

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY RELATIONS EFFORTS AT THE WELDON SPRING SITE REMEDIAL ACTION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project (WSSRAP) Community Relations Program involves many participants from the U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the Prime Management Contractor (PMC) composed of M.K. Ferguson and Jacobs Engineering.

The proactive community relations plan exceeds the compliance requirements of NEPA and CERCLA and is coordinated by a three-person staff of professional communicators. The program permeates many of the operating decisions and the result has been public acceptance of the Project and its actions to date, which has been to conduct remedial actions that will place the site in a radiologically and chemically safe condition, eliminating potential hazards to the public and environment.

INTRODUCTION

For over 20 years, an abandoned chemical plant remained neglected behind a chain-link fence in eastern Missouri. Known during its productive years (1957-1966) as the Weldon Spring Uranium Feed Materials Plant, the facility processed uranium metal for the Atomic Energy Commission.

But that's not all. The property has a war record too. From 1941 to 1946, the U.S. Army operated the Weldon Spring Ordnance Works at the site producing high explosives (trinitrotoluene and dinitrotoluene) for the World War II effort.

These operations left chemical and radiological contamination in the area of the chemical plant and at a nearby quarry used by both operations as a dump for contaminated materials and hazardous waste.

An early inspection of the site by a Department of Energy (DOE) contractor led the agency to the conclusion that Weldon Spring could become a regional disposal site. The result was the first DOE public meeting held in the area concerning the Weldon Spring Site. The date was July, 1982, and the attendance was over 2,000 concerned citizens. As a result of this meeting DOE pledged that radioactive waste from other sites would not be transported to Weldon Spring. Another result was the formation of the St. Charles Countians Against Hazardous Waste (SCCAHW), a small group of citizens living in the Weldon Spring area.

In 1984 the DOE established the Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project (WSSRAP). In 1986 the Prime Management Contractor came on site. At that time the DOE began to characterize the site, and they developed a comprehensive air and water monitoring program and they began carrying out cleanup activities.

Targets for the WSSRAP cleanup are 44 buildings and miscellaneous structures, a variety of ponds and waste pits at the site, and the nearby quarry.

Two factors heavily influence the WSSRAP cleanup:

1. The Francis Howell High School and district offices with a combined faculty and student enrollment of more than 2,000 are located one-half mile from the chemical plant.

2. The quarry is leaking contaminants in the direction of the St. Charles County well field, which supplies drinking water to 70,000 homes.

Although there are no current impacts on these people and resources, there is potential for future impacts. In any case, these present a community relations challenge.

The Weldon Spring community relations problem actually began over 50 years ago when the U.S. Army took over more than 17,000 acres of farmland, homesteads and three townships on which they would place the Ordnance Works to manufacture explosives for the Allied Forces.

This take over has been described by many as a trauma that would never be forgotten. One day officials came to the doors of homes in those quiet towns and told the owners that they would have to vacate their century old homesteads. This abrupt displacement, in addition to the many buyout deals that went sour, produced a high level of distrust of the government that still runs through this community. The situation was compounded when the AEC began producing uranium on a portion of the same land.

The Francis Howell School District, one of the site's closest neighbors, was also a casualty of this government take over in the 1940s. Several schools were seized, and full payment to the district was never received. The school district survived, but the incident is a part of the school's history that is recounted to the students and teachers year after year.

Watching the DOE carefully are two newspapers in St. Charles plus the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, three TV stations representing the major networks, an independent TV station with a news department and a handful of radio stations with energetic news teams. There is also a second special interest group, the Coalition for the Environment, which has a large membership in metropolitan St. Louis.

DEVELOPING THE WSSRAP'S COMMUNITY RELATION PROGRAM

Overcoming these obstacles and developing the current successful community relations program at the WSSRAP did not just happen overnight. Attitudes, programs and initiatives are contributors. They have included:

- Recognition that the community has a right to know, and the site has the responsibility to provide them the opportunity to know.
- Easy availability of technical and management staff.
- Easy to read illustrated informational bulletins that interpret and digest technical documents.
- Science workshops to give the public a head start in understanding the important issues to be addressed in the thousands of pages of text that will be issued for public review in the months ahead.
- An ambitious Partners in Education Program (PIE) with over 25 percent of the site personnel as active participants.
- An Environmental Internship program for area college and university graduate students.
- A biannual publication distributed to every home in St. Charles County.
- A community-wide open house attended by over 700 neighbors.
- A multi-faceted informational program including media relations, neighborhood meetings, and informational material.
- A recognition that everyone on the site is a part of the community communication network.

THE COMMUNITY'S RIGHT TO KNOW

In order to improve public participation, which is an important step in gaining public understanding, we provided the public with convenient access to the documents that explain the work being done at the site. The content of the major documents, (some which were hundreds of pages long) had to be translated so the average citizen could understand them.

INFORMATIONAL BULLETIN

The key points of important documents are digested into six-page informational bulletins that serve as pictorial and written abstracts of the technical documents. These are issued in advance of public meetings.

REPOSITORIES

We provided a collection of all major documents plus take-home copies of the informational bulletins to the five St. Charles County libraries, one of which is a Government Documents Repository established by Congress. In addition a Public Reading Room on site allows interested citizens a quiet place to study the documents.

WORKSHOPS

In February and July of 1991, the WSSRAP hosted a Geosciences and Technologies workshop. Each was attended by more than 100 people from the community. The one-day workshops provided an interactive forum for an open exchange of information between the site and the community. During the workshops everything known about the geology of the site and the latest treatment and storage technologies considered for the cleanup was presented. The objective of the workshops was to give people a headstart in understanding the important issues that will be addressed in the many thousands of pages of text dealing with final waste treatment and disposal that will be issued for public review in the near future.

In each of the workshops speakers made presentations on various topics, and an adjoining room contained supporting exhibits. Poster-sized color photos and displays filled the room. Representatives were on hand to answer questions the attendees might have about a particular display.

The result of these workshops was better informed stakeholders, and even if everyone does not agree with the decision that will be made, at least they will know that it is a sound, thoroughly researched decision.

PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

The WSSRAP was provided an excellent opportunity to further relations with the Francis Howell School District through the "Partners in Education (PIE) Program."

The PIE Program was established by the Francis Howell School District three years ago as a means of utilizing resources of local businesses and organizations to supplement the education process. Last year the Weldon Spring Site ventured into this partnership in order to encourage students to pursue careers in science and industry and also to enhance the community's understanding of the work conducted at the site.

Although the site cannot make donations of dollars or materials, it does have a wealth of expertise to draw upon. There are geologists, biologists, engineers, industrial hygienists, and meteorologists, to name just a few. Drawing upon this resource the site is able to provide the school district with volunteers for such projects as classroom presentations, career shadowing, class tours of the site and science fair mentoring.

Advising the students on their science fair projects has been a highly successful endeavor. Last year approximately 30 site volunteers acted as advisors to students providing them with guidance and lending scientific equipment.

The success of this particular PIE program in furthering community understanding has been substantial. Students and parents who might have been fearful of the site before becoming involved with PIE become comfortable with regular visits to the WSSRAP to work on projects. In addition to their award winning projects, the students take with them the understanding that WSSRAP's mission is the protection of human health and environment. This information is also passed along to their classmates, teachers, parents and neighbors.

Teachers requiring a guest speaker on any number of scientific subjects are encouraged to request a WSSRAP volunteer. One of the most popular requests is a talk on "Radiation in Everyday Life," which may not come as a surprise since the project is cleaning up a former uranium processing plant. In this effort the students learn to understand radiation.

The lectures are not limited to radiation topics. One engineer talked to fourth graders on bridge building, while another has carried the message to over 600 second graders that scientists aren't nerds. This scientist dons a "nerd" facade and then transforms into a "normal" person. In each of these cases the speaker did not try to discuss the site with the students. They were told he or she worked at WSSRAP.

Although on the surface it may seem that activities such as these do not contribute to the objective of improving "understanding", there is, in fact a very important message for these students, teachers and parents about the site. The

message is simply that the WSSRAP is a group people, much like themselves, who care about the environment. This personalizing of the WSSRAP is an important first step in communication and understanding.

None of this would be possible without the support of the technical staff, who take to heart the belief that community relations and public involvement is everyone's job.

PIE is an exciting opportunity for the WSSRAP staff. The intangible benefits from improved community understanding of the project represents only part of its value. The other driving force is the opportunity to spur on the minds of the next generation to careers in science, engineering and environmental fields. The DOE project office enthusiastically supports the PIE program, and both PMC corporations stand fully behind the program.

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The PIE program has been expanded to include an Environmental Internship Program (EIP) for area graduate students. Under EIP, the site will employ up to two interns for a term of four to six months. Work focuses on a technical or discipline problem. EIP maintains the fundamental goals of the PIE program, in encouraging students to pursue meaningful careers in science and engineering.

UPDATE

An informative update on site activities is distributed twice yearly as a supplement through the St. Charles Journal, Sunday edition. This eight-page publication, titled "Update", is distributed to nearly 70,000 homes and businesses in St. Charles County, Missouri. "Update" is a response to requests for information about the site. It helps to communicate DOE's mission of cleanup to the community, discusses progress and events and introduces site personnel to the community.

It is with material like "Update" that has kept communication lines with the community open. It allows an opportunity to remind the community that the work being done at the WSSRAP is not only for them, but also includes them in the decision making process.

OPEN HOUSE

Before the start of major cleanup operations at the site, which will begin in a few months, we held an Open House. The community was invited to tour the site before the skyline, which had been a part of area for 37 years, would be changed forever.

Although the site has always had an open door policy where groups or individuals are welcome to come and visit the site any time, the open house was an opportunity to display information about the site all at once to hundreds of people.

Guided bus tours, slide presentations by the technical staff and exhibits were the highlights of the three-hour program. On the tour, visitors were able to see up close the large process buildings that have been a part of Weldon Spring for nearly four decades. Visitors commented that they always wondered what was happening behind the gates. Over 700 neighbors attended the open house on a pleasant autumn Saturday afternoon.

The guided bus tour of the plant was the most popular attraction, but the presentations on the site's history, radiation, and personnel and environmental protection were filled to capacity, and attendees provided a number of historical

anecdotes and facts relating to the chemical plant and the ordnance works that occupied the site beforehand.

The nearly 50 site volunteers, who had been on hand since early morning, agreed that the open house was fun and rewarding.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Prior to public meetings, supporting the CERCLA process, numerous small group meetings are held to present and discuss issues relevant to upcoming public meetings. These meetings allow stakeholders (politicians, environmental groups, interested citizens, etc.) an opportunity to better understand the basis for the DOE's proposed action in a small gathering that is less stressful and more informative than a formal setting. Inviting the media to one of the small group meetings reduces the probability of inaccurate news coverage of the public meeting.

Other tools and projects the Weldon Spring Community Relations Department uses include:

- **Fact Sheets and Briefing Papers**

Several innovative, easily understood, and informative fact sheets have been developed. The fact sheets are also useful when answering queries from the public, press or officials. Some of the fact sheets produced include, "Superfund Facts," "Interim Response Actions," "Geology and Hydrology of the WSSRAP Site," "History of the Weldon Spring Site," "Air and Water Monitoring," and "Environmental Compliance Documents."

- **Media Training Workshops**

A training workshop was held in 1989 and another in 1991 to prepare Weldon Spring managers on how to respond to, and communicate with the news media.

- **Presentations To Outside Organizations**

Key site personnel make many presentations explaining the WSSRAP to clubs, organizations, schools, local officials, etc. This broadens the understanding of the WSSRAP mission.

- **Employee Communications**

Quarterly, the DOE Project Manager and the PMC Project Director address all the employees in an "All Hands" Meeting. During this one hour meeting the two site leaders update employees on the site's progress, successes and problems. Employees are encouraged to comment or ask questions.

The Community Relations Department also publishes a site newsletter, "NEWSSRAP", twice a month. Included in the newsletter are site items, personal interest stories about the employees, activities and sports, and upcoming events.

It is through these two methods that site employees become well-informed representatives.

These are the programs. So, what are the results?

- Five "peaceful" public meetings

- Support from:

- Elected officials
- Neighbors
- Francis Howell School administration
- SCCAHW

- Over 700 people attend an open house.
- Fair treatment by the media, including an editorial entitled, "Work With DOE."
- Scores of neighbors apply for positions open at the site
- One of the nation's first CERCLA driven Records of Decision signed by the United States Environmental

Protection Agency and the Department of Energy (Quarry Bulk Waste Removal)

Through the many programs, the Weldon Spring Site has achieved a level of trust and confidence that enables it to move on and complete the cleanup. PMC and DOE management realize that a single department cannot do it alone. They support the effort reminding the employees that community relations is everyone's job, and without public understanding, work on the project could come to a stop.