PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HANFORD DEFENSE WASTE - EXTERNAL AFFAIRS PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The Hanford Site, located in southeastern Washington State, has been dedicated to the production of nuclear materials in support of national defense for more than 40 yr. Production activities have resulted in considerable amounts of nuclear waste, which have been stored safely at the Hanford Site. The U.S. Department of Energy - Richland Operations Office (DOE-RL) believes that the technology exists to safely dispose of that waste. In 1986, the DOE-RL released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement--Disposal of Hanford Defense High-Level, Transuranic and Tank Wastes (HDW-EIS) for public comment on proposed options being considered for disposal of the waste. To enhance the public comment process, the DOE-RL developed and implemented a comprehensive public information and outreach program. The approach to the program is divided into five steps: a situation analysis, development of a plan, implementation activities, a method for evaluation, and a mechanism for recommendations. After analyzing the regional political and social environment, the DOE-RL found that the disposal of Hanford Site nuclear waste is not only a national issue, but of major regional interest, and that there are a number of discrete audiences in the Pacific Northwest that need to be reached. Based on this information, a detailed plan was developed that outlined four major program activities that were needed to achieve a high degree of public understanding and involvement in the decision-making process. These activities included conducting public meetings, consisting of open houses, workshops, and hearings; establishing a citizens' forum; coordinating a speakers' bureau; and establishing a media relations program. All of these activities were conducted in 1986. An evaluation of the public meetings component of the program indicated that the public information and outreach program was a good first step for the DOE-RL: all applicable regulations were met, the DOE-RL began to establish credibility in the Pacific Northwest, media treatment began negatively and later became more factual and less interpretive, and some degree of regional consensus was reached on the need for the DOE-RL to proceed with disposal using available technology.

INTRODUCTION

The Hanford Site, located in southeastern Washington State (Fig. 1), has been dedicated to nuclear technology activities for more than 40 yr. A major U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) mission has been the production of special nuclear materials in support of national defense programs. Production activities have resulted in the generation of nuclear waste, which has been safely stored on the Hanford Site for 40 yr. In the early years, the top-secret Manhattan Project of World War II required that information about production and storage of nuclear material be classified. As the technology advances and information become declassified, data about onsite activities and future plans are becoming part of the public record.

On April 1, 1983, the DOE-Richland Operations Office (DOE-RL) published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register that indicated their intent to prepare a draft Hanford Defense Waste - Environmental Impact Statement (HDW-EIS) on proposed options being considered for the disposal of high-level, transuranic, and tank wastes at the Hanford Site. The draft HDW-EIS was released for public review and comment in 1986 in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which states that for all proposed major Federal actions a provision must be made for adequate public input and comment.

To enhance the public comment process, the DOE-RL developed and implemented a comprehensive public information and outreach program in parallel with the preparation and release of the draft HDW-EIS.

The DOE-RL enlisted the support of those Hanford Site contractors most closely involved with waste management operations and preparation of the draft HDW-EIS. Rockwell Hanford Operations (Rockwell) was designated the lead for overall program management and the Battelle/Pacific Northwest Laboratory (PNL) Human Affairs Research Center provided primary support. The Hanford Defense Waste - External Affairs Program (HDW-EAP) was

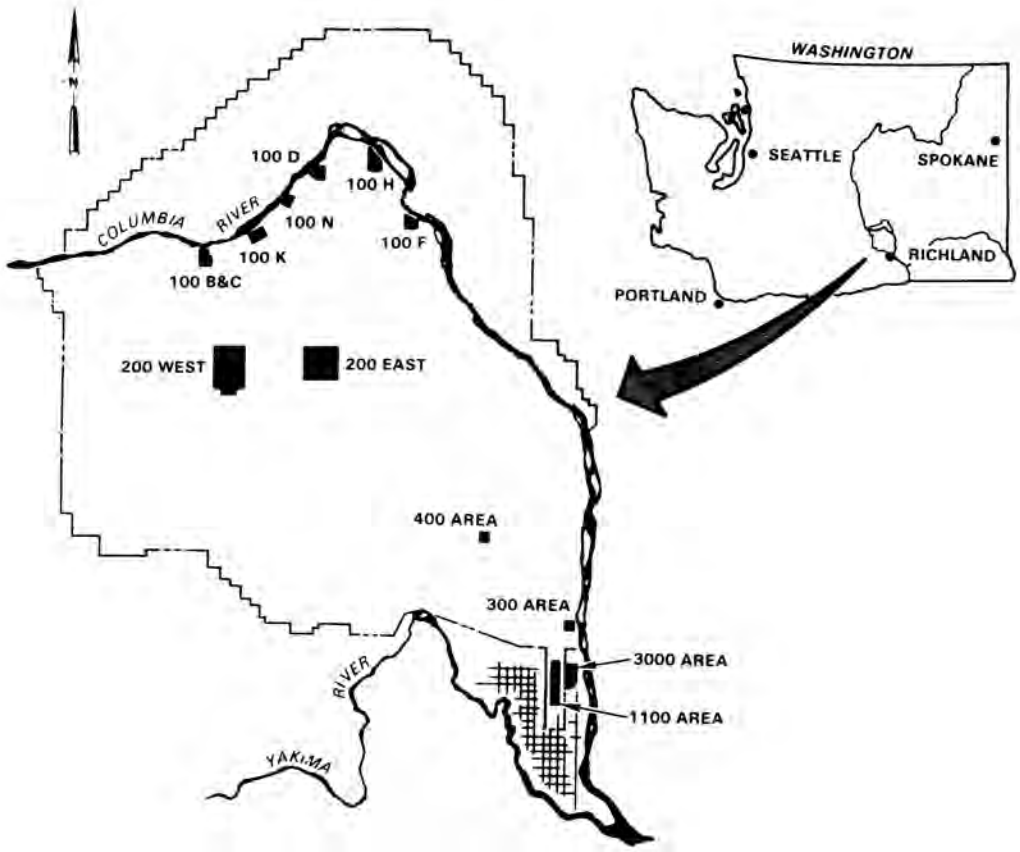

Fig. 1. Location of the Hanford Site.

developed and implemented over a 3-yr period. The approach to the HDW-EAP was divided into five steps:

- A situation analysis of the social and political environment in the region
- Development of a plan to guide the program
- Implementation of program activities described in the plan
- A method for formally evaluating selected program activities
- A mechanism for making modifications to the program as it continues.

Written comments and oral testimony received in 1986 are being considered by the DOE-RL during preparation of the final HDW-EIS. The final HDW-EIS is scheduled for release in late 1987. The DOE-RL is committed to continuing to provide information to the public on the status of the HDW-EIS process as well as other future activities that could have an impact on public health and safety.

This paper briefly describes the conduct of the HDW-EAP from 1984 through 1986.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Prior to the development and conduct of any public outreach activities, the DOE-RL contractor staff analyzed the social and political environment in the Pacific Northwest. It became evident that disposal of nuclear waste at the Hanford Site was a regional issue, primarily because the states of Oregon and Idaho provide southern and eastern borders to Washington State, respectively; and the Columbia River, which flows along the perimeter of the Hanford Site, flows into Oregon State. The Snake River joins the Columbia River south of the Hanford Site and then flows into Idaho State. Concern has been expressed about the possibility of contamination originating from the Hanford Site reaching the public via the two rivers.

Additionally, a reader poll published in early January 1986 by the Seattle Times ranked nuclear waste as the Pacific Northwest's leading issue in 1985. The nuclear waste issue continues to dominate the news. The public has great difficulty separating defense waste disposal from other nuclear issues, specifically the repository issue. The DOE-RL had a perception problem with credibility because little information on defense waste and options for disposal had been made available to the public prior to 1986, and no ongoing mechanism was in place to effectively transmit information. Another problem facing the DOE-RL was that the public's level of knowledge and understanding of defense waste operations was insufficient for them to provide fully informed comments on the complex disposal options proposed in the draft HDW-EIS. The primary goal of the HDW-EIS process was to encourage public involvement and comment.

The situation analysis also indicated to the DOE-RL the following major audiences of interest in the region that should be targeted for outreach activities:

- Government agencies

- State legislatures
- The media
- Affected Indian tribes
- Special interest groups
- Individuals.

Based on the results of the situation analysis, the DOE-RL and their contractor staff developed a detailed plan to guide the program.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN

Two comprehensive third-party reviews were conducted to ensure that the HDW-EAP was on the right track. The following recommendations were made.

- Conduct further public opinion research (e.g., focus groups).
- Identify local and regional leaders and initiate a contact program.
- Enhance and foster media relationships.
- Establish a Citizens' Advisory Committee.
- Develop and implement a useful public involvement process.

An Implementation Plan was prepared on these recommendations. It outlined several major activities for the HDW-EAP, including:

- Planning and conducting a series of public meetings
- Establishing a citizens' forum on defense waste
- Coordinating and conducting a defense waste speakers' bureau
- Establishing a media relations program.

The Implementation Plan guides the formulation of strategies and procedures for interacting with and briefing Federal, State, and local officials; affected Indian tribes; the media; and public interest groups by developing supporting materials. It describes the public notification process and details a mechanism for monitoring public response to the program. The Implementation Plan is updated periodically to reflect changes and modifications that are made to the HDW-EAP.

IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Four primary activities were conducted in 1986, including public meetings, the Northwest Citizens' Forum on Defense Waste, the Hanford Defense Waste (HDW) Speakers' Bureau, and media relations.

Public Meetings

The DOE-RL outlined three types of public meetings to correspond to the three phases of the draft HDW-EIS review process: meetings held prior to the issuance of the draft, meetings held early in the draft HDW-EIS comment period, and meetings held just prior to the close of the comment period. The three types of meetings were called open houses, workshops, and formal public hearings, respectively.

- Open Houses--The open houses were held prior to the release of the draft HDW-EIS for public review and comment. The open houses were designed to help prepare the public to participate in the draft HDW-EIS comment process by providing general information about the Hanford Site, as well as basic information about the defense wastes currently stored there.

The open houses featured an informative photographic exhibit comprised of five stations. The stations described the history of the Hanford Site, current waste storage practices, basic information about radiation and the Hanford Site environment, alternatives proposed for disposal, and a description of the public involvement process. A videotape was shown at the beginning of the exhibit to provide the public with an overview of the Hanford Site. Each station was staffed by the DOE-RL and their contractor personnel. The informal nature of the open houses provided the public with a face-to-face opportunity to ask questions and receive answers. It was estimated that over 5,000 people attended the open houses, which were held in seven cities throughout the Pacific Northwest as well as five special showings in area shopping malls and science centers.

- Workshops--The workshops were started several weeks after the draft HDW-EIS was released for public comment. The workshops were more technical in nature and were designed to answer the public's specific questions regarding the content of the draft HDW-EIS after it had been reviewed.

Each workshop opened with a brief introductory presentation by a DOE-RL staff member, including a slide show summarizing the alternatives evaluated in the draft HDW-EIS. After the introduction, the group broke into smaller working groups chaired by DOE-RL personnel and their contractor staff. These groups covered such topics as calculated environmental impacts for each alternative, a discussion of the disposal alternatives and costs, transportation and socioeconomic impacts, and the current Hanford Site environment. The smaller working groups provided the public with an opportunity to conduct a dialogue with the DOE-RL on specific technical issues. Workshops were held in seven cities throughout the Pacific Northwest, many of them in the same cities as the open houses. It was estimated that about 300 people attended.

- Formal Public Hearings--The formal public hearings were held just prior to the close of the 120-d draft HDW-EIS comment period. The hearings were designed so that the DOE-RL personnel could receive formal public testimony for the official record.

The hearings were conducted by an independent moderator and opened with an introduction and description of the hearing protocol. After the introduction, individuals interested in providing testimony addressed their comments to a panel consisting of DOE-RL personnel and their contractor staff. All testimony was recorded on tape and by a certified court reporter. Each person was given 5 min to testify. Testimony in each city was taken in two 3-h sessions: one in the afternoon and one in the evening. In some cities, where the number of people wanting to testify exceeded the time slots available, the DOE-RL extended the time so that

everyone who wanted to speak had the opportunity. The DOE-RL staff did not comment on any of the testimony. Testimony received is currently being considered by the DOE-RL staff as they prepare the final HDW-EIS. All relevant comments and all DOE-RL responses will be included in the final HDW-EIS.

Although only one public hearing is required by the NEPA, four were held throughout the Pacific Northwest because of the possible far-reaching environmental impacts. About 2,000 people attended the hearings, and 245 people testified.

Northwest Citizens' Forum on Defense Waste

To further ensure that public concerns and viewpoints regarding the impact of the draft HDW-EIS on public health, safety, and welfare were identified and formally represented in the HDW-EIS process, the DOE-RL has established a Northwest Citizens' Forum on Defense Waste to act as a communication channel between the public and the DOE-RL until the final HDW-EIS is issued. The forum is composed of Pacific Northwest citizens representing a broad range of constituencies and regional interests. The forum examined the draft HDW-EIS and submitted an evaluation report to the DOE-RL that included detailed recommendations. The forum also prepared a second report, which evaluated the HDW-EIS public information and outreach program. Regular meetings were conducted, and all meetings were open to the public. The media were also encouraged to attend. At the forum's request, both pro- and antinuclear groups were invited to address the forum and present their viewpoints. This open format provided channels of information to forum members other than the DOE-RL and their contractor staff and made additional public input available to the DOE-RL on issues pertaining to the draft HDW-EIS.

Hanford Defense Waste Speakers' Bureau

The Speakers' Bureau was organized to provide information to civic organizations, schools, etc. Presentations by the Speakers' Bureau were made to civic and service groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, schools, and local government entities (e.g., fire departments and other emergency response units). The selected speakers received extensive communications training. Each audience to be addressed was analyzed and a suitable speaker for that group was selected. These audience profiles were an important aspect of the program. During 1986, over 300 presentations were made to more than 10,000 people throughout the Pacific Northwest by the Speaker's Bureau.

Media Relations

The media relations activity included periodic tours and briefings with emphasis on the management and disposal of Hanford Site defense wastes. The briefings and tours provided media representatives with background information for feature articles and current news items. Regular interaction with the media helped to establish a working rapport between the DOE-RL and the media. Consistent media interactions resulted in increased and more factual coverage of the defense waste disposal program. All DOE-RL personnel and their contractor staff received communications training, which facilitated more relaxed and open dialogues.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

In an effort to assess whether the goal of achieving adequate public input and comment on the draft HDW-EIS had been met, the DOE-RL requested that a third-party evaluation be conducted on selected program activities. Since the planning and conduct of the public meetings were the primary focus of the HDW-EAP in 1986, the meetings were chosen to serve as an indicator of the value and success of meeting the DOE-RL objective. The balance of the program activities was evaluated internally. The public meetings were held over a 6-mo period, and enough evaluative material, such as list questionnaires and newspaper articles, existed to conduct the evaluation. In addition, program staff were interviewed throughout the 6-mo period to provide feedback on the process.

Results of the evaluation generally indicated that the comprehensive and open nature of the program was a good first step in improving public understanding of the issues and in meeting the public's need for information about the Hanford Site. The program was aimed at involving not only the general public, but Government officials, the media, and special interest groups. Public comment indicated the need for more and continuing public involvement regarding not only defense waste activities, but other Hanford Site programs as well. The DOE-RL goal of achieving compliance with NEPA regulations was met, but it appeared that the public was not entirely convinced that their comments would be considered in any kind of useful way.

Another major area of evaluation was the issue of the program's impact on the perceived level of credibility for the DOE-RL. A supportive and active media relations program was initiated and went a long way in establishing credibility for the DOE-RL in the Pacific Northwest. Media treatment of the process evidenced a change in the tone of coverage throughout the public meetings. Initial coverage of the open houses was extremely critical--questioning the cost of the program, the general credibility of the DOE-RL, and the "public relations" nature of the HDW-EAP--but coverage after the open houses improved. Reporting became more factual and less interpretive, and remained so through the workshops and hearings. In addition, despite a series of unplanned events outside the program (e.g., repository site selection, postponing selection of a second repository, the Chernobyl incident), the DOE-RL did not lose any ground.

Actual comments received on the draft HDW-EIS were also briefly reviewed, separately from the evaluation materials. This cursory review indicated that the states of Washington and Oregon, as well as the Northwest Citizens' Forum on Defense Waste, had achieved considerable regional consensus about the need to proceed with disposal of the Hanford Site defense waste and that the DOE-RL could safely dispose of several waste types using existing technology.

As part of the evaluation process, the development of program recommendations was the final activity in the HDW-EAP. These recommendations were considered the final point to close the communication loop and provide needed feedback to the DOE-RL from a third party to help guide the program in 1987 and beyond. The primary source for recommendations was the information evaluated from the public meetings.

The following recommendations are made to developers of future public outreach programs.

- Develop and implement a supportive and active public outreach program to provide more and regular opportunity for the public to interact with the DOE-RL; these forums should be well publicized and held in convenient locations.
- Maximize efforts to improve and develop an effective media relations program.
- Work closely with special interest groups to identify their issues as well as provide a channel of information.
- Take administrative and management risks; be flexible and innovative so that the programs are responsive to the needs of the people.

CONCLUSIONS

The Hanford Site defense waste public information activities and the HDW-EAP was a major success for the DOE-RL. Since its implementation, the media attitude about the Hanford Site and its defense waste operations has, in many ways, improved. A regional consensus recognizing the need for permanent disposal of Hanford's defense waste is forming, and the public is gaining a sense of greater openness by DOE about activities at the Hanford Site. This positive trend can be attributed to the dedication and professionalism of the personnel at the Hanford Site, and their willingness to serve as ambassadors in communicating DOE's plans, programs, and accomplishments.