

MORE EFFECTIVE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION - HLW DISPOSAL

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Generally at prominent symposiums, such as this one, speakers are considered somewhat of an expert in the subject on which their presentations are based. Either legitimately an expert or expert because they are possessors of a briefcase and are away from home. Somehow I don't feel there are many legitimate experts around when it comes to talking about effective public communications relative to high level waste disposal. I believe methods of effective public communication will vary from state to state or from area to area. It depends almost entirely on the level of education, perhaps formal, perhaps practical, that your immediate public has. In areas of the country where various types of nuclear facilities are located and have operated safely for a number of years, the people appear relatively knowledgeable of the topics you discuss, relatively open-minded to the presentation of information, and more able to evaluate information and form objective opinions free of emotionalism. In areas of the country where these facilities do not exist, the people are victims to the lack of a public education program. Trying to communicate now with many of these people, with their preconceived ideas, is quite difficult.

Of course, it is quite evident around the nation, that most people do not understand the scientific principals related to radiation, geology, hydrology and the other technical fields associated with the studies connected with the National Waste Terminal Storage Program. Also, in many instances, the scientifically trained personnel who are attempting to communicate with the public are unable or unwilling to speak with "plain talk" or on the level with the audience. It is unfortunate, but, as is often the case, many of these scientific "experts" themselves may not agree on specific issues while appearing on the same platform and, as might be expected, even an attentive but non-technical audience will become confused and bewildered and will believe only that person who is saying what is wanted to be heard.

Communication is not only talking, but it is also composed of listening and understanding. If you are sleeping out there and not listening, then, regardless of what I am saying, we are not communicating. If you are listening, however, and aren't interested in what is being said or don't understand anything I am saying, we are still not communicating.

Radiation cannot be detected by any of our five human senses. When this situation is coupled with the fact that so many stories have appeared in the media that have exaggerated and sensationalized the valid dangers involved, a great percentage of the untrained American population are simply afraid. Fear, of course, is real. A young child who is afraid of the dark can be assured by a loving and understanding parent that there are no wild animals out there that will get him, but, until the youngster is ready and willing to accept that fact, he is living with a real fear. When trying to communicate on nuclear waste with an audience which contains people who are afraid, similar patience and understanding by the speaker has to be clearly in evidence before these people will accept you into their confidence. Unless a speaker is very familiar with his audience and if he is addressing people whose everyday lives are being affected by field activities relative to siting a repository, he almost has to assume some of the people are afraid and subject to emotional outbursts. With calmness, sincerity, and understanding oftentimes the speaker will be able to overcome the element of fear just enough to communicate rather effectively.

When trying to communicate on the nuclear waste issue, and I suppose this is true of any emotional, controversial subject, a speaker, to be effective, has to convey that he cares about the people he is addressing and recognizes and acknowledges that they have true, sincere concerns. Too many times a speaker appears out of Washington or some such place and efficiently, but impersonally, tells it like it is and then promptly leaves town with the people expressing for sometime afterward the feeling that their government doesn't care what happens to them. Then it becomes the burden of the state or local representatives to soothe emotions and solve problems not created by any of them.

Effectively communicating with the public on nuclear waste matters, as I mentioned earlier, I am sure varies from area to area. Since what experience I have in this field is limited to Mississippi, where two salt domes are currently undergoing studies designed to evaluate their potential for becoming a waste repository, my comments will undoubtedly reflect our problems in public communication and progress that we are hopefully making along these lines.

There are no nuclear facilities in my state to compare with such places as Oak Ridge, or the Nevada Test Site or Barnwell or Idaho Falls. Nor are there any presently operating nuclear power stations with which the citizens have had any comfortable association. We do have a number of piercement-type salt domes in the Gulf Interior salt basin and they can associate one of these domes with nuclear activities, the combination of which no other state has experienced. The Federal Government in the middle and late 1960's exploded two nuclear weapons within Tatum Salt Dome and two non-nuclear explosive devices within the resulting cavity. They can associate these happenings with the fact that contamination concentrations in the near-surface fresh water at the site since decommissioning apparently do not reflect decay or dilution. They can associate with the fact that what groundwater monitoring system

is present is there because the state in 1978 and 1979 insisted that it be put in-place. They can associate with the fact that the Tatum 1400 acre site has no restrictions on access and people are living and farming all around it, and that approximately one-tenth the number of monitor wells exist there as exist on the Hanford reservation upon which no one lives. These, and other related facts too numerous to take up our time with here, have resulted in a serious deterioration in the confidence our Mississippi audience has with the concern of our Federal Government for their health and safety. One of the big obstacles we in Mississippi have yet to overcome in communicating with our people is this feeling the government is trying to meet and will meet their ever accelerating deadlines without exhibiting evidence for caring about their health. Many of the people, in general, have expressed to us little or no confidence in the out-of-state experts, except those who are saying what the people wish to hear. They are bewildered, confused, and in some instances afraid.

Some of the people living in the county in which the salt domes are being studied in our state are direct descendants of a group of people who were on the receiving end of another federal action some sixty or so years ago. At the time of World War I, an army training base was built on a national emergency basis in the southern part of the county, and some of these people can show you pictures of their family's barns and out-buildings being torn down so the camp could be built. A number of people gave up their land and their homes and moved to the northern part of the county - the area where the Richton Dome is located. Some of them are afraid they are going to lose their homes like their parents or grandparents did.

Another problem we have found is speaker credibility. On more than one occasion a representative of the Federal Government, or even the state, has presented information in good faith relative to the nuclear waste program that in a matter of days or a very few weeks would prove to be invalid. There might appear in an out-of-state newspaper, or the proceedings of a symposium or perhaps a nationally circulated periodical, statements reflecting a change in somebody's policy that would refute statements made at public meetings. The members of an already sensitive public readily pick up on this and immediately are convinced they have been lied to. It is virtually impossible for these people to accept as truth anything you subsequently may say. It is almost equally impossible to get their attendance at another public meeting at which you are supposed to be present.

This credibility thing surfaces often times in another area. After a presentation is made, it is customary in Mississippi to allow the citizens to ask questions. Occasionally, of course, they may ask something for which there is no immediate answer or the speaker may not know the answer. In any event, the public should be leveled with and not fed a bunch of meaningless bureaucratic jargon. If the answer is not known, the person should be told so and an effort should be made to get the answer and a follow-up

response supplied to him. They should not merely be placated, but told the truth in order to establish and maintain credibility for the speaker.

We have found credibility can be enhanced and communication can be made somewhat more effective by informally talking to a small group of people as opposed to speaking to large groups. The more informal the situation can be, and the approximation of a one-to-one speaker-to-audience ratio will assist the audience in obtaining a feeling they are being treated equitably. This will also assist the speaker in getting a feel for the chief concerns of that particular audience. We have also found that this same principle has worked rather well in dealing with the media. So far we have experienced fewer mistakes and fewer sensationalisms from the media personnel with which we have had the opportunity to sit down one-on-one and explain the program. The media will reach a much greater segment of the public than any of us as individuals will, and an informed media can communicate much more effectively with the public than an uninformed one.

Communicating effectively with the public in Mississippi would have been much easier if certain federal actions had not occurred in the past that impacted their lives like they have, and also if an educational program had been initiated early on in the program. The State of Mississippi has recently let a consulting contract for the purpose of developing a public information program. At this time we do not know exactly what this program will look like or even if it will be ultimately achievable. What we are striving for is objectivity - trying to present all sides - while, at the same time, addressing the issues that are of most concern to the affected people. We are at the present time trying to get a committee of the people to work with us voluntarily for the purpose of identifying these issues and concerns and help work out a vehicle for the dissemination of the information. This concept of public participation in a public information program of this type, to our knowledge, has not been attempted before in nuclear waste matters. We do not know if it will work. When we see the proposal, we will review it and determine the feasibility and, if it is, request funding for the implementation. If it works at the local level, then possibly, it could be adapted in some fashion for statewide application. If it does not work, then nothing tried - nothing gained. But, the end result shouldn't worsen the situation as it now exists. Perhaps in a year or two or three, we will know of a more effective method of communicating with, at least, the public in our area.