

The “question” question

Is it safe to swim in our waters?

Is our water safe to drink?

Is it safe to eat fish and shellfish from our waters?

These questions are the ones people want us to answer. But we generally don't answer them in a simple enough way to really deliver what the questions seem to promise.

These questions raise an expectation of a yes-or-no answer. But most of the answers we can provide are qualified. We can say with some certainty that the water meets a certain standard, but for many in the general public “safe” means essentially “contaminant free”. Also, much of the info we're offering is not current (updated weekly, quarterly, etc.) In the case of most streams and lakes we really have no guaranteed info at all.

Also, if we say the water is safe and someone gets sick are we liable, legally or in the court of public opinion? If we raise questions we aren't going to answer clearly, we set ourselves up to fail with the general public. We might be able to educate them, but probably **not** on the morning they're heading to the beach.

We can provide realistic answers to questions like:

Does our drinking water meet safety standards?

How does my beach rank for safety?

How do I know fish or shellfish from our waters is safe?

Presenting questions this way may not be as satisfying as yes or no, but does provide a context for the kinds of limits to the answers we can provide.

Considerable attention has been paid in the last several years to Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff who has popularized the concept of “framing”. In brief, he points out that the verbal frame that contains an argument or question determines how it is perceived. The headline questions on the website are the frames for the data presented. That is why it is critical that the questions be properly phrased.

State Water Board Office of Public Affairs