

TABS ON CONTAMINATED SITES

Contaminated Sites Program - Federal Sites

This is one in a series of Technical Assistance Bulletins (TABs) prepared by Environment Canada-Ontario Region for Federal Facilities operating in Ontario.

TAB #12



Developing a Community Relations Program for Contaminated Sites

DESCRIPTION:

Open and consistent communication with a community during the site assessment and remediation activities assures the public that their concerns have not been forgotten, and helps the custodian department move towards protecting human health and the environment. A good community relations program will yield fewer “surprises”, and as a result, fewer delays in site remediation, as compared to a site where the custodian department and the community are not freely and frequently exchanging information.

This TAB can be used when a potential or confirmed contaminated site is known to, or may predictably, affect people or areas off-site. In this situation, the site becomes a public issue and a Community Relations Program should be initiated. You should consult your Departmental Communications Office at the earliest possible stage in a project.

OBJECTIVES OF A COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAM

1. To give the public the opportunity to comment on and provide input to technical decisions.
2. To inform the public of planned or on-going actions.
3. To focus and resolve conflict.

FOCUS OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAMS (CRP)

A Community Relations Program (CRP) should focus on the people who are most concerned about the site; those who consider themselves to be directly affected, believing their health to be endangered, or

perceiving possible economic loss. As such, a Community Relations Program will likely have to be developed when the contaminated site is close to residences, play-grounds, schools, livestock, crops or other vegetation, public water supplies, recreational lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, wetlands, bird sanctuaries, games reserves, and parks, or if the site is highly visible.

SUGGESTED COMMUNITY RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

The specifications of CRPs will differ for each site. CRPs may be started at any stage of the site assessment/ remediation process. Accordingly, some suggested community relations activities which can follow each stage of the process are outlined below.

In the event that a contaminated site may potentially affect people or areas off-site, the site will become a public issue, and a CRP should be initiated.

Community Relations During Preliminary Site Assessment

At this stage there is little need for organized community relations activities or for large-scale efforts to inform the community of the government's interest in the site because this can generate unrealistic fears or expectations. It is not yet known if there is a problem at the site.

Community Relations During Field & Sub-Surface Investigations

Since the appearance of contractors and consultant teams is likely to increase community interest on a highly visible site, it is advisable to step-up community relations efforts accordingly, or initiate community relations activities if not yet begun.

Community Relations During Remedial Investigations

Once results of the field and sub-surface investigations are known, and it is determined that remedial action is necessary, the community relations staff should anticipate increased community concern and interest in the site. To meet this increased interest, the staff should prepare and share factual information about the site.

Additionally, a public meeting may be held after remedial action has been deemed necessary to provide the community with an opportunity to comment orally. The media will likely also be attracted to the site at this stage. Accordingly, it would be useful to prepare a press release to accompany any fact sheets/newsletters that might have been distributed to the media.

Community Relations at the Completion of Remedial Investigations

Once a preferred remedial method has been selected, the department should: develop a proposed remedial action plan; post a public notice of the availability of the proposed remedial action plan; provide an opportunity for submitting oral and written comments; provide the opportunity for a public meeting; and, integrate the community's comments and concerns into the final remedial action plan.

Community Relations During Remedial Action

If site conditions permit, site tours can be conducted to enable community members to better understand the nature of the problem at the site and the response action. If site access is restricted, a pictorial display at a secure area of the site would allow the community to view the progress at the site.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS TOOLS

The community relations tools listed below, are some of the most common activities used when conducting a community relations program.

Contact Person: One staff member is designated as a contact person who assumes responsibility for addressing citizens' concerns.

Fact Sheets/Newsletters: A fact sheet/newsletter should summarize current or proposed site assessment or remediation activities, and present technical information in a clear and understandable format.

Press Releases: A press release to the local media can reach a large audience quickly and inexpensively.

Public Meetings: Public meetings inform citizens of ongoing response activities, and allow the department to discuss and receive citizen feedback on the proposed course of action. To facilitate effective communication, a public liaison committee should be set up to represent the concerns of the general public.

Site Tours: Site tours should be conducted after the remediation has been started and if site conditions permit, to familiarize the media, local officials, and citizens with the remediation technology and processes.

SOURCES

United States Environmental Protection Agency (1988). *Community Relations in Superfund: A Handbook-Interim Version*.

United States Environmental Protection Agency
(1990). *Sites for Our Solid Waste: A Guidebook for
Effective Public Involvement.*

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