

## **DEVELOPING BROAD BASED STAKEHOLDER ACCEPTANCE FOR THE WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Building acceptance of plans for transuranic waste disposal at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) has relied on nurturing key partnerships at all levels with all stakeholder groups. Developing broad-based stakeholder understanding and acceptance for permanent waste disposal at the WIPP began in the mid-1970s in Carlsbad, New Mexico. The road to opening the nation's first, fully permitted nuclear waste repository has been successful, in most part, due to the commitment of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the long-term supportive involvement of community and state leaders. The building and nurturing of support for the WIPP involves (1) application of the strategic risk communications process, (2) understanding political and intergovernmental expectations, (3) deploying a disciplined community relations program, and (4) implementing economic reciprocity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Located in southeastern New Mexico, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) will ensure the safe, permanent disposal of radioactive transuranic waste generated by the production of nuclear weapons. The mission of the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Carlsbad Area Office (CAO) is to protect human health and the environment by opening and operating the WIPP for safe disposal of transuranic wastes and by establishing an effective system for management of transuranic waste from generation to disposal. Transuranic waste consists of clothing, tools, rags, debris, residues, and other disposable items contaminated with man-made radioactive elements, mostly plutonium. Transuranic waste began accumulating in the 1940s with the beginning of the nation's nuclear weapons program. Sound environmental practice requires that the nuclear materials be permanently isolated to provide protection of human health and the environment.

The WIPP has been fully studied and approved for disposal of pure transuranic waste by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The State of New Mexico has issued its Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) permit in draft form. The RCRA permit will allow the WIPP to accept transuranic waste mixed with hazardous constituents such as solvents and lead. The WIPP facility and the Carlsbad Area Office have completed an extensive operational readiness review under the auspices of the

Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board. Once pending and anticipated litigation is resolved, the WIPP will begin receiving transuranic waste.

## TRU DEFENSE WASTE GENERATING AND STORAGE SITES

Including Small Sites



Fig. 1. Generating and Storage Sites (including small sites).

Subordinate to the technical and regulatory successes of the WIPP has been an aggressive and disciplined stakeholder outreach and public information effort that has proven successful.

### BACKGROUND

The WIPP stakeholder outreach and public information programs, from a national perspective, are broad reaching. Besides supporting a fixed nuclear facility, the repository itself, they involve 16 states in the nation with both large DOE sites and small quantity locations. See FIGURE 1. The outreach activities involve all the congressional, state, tribal, county, and city elected and appointed officials in those states and the regions that serve as corridors for the transportation of wastes to the WIPP. Stakeholders who have an interest or are impacted represent the major special interest groups targeted.

The CAO's counterparts at the 23 DOE sites and laboratories are key partners who are in turn supported by a myriad of compact administrators, partnerships supported by memorandums of agreement, citizens who are members of oversight committees, and

community leaders. In addition, the WIPP public affairs program addresses the immediate interests of the local, regional, technical, and national news media. The Carlsbad, New Mexico community that includes the WIPP's employees and their families is considered a fundamental key to the public affairs activities and the successes of the project since its inception.

The first standing legal action involves a 1991 lawsuit against the DOE and the U.S. Department of Interior in which an injunction was issued in 1992 barring the shipment of transuranic waste to the WIPP in order to conduct experimental research as part of the test phase. This injunction was based on the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. The New Mexico Attorney General and others have taken the position that the injunction is still in effect. The DOE disagrees, saying that the grounds for the injunction were removed when Congress passed the WIPP Land Withdrawal Act of 1992. The WIPP site radioactive waste test phase was canceled in 1993, and the NEPA evaluations of WIPP were completed by issuance of the Record of Decision for waste disposal in January 1998.

In May 1998, the New Mexico Attorney General and other plaintiffs asked that the court prevent the disposal of transuranic waste at WIPP, asserting lack of a hazardous waste permit from the State of New Mexico and lack of interim status under RCRA. However, under the EPA site certification granted in April 1993, the DOE may begin operations at the WIPP before it obtains the hazardous waste permit if it disposes of transuranic waste that is not a hazardous waste subject to RCRA.

Another set of lawsuits was filed by WIPP opponents in July 1998 against the EPA challenging its decision to certify the WIPP.

When inaccurate or misleading statements appear in the print or broadcast media or in other public forums, the WIPP Public Affairs team prepares prompt formal responses and delivers them to the news media. This proactive feedback strategy has proven very effective. Now, many stakeholders and elected officials who follow the WIPP and are extremely knowledgeable ask for background information on the issue. They often join the WIPP in setting the record straight with the news media.

As in all industries it is necessary to anticipate customer needs. The WIPP public affairs planning processes use public opinion polling data when available. They also gather information from public hearings, interviews, and benchmarks to determine the information needs of stakeholders, elected officials, and the public.

Every strategic partnership nurtured by the Carlsbad Area Office is detailed in a disciplined planning process. Although each plan is uniquely different and designed to meet a strategic objective, most plans follow a common management-by-objective format with considerable emphasis on performance measurement.

Most public affairs practitioners resist measuring their individual or group performances. Once performance is tracked and measured, however, the measurements prove invaluable. For example, the Carlsbad Area Office tracks eight metric points for the Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division. The tracked progress in fiscal year 1998 showed a 63 percent increase, in site tours, news releases, media outreach, exhibit placements, community updates, speeches, and Internet activity.

## **PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS**

Public meetings, frequently required by statute, are a fundamental link in building a formal record of public participation. Although seen by many as a necessary, technical step in the openness process, the Carlsbad Area Office has capitalized on the public meeting process as an opportunity to build links among the DOE community, special interest groups, the news media, and the public.

In the past three years, stakeholders have had more than 125 separate opportunities to publicly voice concerns and support, to offer input and questions, or to see and hear about the WIPP programs. Some of the public meeting opportunities have included:

- Scoping meetings and public hearings on the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Disposal Phase Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement
- Regular quarterly meetings with independent oversight groups such as the New Mexico Environmental Evaluation Group
- Meetings with leaders of communities impacted by the WIPP site
- Meetings with tribal governments
- Numerous hearings conducted by the WIPP regulators such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department.

The process of building internal partnerships involves pre-planning and advanced communications. Dates, times, and locations for public meetings are identified as early as possible and published in the Carlsbad Area Office Monthly Calendar for Stakeholders.

In some cases, the Carlsbad Area Office, Office of Public Affairs offers to use its toll-free telephone number to schedule presenters at hearings. This allows stakeholders direct contact with a WIPP representative.

## EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

WIPP educational outreach programs and initiatives rely on thorough teamwork by the Carlsbad Area Office, its contractors, school districts, institutions of higher education, and students. Building partnerships within educational institutions is important. This is based upon national opinion research that identifies educators as one of the most credible groups to communicate complex risk information to the public and media.

What is most important to this partnership is that the Carlsbad Area Office does more than simply try to inform educators; it also strives to listen to educators. Therefore, the two goals of the WIPP educational partnerships are to:

- Listen to educators for key program guidance
- Expose educators and students to innovative and unique learning opportunities

Several of the successful programs are:

**Rural Community College Initiative.** Sponsored by a Ford Foundation grant, the Rural Community College Initiative teams Westinghouse Electric Company with New Mexico State University at Carlsbad to develop grants that use rural college resources. This grant process focuses on creating jobs, raising income, generating wealth, and reinvesting that wealth in regional businesses, institutions, and people. Through volunteerism, staff at the WIPP have contributed more than \$10,000 in in-kind services.

**Renaissance Program.** Through the support of the WIPP management and operating contractor, the Renaissance Program was implemented to improve self-esteem by motivating the middle school student in academic achievement, attendance, leadership, and citizenship. Carlsbad is the first school district in the nation to have a district-wide Renaissance Program. A local advisory board governs the program through which faculty and community volunteers-many from the WIPP- manage its day-to-day activities. The way Renaissance is administered in each school is unique; but in every school, it is a process for recognizing and rewarding positive student behavior and achievement.

**Southeastern New Mexico Educational Resource Center.** The mission of the Southeastern New Mexico Educational Resource Center is to provide resources to the 11 school districts in southeastern New Mexico through the collaborative efforts of school districts, governmental agencies such as the U.S. Department of Energy, Westinghouse Electric Company, and Sandia National Laboratories. Local businesses and industries have joined in this partnership. The center is working with school districts to:

- Identify needed math and science materials and equipment
- Meet needs through the provision of technical assistance, excess property transfers, and educational materials
- Coordinate faculty training
- Promote an awareness of employment opportunities enhanced by a knowledge of math, science, and technology
- Initiate programs that bridge the gap from school to work

**Waste-management Education and Research Consortium.** This university-level consortium conducts an annual international environmental design contest for universities, and high schools by providing competition, educational challenges, and transfers of technology. This unique and innovative contest, championed by the WIPP contractors, is the only university-level environmental design contest of its kind that provides participants with design and practical experience on actual environmental restoration issues. The contest is structured to give university student groups from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Middle East, and Europe an opportunity to exchange information through the designing, developing, and testing of an environmental control process. To support this unique effort that brings a broad cross-section of new environmentalists together, the U.S. Department of Energy, the Carlsbad Area Office, and the Westinghouse Electric Company budgeted \$86,000 for the consortium in 1998. In addition, \$25,000 is contributed in the form of cash donations and volunteerism.

## **SPEAKERS BUREAU**

Although a fundamental element of any communications strategy for a nuclear facility, the WIPP Speakers Bureau is focused geographically with several direct messages and goals. The goal is to reach out to stakeholder audiences who may not have an opportunity to visit the WIPP site. Speakers' presentations are tailored to meet audience needs, while focusing on project awareness, national importance, and environmental responsibility.

## **EXCELLENCE IN COOPERATION AND SAFETY**

Stakeholders, who are defined as groups and individuals affected by or interested in the WIPP, including those who live near temporary waste storage sites or along the waste transportation corridors, are involved in the regulatory compliance process. The CAO has addressed concerns and solicited input from stakeholders and regulatory agencies early and throughout the regulatory certification process. The CAO also participates as a

supportive member of nearby communities through stakeholder outreach, economic development, delete progress briefings, and other activities.

The DOE has entered into cooperative agreements with states, tribes, and organizations along the transportation corridors. The agreements ensure that emergency responders and medical personnel in communities through which the waste is to be transported are well trained and equipped in the unlikely event of a WIPP-related transportation incident. The DOE provides funds through the Western Governors' Association and the Southern States Energy Board to the various member states for emergency response training and equipment.

A key outreach message is that the WIPP also provides nationally recognized leadership in safety and operations excellence by setting many of the current standards for DOE facilities. For example, the WIPP facility:

- Earned the first DOE Voluntary Protection Program "Star" Status for safety
- Received the "Mine Operator of the Year" designation by the state of New Mexico for the 12th consecutive year in 1998
- Organized, trained, and sponsored the winning team in the 1994 Mine Safety and Health Administration National Mine Rescue Contest, the crowning achievement of more than 80 contests
- Earned three National Safety Council awards for excellence in safety
- Is registered by the International Standards Organization as an ISO 14001 site, the only nuclear facility in the U.S. with the designation. ISO 14001 is a voluntary program for developing and implementing an Environmental Management System

The Carlsbad Area Office is supported by a number of contractors including the Westinghouse Waste Isolation Division, Sandia National Laboratories, the Carlsbad Area Office Technical Assistance Contractor, and Day & Zimmermann LLC

The CAO has set the vision of providing WIPP-specific public information and earning informed consent among stakeholders. The Public Affairs team is committed to providing public information and public participation in the project decision-making process

In the past three years, stakeholders have had more than 125 separate public opportunities to voice concerns and offer suggestions to the WIPP program. The opportunities have included meetings on the WIPP Disposal Phase Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, the EPA compliance certification process, regular meetings with oversight groups, interactions with leaders of communities impacted by the WIPP site and

transportation, meetings with state, city, county, and tribal governments, and hearings conducted by regulators

The CAO also uses other opportunities such as one-on-one interviews and small group meetings to define and quantify what people are thinking. Community interviews in Santa Fe, for example, showed that transportation issues are critical to earning the community's informed consent. As a result, the CAO opened a WIPP Public Information and Outreach Office in Santa Fe.

Research clearly demonstrates that the closer audiences are to the WIPP, the more favorable their opinions. Therefore, a key objective of the Santa Fe office is to offer greater stakeholder access to the decision making process. In addition, a secondary objective is to establish the WIPP and its management team as community partners in Santa Fe.

Efforts of the Santa Fe office have been instrumental in a significant paradigm shift in northern New Mexico, with general public sentiment moving from a position of considerable opposition and mistrust to one of informed consent. The staff has influenced the largely hispanic community through repetition of key messages that generate simple inductive reasoning which relies on repeated observations of reality.

One key benefit is that the Santa Fe office has bridged the communications void that formerly existed in northern New Mexico. The office offers key audiences, state officials, and the media access to in-depth information, spokespersons, and valuable outreach efforts concerning radioactive waste transportation and its disposal.

Principal target audiences addressed by the Santa Fe office outreach programs and strategies are:

- Citizens who have an interest in and need to know about nuclear waste transportation
- Community, business, and civic organizations
- Stakeholders involved in the decision-making process who form the body that will grant "informed consent" to nuclear waste transportation and disposal
- Regional media whose challenge is to report the news and inform their readers and viewers as objectively as possible
- Elected and appointed officials who are charged with the responsibility to seek a solution to a pressing national problems



## **NORTHERN NEW MEXICO OUTREACH STRATEGY**

In January 1997, the Department of Energy's Carlsbad Area Office established a low-profile public information and outreach office in Santa Fe. Previously, there had been significant opposition in that community to plans for transporting waste through or near the city. The WIPP public affairs team developed and implemented a series of strategic stakeholder outreach and media relations plans designed to help remedy the concern.

Since the Santa Fe Public Information and Outreach Office opened, there has been a significant change in public and local government acceptance. The Carlsbad Area Office heralded the Santa Fe outreach to stakeholders as being pivotal in changing Santa Fe opposition to the WIPP shipments.

Recently, the DOE, State of New Mexico, and Santa Fe City Council signed a negotiated agreement to permit transuranic waste shipments through the city. Twelve months ago it would not have been possible to discuss the issues, let alone reach acceptable closure.

Among many successful partnership initiatives originating from the Carlsbad Area Office's Santa Fe Office was a strategy to become more involved with key homeowner associations. Representatives systematically met with the management of each association. They made presentations to their memberships about the purpose of the WIPP. They discussed the existing risks and the benefits of removal of risk by opening the WIPP.

The DOE and contractor management team also listen to concerns about the transportation issues unique to Santa Fe. Representatives of the Santa Fe office attend key business meetings to become further involved and ensure immediate availability to answer questions. In addition, a team of representatives from both the Santa Fe office and the WIPP attend all hearings of the New Mexico Highway and Transportation Department.

As a result of the active partnership with key land owners, a recent headline in the Santa Fe New Mexican read: "Las Campanas gives up land for bypass." The Las Campanas Development Company stated: "We recognize the critical issues of timing and the importance of the bypass for the safety and convenience of the citizens of Santa Fe." The homeowner organization agreed to dedicate 62 acres without condition at no cost, to the bypass construction project.

## **SprintFAX STRATEGY**

A key tactic tying the site's active media relations program to a national stakeholder outreach strategy is the use of SprintFAX to distribute news releases to stakeholders.

The WIPP stakeholder database contains more than 11,000 active names and addresses listed by state.

When a news release is distributed to the news media, it is also simultaneously sent to every stakeholder in the states selected. SprintFAX has the capability to distribute news releases to 2,000 recipients within 45 seconds.

Through computer links using e-mail, both the news release and letterhead are transmitted to Sprint, which uses its trunk telephone lines to broadcast the news release to both media and stakeholders. This capability puts breaking news in the hands of stakeholders before they read it in the papers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Building acceptance for transuranic waste disposal at the WIPP has relied on nurturing partnerships at all levels within all stakeholder groups. This strategy has proven to be the most effective in comparison with other public affairs strategies.

Twenty years ago the public relations industry provided public information as the mainstay of communications. The marketing industry emerged, and the "never let a price hang" philosophy evolved. Next, scientific analysis was loosely applied, leading industries to seek informed consent while informing the public of what had already been done. The success of the WIPP Public Outreach program shows that the most successful strategy is to constructively and innovatively build public affairs partnerships and informed consent at all levels.