

## FULFILLING INFORMATION NEEDS OF ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS:

### THE CURRENT WEST VALLEY EXPERIENCE

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the justification for environmental group communications and the options available in structuring such a dialogue. The program currently in place at the West Valley Demonstration Project is detailed. The benefits of these communications for both the project and the environmental groups are discussed.

#### PURPOSE OF THE WEST VALLEY ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

The West Valley Demonstration Project (WVDP) located south of Buffalo, New York was chosen to exhibit the solidification of high level nuclear waste. The project is also charged with the cleanup of low level and transuranic wastes. The closed door communication policy of the former reprocessing operator along with the current promise of new waste management technology fostered suspicion from environmental groups. Consequently, the WVDP public information department organized regular program meetings with three diverse environmental organizations: the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes, the Sierra Club Radioactive Waste Campaign, and the Springville (New York) Field and Stream Club. Members of these groups and project management express great satisfaction with the results of this unique open communications approach.

This paper addresses the justification for environmental group communications and the options available in formatting such a dialogue. The West Valley program is detailed including realized and potential project benefits.

The environmental communications program in place at the West Valley Demonstration Project was instituted in the throes of a challenging scenario. The site had just been chosen by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to demonstrate the cleanup of high level nuclear wastes with a relatively new technology. The former nuclear fuel reprocessing operator had maintained a closed door communications policy. Consequently, the initial reaction of environmental groups to the project was one of suspicion and fear.

The site contractor, Westinghouse Electric Corporation, immediately set up a public information program characterized by openness to the media and the general public. Established was a special program designed to enhance communications with environmental groups.

Chief purposes of this special program are to generate confidence in the project objectives and communicate that the project solves an environmental problem. This has been achieved by

accurately identifying environmental groups and effectively meeting their information needs.

#### Options for Environmental Group Communications

A number of options exist for communicating with environmental groups. One option is to communicate through TV and newspapers as part of the general public information program without tailoring a program for environmental groups. However, this approach does not meet the specialized information needs of these groups, nor does it allow for interaction with their interested and knowledgeable members.

A second option is to send out fact sheets to environmental groups as part of a larger mailing list distribution. This generates information beyond media coverage but is not an information exchange and can be criticized as one way communications.

A third alternative is to conduct open meetings on a neutral site jointly sponsored by the project and the environmental groups. In theory this gives all interested persons a chance to participate in an information exchange. However, in practice open meetings often lack organization and result in chaos.

A fourth alternative is to appoint a liaison committee of environmental group members to oversee the project. This provides for a premium of involvement; however, it could result in a platform from which to criticize a project. It also entails a delegation of authority to an outside group. A project director may not be empowered to do this.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATIONS AT THE WEST VALLEY DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

There is at the West Valley Demonstration Project an environmental communications program that includes the best of the four options and minimizes adverse impacts. The program consists of quarterly progress report meetings with three diverse environmental groups - the Sierra Club Radioactive Waste Campaign, the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes, and the Springville (New York) Field and Stream Club.

These meetings take place at the project site. This enables the briefings to be highly informative, allowing the use of visual aids as well as the opportunity to conduct facility tours. The session topics and questions are generated in advance by the environmental groups. Project experts and managers are selected to make scheduled presentations which address the requested topics. Discussions have centered on waste sampling, solidification technology, environmental monitoring, and facility decontamination. These groups have toured the former nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, the waste vitrification complex, and the site laboratories.

Presentations are followed by a question and answer period. This format is organized and allows a thorough information exchange. It targets environmental groups and encourages their interest.

To complement this program a technical information center is maintained in the project library which makes referenced materials available to environmental groups. The public information department coordinates the placement of documents into this file. Papers can be copied on request. This enables interested persons to receive more detailed information about the project.

#### JUSTIFICATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP COMMUNICATIONS

Environmental group communications can serve to build confidence in the project's mission and leadership. They can also function as solid policy that mitigates charges of corporate elitism and governmental heavy handedness. Environmental communications can result in greater perceptions of group control and consequently higher commitment to the project. These communications may also encourage considerations overlooked by those whose major orientation is technical. Group input can help shape project decisions. The intersection of ideas can lead to greater understanding and trust that can promote knowledge and harmony.

#### PROGRAM RESULTS

This information exchange involves regularly bringing persons to the site, many of whom are antinuclear and initially skeptical of the project. Many have indicated their early concern about the site has been alleviated; furthermore, they are impressed with the purpose of the project and its commitment to safety.

Carol Mongerson, a well-known environmental group leader, commended WVDP for its open program allowing the discussion of both problems and progress. Dan Walsh, New York State Assembly Majority Leader, acknowledged the project's communications program for assuring that environmental constituents are well informed.

These efforts result in significant project cost savings by addressing environmental issues to ensure no project time is lost due to public opposition. This allows engineers and scientists to productively focus their talents on schedule milestones.

At the same time environmental group interest is encouraged. Communications take place on a regular basis within a structured format. The information needs of these groups are targeted and fulfilled through this program.