

CAN'T THIS TRAIN GO SOMEWHERE ELSE?

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses public relations/public affairs challenges encountered in shipping a decommissioned reactor vessel from Sioux Falls, S.D. to Richland, Wa. and some of the measures his company took to assure completion of the shipment in a timely manner.

EARLY PLANNING PAYS OFF

In the transportation of radioactive wastes, there is always a delicate line to be walked between reality and perception. It has been Northern States Power Company's experience that reality alone will not work; some concessions to perception must be made.

The reality is that the shipment of both high and low-level radioactive wastes has a safety record second to none among hazardous materials shipped in the world. Years of experience, a strong body of regulation and close attention to packaging have resulted in a remarkable safety record. Unfortunately, that information is almost useless when it comes to making unusual or high-visibility rad waste shipments. Reality and reason should be "checked at the door" when entering upon any such shipments.

It's not that today's well-informed state agencies and regulators don't know about this record of safety, they do. Rather, it's the age-old squeeze that all in public service experience; the squeeze between reality and the fear anti-nuclear activists very skillfully spread to a public that has no reason or time to become educated in the arcana of hazardous material shipment. Simply put, it's far easier to spread fear than to create conviction. And, the opposition will always turn out more-vocal witnesses in greater numbers at public hearings; witnesses that reporters can't seem to resist.

Those of us who propose to make unusual or high-visibility shipments need to accept and understand the realities that state and local officials face. They must live in their communities long after our train or truck has passed through. Their credibility is at stake, and credibility is a priceless commodity for them just as it is for us. Further, many of them must face re-election or face the prospect of losing their appointments should a new administration be voted in. And, finally, they and we have to deal with the all-pervasive influence and power of the news media.

Under this all-too-well-known scenario, adversarial confrontation with state and local officials should be viewed as a last resort. They have jobs to do; so do we. The question then becomes how can we get our jobs done without bankrupting our employers, without backing state and local officials into an untenable corner and, at the same time, perusing the grail of injecting some reality into nuclear phobia? If you have a quick and easy answer, prepare to deal with great wealth in your future!

The unusual, high-visibility package NSP was planning to ship was the reactor pressure vessel from its partially decommissioned Pathfinder plant in South Dakota. The plan was to ship the 290 ton vessel (as-shipped weight) in one piece, by rail more than 1,600 miles through six states and some of

the most pristine wilderness in the western United States. Fortunately, we had previous experience with high-visibility shipments.

NSP first confronted the "reality gap" in shipping radioactive material in the mid-80s when the company proposed to ship 1058 spent fuel assemblies by rail from its Monticello plant in Minnesota along the scenic Mississippi River valley to General Electric's storage pool in Morris, Illinois. There had been no controversial radioactive material shipments in the region in recent memory, and a shipping campaign of that magnitude was bound to attract attention.

Nebraska Public Power District already had begun ground work for a similar shipping campaign from its Cooper plant. We learned a great deal from their scars. Probably the single most important lesson we learned was "take care of the locals." Understand the needs of state and local officials, keep them informed, do what you can to make their lives easier. They are the most credible sources of information to people in their localities. Conversely, they know their communities far better than we can ever hope to. They can be a priceless resource when it comes to taking the pulse of a region and assessing the pre-shipment work that needs to be done.

That simple piece of advice, "take care of the locals," served us extremely well in the spent fuel shipments. It is no wonder, then, that we kept that principle top in our minds as we planned for the shipment of Pathfinder's reactor vessel.

Perhaps the number-one rule under the general precept of take care of the locals is that public officials, just like the rest of us, don't like surprises. Again, they will be turned to by their friends and neighbors (not to mention their bosses) when news of a major shipment breaks. They will be one of the principal sources for local and regional news media. They will help create the all-important first impression of the proposed shipment. Caught by surprise, they will not be happy, and that puts the proposed campaign off on a very bad foot!

With the Pathfinder reactor shipment, we did our first notifications more than a year in advance of our projected shipment date. At that early date, we were not interested in creating a media or public furor over the shipment, so the "heads up" came in the form of a FYI letter from our VP of nuclear generation to the governor's designee in each state along the proposed route. In the letter, we outlined our plans and provided a contact person and phone number within NSP. Reaction, basically, was gratitude for the heads up and a request to "keep us informed."

There was a handful of phone calls to our contact person during the next few months, but no media hype and no broad public awareness. At six months pre-shipment, we sent a second letter, this time with an offer to come and meet with any state or local officials to provide a fuller briefing and

answer questions. Several groups accepted our invitation, and the shipment entered the media and public arenas. It is at this phase that reality begins to collide with perception.

Knowing from our own experience and that of NPPD that this collision with perception was inevitable, we had much earlier made some key decisions that would help head off scare allegations we knew would be coming. There were dollar signs attached to the decisions. Also, we would be doing significantly more than the regulations required. We were well aware that these extra measures can cut two ways. They can help "sell" the shipment, but they also can feed the perception that all this shipment stuff is terribly dangerous, otherwise why would NSP be doing all these things?

The hard bottom line was that even a year's delay of the shipment could easily double its cost, and that number had six zeros behind it. Swallowing hard, we planned in advance to do several of the things that proved so successful in the Monticello spent fuel shipments.

Probably the biggest decision was to provide an escort with the shipment. This was purely a perception issue. The reactor vessel contained a total of 2.08×10^{13} Bq, virtually all of which was irradiated metal internals. We had made previous LLW shipments along exactly the same route (using the IF-300 cask) that contained more than 1.11×10^{15} Bq. This was just a big chunk of mildly radioactive steel. Its biggest threat was its weight, not its radioactivity.

So, why the escort? For the opposition and many worried members of the public, comparative radioactivity numbers mean nothing and the fact that the radioactivity was locked-up in the metal of the vessel wasn't persuasive. They wanted to know who would be on the scene in the event of an accident in a small community or at a remote location. That had come through loud and clear in public hearings on Nebraska's spent fuel shipments. We learned from their experience and planned escorts for our fuel shipments before we even announced them.

Knowing this bit of history, the decommissioning project manager committed to shipment escorts for the vessel before the issue ever came up. It became a trump card for us that headed off a number of potential opposition arguments and provided a significant level of comfort to local officials that expertise would be at the scene of any accident to provide assurance there was no release and to assist first responders. It was not required by regulation; it was not required by the real "threat" of the shipment. However, it was our judgement that it was "required" by public perception if we wanted to get the job done.

Because of the remoteness of the rail route, we decided to attach a personnel car to the shipment train. (Burlington Northern was requiring a dedicated train due to the high-wide nature of the package.) The escorts had a variety of communications equipment and a full trunk of radiological response equipment. Three NSP personnel traveled with the shipment. There was a radiation protection specialist, an expert in how the vessel was packaged and a public relations professional to deal with the media along the route and back at home.

Had anything gone wrong along the route, no matter how insignificant, the potential for dramatic media and public-official reaction was significant. Communication with the outside world would be essential. Therefore, we carried a variety of communications gear including cellular phones, IMTS

(pre-cellular mobile phones) phones and Burlington Northern's own private phone system.

Some state officials had expressed a strong interest in being kept informed of the position of the train during the shipment. NSP management wanted to be kept informed of the train's progress as well. To facilitate this, we created a shipping coordinator's office at NSP nuclear headquarters in Minneapolis. Interested state officials were given a dedicated, non-listed phone number to call during the shipment. The coordinator's office was staffed full time during business hours. During non-business hours, the shipment coordinator carried a pager and cellular phone so that he could always be reached. (He was even paged three times during a wedding. Fortunately it was not his own!)

In addition to all the phone equipment, we had another piece of hardware along that made tracking the shipment much easier. Early on in the planning process, we had contacted the Department of Energy to see if it would be interested in using the shipment as a real-world test of its Transcom tracking system on a rail shipment. (Transcom is a satellite-based tracking system.) DOE agreed to a cooperative demonstration project with us and also said it would like to test a new, solar-powered system in addition to the conventional system.

The Transcom system worked remarkably well and provided highly accurate position information to NSP's shipment coordinator's office. Because of the remoteness of some sections of the rail route, our various phone systems didn't always work. However, even in the most remote areas, we could use Transcom to get a fix on the train. (Some of the longer tunnels along the route temporarily stymied the Transcom system. However, the system would automatically re-acquire the satellite shortly after emerging from the tunnel.) When the shipping coordinator went home in the evening, he simply carried along a lap-top computer with a modem that allowed him to contact the Transcom system from home.

While not required, we also prepared a written emergency response procedure. It turned out we were never asked to share it publicly, but it was ready nonetheless. It was basically a communications and notifications document that clearly left actual response in the hands of the local and state responders. We would be there to assist them.

Several governmental entities took advantage of our offer to provide a briefing. A small team from the decommissioning work group, along with representatives of U.S. Ecology and Burlington Northern, made several trips to Washington State, Idaho and Montana to brief state and local officials about the shipment. In three cases, we also were asked to take part in public information sessions. In most instances, we took advantage of the trips to visit with the local media, and in one instance, extended our stay by one day to appear at a regularly-scheduled news briefing for area reporters the next morning.

In every instance, the meetings with area officials were very cordial and productive. The people we were dealing with were knowledgeable and knew the lack of any significant risk involved with the shipment. They also were realistic politically and appreciated the extra efforts we were extending to make the shipment more palatable.

No state or local unit of government along the 1,600 mile route took a position opposing the shipment. When asked by the media or at the public information sessions, official state representatives always provided assurances that the risks

associated with the shipment were extremely low; lower, in fact, than many other kinds of hazardous material shipments. To their credit, the answer remained the same even in front of hostile opposition at some public sessions.

Ironically, the author was asked at one such public session why we were going to all this added trouble if the shipment was so safe. He responded that the extras we were doing clearly were not justified by the level of actual risk, but appeared necessary to us to get the job done politically. He asked if they would rather we had stayed at home and just done the required seven-day advance notification. There was no reply.

NSP's media relations staff was available to all the media along the route 24-hours a day seven days a week. We have always had a very open, honest relationship with the news media. We have found that most reporters appreciate this, and that many are more than a little surprised that we return calls promptly and answer all their questions directly.

Media coverage just prior to and during the shipment was fairly intense, but was non-hysterical and reasonably balanced. And, again, officials quoted in the coverage provided a realistic perspective on the actual risk and, in some cases, even praised NSP for its openness throughout the process.

In many communities along the route, small groups of people came out to see the train. As we moved further west and the broadcast media coverage picked up, the crowds grew in number and frequency. However, in the entire 1,600 mile journey we did not encounter any protests or demonstrations.

We had anticipated some activity in Spokane, but we passed through very early on a Sunday morning and no one showed up at all.

There was one small touch in both NSP's spent fuel shipments and the Pathfinder reactor shipment that paid big dividends - baseball caps! In the course of a major shipment or campaign of shipments, the shipper comes in contact with literally hundreds of people who have a role in its success. We have found that a customized baseball cap is a terrific ambassador of good will. They create allies and a sense of teamwork and involvement that pays big dividends. At one unscheduled stop in Montana, we made dozens of new friends by passing out the caps. One can even thaw the chill of a dubious railroad union worker with a three-dollar cap.

NSP has yet to discover the perfect balance between perception and reality. Clearly we did much more with the Pathfinder shipment than was required. However, we did get the job done on time, without significant opposition and with reasonably balanced media coverage. We had no opposition from any state or local official and we saved our company a very significant amount of money by getting the shipment to the U.S Ecology Richland site on time. Perhaps as important, we completed yet another uneventful radioactive waste shipment without creating any new "enemies" along the 1,600 mile route. Maybe that will make it somewhat easier for the next shipment.