



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Whistleblowing City Engineer (adapted from NSPE Case No. 88-6)

Year

1999

Description

An engineer privately informs other city officials of an environmental threat, a problem her supervisor has ordered her not to disclose.

Body

Mario, the City Engineer/Director of Public Works for a medium-sized city, is the only licensed professional engineer in a position of responsibility within the city government. This city has several large food-processing plants that discharge large amounts of waste into the sanitary system during canning season. Mario is responsible for the disposal plant and reports to James about its operation.

Mario tells James that the plant is not capable of handling potential overflow during the rainy season and offers several possible solutions. James replies that they will face the problem when it happens.

Mario privately notifies other city officials about the plant problem, but James removes the responsibility for the sanitation system from Mario and gives it to Chris, a technician who is normally under Mario's supervision. James instructs Chris to report directly to him and confirms this arrangement with a memo, which is copied to Mario. Mario is also placed on probation. He is warned that if he discusses the matter further, he will be terminated.

Mario continues to work for the government as City Engineer/Director of Public Works; he assumes no responsibility for the disposal plant, but continues to advise Chris without James's knowledge. During the winter, heavy storms occur in the city. It becomes clear to those involved that if the plant's waste water is not released into the local river, the ponds will overflow and dump all of the waste into the river. Under state law, this condition must be reported to the State Water Pollution Control Authority.

How would you respond to this situation? How do you assess Mario's actions? What about James's actions? What about Chris? What are Mario's obligations to either James or the Public Works Department? What are Mario's responsibilities for the environmental health of city residents? How might these responsibilities be fulfilled simultaneously? Which takes precedence in case of conflict? What additional information would you like to have, and what difference would it make to your assessment?

[NSPE Code of Ethics](#) An earlier version may have been used in this case.

Notes

See the original NSPE case at: [City Engineer - Case No. 88-6](#).

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Open-ended scenario

Parent Collection

Professional Ethics in Engineering Practice: Discussion Cases Based on NSPE BER

Cases

Topics

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Engineering

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