

Federal government taps NC State experts to explain nanotech risks

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The arm of the federal government responsible for coordinating nanotechnology research and regulations across the country has called on experts from North Carolina State University to craft a white paper that will lay out how government and industry officials should communicate potential risks associated with nanotechnology to the media and the public. NC State communication expert Dr. David Berube has been negotiating this project for nearly 18 months.

NC State's Dr. Brenton Faber, who is also associated with the project, says the goal of the white paper is to advise the government on how it can "accurately communicate the risks and opportunities presented by nanotechnology." Faber explains that "people want to know if nanotechnology is something they should worry about, and it is important for the government to be able to explain any potential risks to the public in a manner that they can understand – because what is the point of developing these technologies if people don't trust them?"

Berube notes that the white paper could also be used for years to come to inform how the government, industry and researchers convey information about the risks of any new technologies. "The last time a white paper on risk communication was done was in 1989," Berube says, adding "there is little doubt this could craft the direction of risk communication for some time. This is quite an honor and a challenge."

The paper is due July 31 and will be followed up with a one-day workshop in Washington, D.C. This workshop and others planned will

feature the report's authors, who will advise government officials on some of the better ways to communicate accurately with the media and the public.

The National Nanotechnology Coordinating Office (NNCO) coordinates activities relating to the National Nanotechnology Initiative. Dr. Vivian Ota Wang, the communication director of the NNCO, who also serves on the National Science and Technology Council of the Executive Office of the President, selected Berube to author the white paper. Drs. Faber from NC State and Dietram Scheufele from the University of Wisconsin, as members of NC State's new Public Communication of Science and Technology project, agreed to assist.

Funding for the white paper will support one graduate student and one doctoral student, who will work on the project at NC State this summer.

Nanotechnology is generally defined as technology that uses substances having a size of 100 nanometers or less (thousands of times thinner than a human hair), and is expected to have widespread uses in medicine, consumer products and industrial processes.

Faber is a professor of English at NC State. His research focuses on communications related to science and technology.

Berube is the author of *Nanohype: Beyond the Nanotechnology Buzz*, a contributing author to the anthology *Nanotechnology & Society: Current and Emerging Ethical Issues* and teaches graduate courses in risk communication and rhetoric in science and technology at NC State.

Source: North Carolina State University

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