholder briefing	Update a specific audience with significant milestones, activities & project undertakings. Also update with any significant research findings.	1-8 (one audience at a time)	Webinar (or in person where appropriate)	Midway point and end of project	1-5	TBD
News articles	Written news or feature article	2-8	Online or in print	Whenever opportunity	1, 2, 3, 4	TBD



	about the project. Could be written by a member of the project team or an external journalist with close consultation with Task 4 group.			arises or more frequently on WaterRA website		
Fact sheets/brochures	A factsheet or fact file on one sheet is a presentation of information and data in a format which emphasizes key points concisely, usually using tables, bullet points and/or headings, on a single printed page	1-7	Online PDF on WaterRA website	As required	4-5	TBD
Social media	Short update (1-2 sentences) on WaterRA or project partner Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn	ALL	Online	As required	1-3	TBD
Reactive media responses	Real-time social media post or project update due to heightened media attention.	2-8	Online or in print	As required	1-5	TBD
Videos	A look into the project, either by research activity or interview with a project partner.	2-8	Produced in-house or filmed by external crew for public network	As required	1-3	TBD

Communication Goals

Communication of the Collaboration on Sewage Surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 (ColoSSoS) Project is **to help secure and retain the awareness and support needed to enable successful implementation of the project Australia-wide and across all delivery phases** (see Communications Plan).



Due to the sensitive nature of the information generated by the project, all external communication about project findings will be at the discretion of the health departments.

For internal communications and where external communications are allowed, five (5) primary purposes for communication have been identified below:

1. Promotion and Positioning – To promote the project and position it as Australia’s leading work into sewage surveillance of SARS-CoV-2.
2. Grow Involvement – Promote the project and associated activities to encourage funding and further involvement from organisations across Australia.
3. Promote Project Partners – To promote WaterRA, our project partners and their success.
4. Industry Intelligence – To inform broader water industry of science behind project, to raise understanding, explore needs and future opportunities.
5. Efficient and Effective Collaboration – Project updates critical to project partners only.

Audience

Identifying your audience enables your communications to be planned logically. The following eight (8) groups have been identified (see Communications Plan). These groups may require different messages and (possibly) different communications channels to reach them.

1. Project Partners
2. State and national health departments, other departments and peak bodies
3. Federal Government stakeholders
4. Water industry
5. Research and research laboratories
6. Routine testing laboratories
7. International collaborators
8. Other (general public)