

## **LIFE AFTER THE SSAB, HOW SANDIA NATIONAL LABORATORIES IS PROGRESSING IN ITS TRANSITION FROM SSAB TO LONG TERM STEWARDSHIP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Department of Energy, Kirtland Area Office (DOE/KAO) ceased funding of its Sandia National Laboratories Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) at the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2000 and moved into a new phase in public participation. The decision by DOE/KAO to cease SSAB funding and transition to the new phase was based on a continuously decreasing workload resulting from transition to completion of the Sandia Environmental Restoration (ER) Project. The transition was discussed with SSAB members and the community at the start of FY 2000. The new phase represents a transition between the completion of ER work at Sandia and the implementation of a long-term stewardship plan. Efforts to make the transitional period a success come in the form of movement from the community and commitment by DOE and Sandia to better accommodate public participation for the long term.

At Sandia, efforts are under way to create a new internal mechanism to evaluate and prioritize issues and determine the best management approaches. DOE has implemented contract support to ensure community a location and associated resources to facilitate and encourage continued and new citizen interaction. The new approach requires developing a relationship with the community that is not based on requirements imposed by DOE for participation, such as that required by an SSAB public involvement format. The community feedback has been very valuable to DOE and Sandia.

With the termination of the SSAB came the formation of a long-term stewardship community resources group and a Community Resources Information Office (CRIO.) The group, which sees itself as an interim team to help with the transition from project closure to long term stewardship, is making use of the CRIO facilities to help in this effort.

The group expressed a number of goals:

- Continue to work with Sandia's ER Project on on-going cleanup and waste management projects.
- Work with the Sandia ER Project on closure efforts, such as commenting on No Further Action (Class 3 Permit) proposals.
- Work with the Long-Term Stewardship task groups formed from community volunteers and government officials to create a workable, effective stewardship plan for the Sandia ER Project.

- Work to redefine “environmental issues” at Sandia to broaden them beyond ER-related activities and create an improved long-term relationship between the Labs and community.

Sandia is among the first of DOE’s facilities to discontinue the use of an SSAB. Other sites may consider the approaches used here, as they near this point in the future.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On September 20, 2000, the DOE/Sandia National Laboratories SSAB met for the last time. The board posed for a group photograph and concluded work that began in June 1995 at a time when Sandia’s ER Project was moving into its closure phase and beginning work on a long-term stewardship plan.

One critic called the final meeting “a little noticed event.” Others wondered if the DOE had terminated the board as a “convenient move,” as activism appeared to be on the increase. SSAB members from other boards have questioned the loss of Sandia board and wondered how public participation can continue in the Albuquerque community.

Of course, the answer is that citizens advisory groups are not the only venue for public participation. And, the DOE/Sandia decision was not made lightly. In fact, the closure had been carefully planned over a period of more than a year. Further, the future of public participation in the community has been placed not in the DOE’s hands, but in the hands of citizens willing to roll up their sleeves and continue to work in the process. Fortunately, there have been quite a number of these citizens. As a result, the future appears to be bright in a number of key venues.

## **THE INTEGRATED CONCEPT**

Public participation and the Sandia ER Project’s attitude toward it have grown and evolved during the past five years. DOE and Sandia’s first reaction, that we would do public participation because we must, has given way to the realization that public participation is a key component of doing business with a potential to actually enhance success.

In terms of tools, what Sandia and DOE have done in the past is to use a rather limited number of information gathering, dissemination and exchange devices. This has been largely because of the emphasis on the SSAB. Other DOE sites have shared problems with this approach.

Our analysis showed an emphasis on information exchange at the cost of gathering information from a broader audience and disseminating information that should be vital to an informed decision. We also found that dissemination had largely been too technical. To remedy this we sought what we refer to as a more “integrated” concept, meaning that it will comprise dissemination, gathering and exchange of information.

Among the new tools we are implementing or still developing are a new internal approach to public participation, the use of public opinion polling, new printed and web communications, and the wider use of more informal public meetings to foster one-on-one discussions. Ad hoc working groups, with clear goals and limited life expectancies are also a part of this plan.

Also critical to the success of a public involvement effort was the consideration of the scope of the program or project. Good communication and teaming of Sandia's ER Project managers and public affairs specialists was essential to developing and implementing the public outreach plan for transition to the new phase in public participation. Implementation of options other than an SSAB would not have been evident if these two organizational functions did not communicate their expectations for 1) public involvement and 2) an understanding of the Sandia ER Project workload and schedule.

In the case of the Sandia ER Project, utilization of working groups was very effective prior to establishment of the SSAB, as well as during the time the SSAB was in-place. The working groups were structured to encourage participation by SSAB members as well as individuals who were not members of the SSAB. Small working groups comprised of SSAB members and other citizens within the community studied a variety of Sandia ER Project initiatives and provided valuable advice and questions. The working group recommendations were subsequently presented to the entire SSAB, by the SSAB members who had participated in the working group. The SSAB then either supported or rejected the working group's findings and advice.

Often, the issues were too complicated and time-consuming and schedule-driven for a group of 30 SSAB members to tackle. Consequently, the smaller working group structure became a useful tool for the SSAB. The SSAB generally adopted working group findings and advice, and could better identify specific areas for disagreement. It became apparent as the Sandia ER Project workload decreased that a transition toward utilization of working groups would be more effective in addressing specific issues and reviewing the work remaining. In addition, a less structured and more time-effective public involvement format than that required by an SSAB was seen as a way to encourage increased and broader representation by the community. Administrative and coordination efforts required by an SSAB structure consumed much of the time of Sandia SSAB members, leaving less time and energy to address specific, critical and time-dependent Sandia ER Project issues.

Based on experience with the SSAB format and the format of the new phase, it's evident that site-specific and community-specific considerations should be made when selecting and implementing a public involvement format. The format should:

- reflect a conscientious effort to address community concerns while obtaining timely community feedback,
- consider the workload of the project, and

- recognize national expectations of DOE as dictated by Congress (which include fiscal and regulatory constraints).

A break down by informational mode would suggest improvements in gathering, dissemination and exchange are all possible in this new approach.

- In the area of information gathering, Sandia will continue to make use of its network of contacts in business, education, and the scientific communities. It will add focus groups and surveying as appropriate. The use of interactive mailings, to make use of an extensive mailing list to “get back” information is also under consideration.
- Efforts to open an external web site and create an “environmental annual report” have already been successful in improving information dissemination with key stakeholders. In the days ahead, efforts to make meetings more interactive and to increase effectiveness of tours and environmental exhibits will continue as well.
- Proven methods of subject-specific working groups and informal meetings -- fostering one-on-one communications -- are being designed with information exchange in mind. It is important for technical staff to hear the values and concerns of the community and to share ideas at an appropriate level on how public issues can be addressed.
- Continue and encourage utilization of the CRIO by the community to identify and discuss environmental issues regarding the Sandia ER Project.

The broader spectrum of techniques now being employed is designed to make better use of stakeholder resources leading to better decisions for the DOE, Sandia and the community. Costs to fund and staff a resource center, provide for travel and educational expenses for individuals involved in public participation and provide meeting space for smaller meetings are expected to be well below costs associated with the DOE/Sandia SSAB.

This significant reduction in costs and the anticipated results should prove the new approach a responsible and more desirable choice based on the current Sandia ER Project workload. Internal staffing costs are expected to be similar to past years. It is also noteworthy that DOE/KAO is proposing additional funding through the baseline/budget request process to address future public involvement activities related to Sandia ER Project Long-Term Stewardship. Funding levels for implementation of Sandia ER Project Long-Term Stewardship planning are being identified through the community's Stewardship Task Group efforts. In this way the new public involvement structure has already provided feedback to improve the development of budget proposals.

## **AT SANDIA NATIONAL LABORATORIES**

One key element of the new internal system was put into place late in FY 2000 with the publication of Sandia's first-ever Environmental Report to stakeholders. This document, which is evolving from a summary of environmental monitoring activities at the laboratories, now includes information on the Sandia ER Project and other environmental activities at the labs. The report includes a section on Sandia's pollution prevention

activities, for example. Information on Laboratories' research with environmental implications is also included. Further refinement of this communications tool is expected in the years to come.

Another new communications tool, unveiled last summer, is an external web site with up-to-date information about progress towards a Sandia ER Project Long-Term Stewardship plan.

Public opinion polling, done for Sandia in a number of topic areas, now includes regular questions on the labs environmental performance in a general sense. Funding at present, precludes detailed probing on issues, but at least provides an overall "report card" for DOE/Sandia efforts in the environmental protection area.

Recently we completed a move to make a permit requirement that the Labs hold quarterly public information meetings into a more community-friendly effort. This was done by combining Sandia's meetings with those of our host facility – Kirtland Air Force Base. For many in the community, distinctions between DOE or Department of Defense (DoD) funding are neither understood nor important. Because we are "painted with the same brush" in the community, it seems sensible for us to make the best use of the public's time by more closely coordinating these meetings.

## **IN THE COMMUNITY**

In the early 1990s at the beginning of the SSAB process, the Sandia ER Project involved the community in a decision to create a storage, treatment and containment cell for environmental restoration-derived wastes. Public support was key to the Environmental Protection Agency's decision to permit this facility at a remote environmental site adjacent to the Laboratories' Chemical Waste Landfill. Workers are now excavating the landfill and the facility – called a Corrective Action Management Unit, or CAMU – is a key fixture in the cleanup project's plan.

Decisions are being made this year as to appropriate contaminants – most of them at relatively low levels – and treatment methods for waste to be contained at the CAMU. The need for ongoing public involvement in this process is critical. With the projected closure of the CAMU, several years after the completion of the Sandia ER Project, plans for long-term stewardship at the site will be important to public confidence in the facility.

The DOE/Sandia SSAB spent countless volunteer hours during the past year evaluating some sixty-four environmental sites declared clean by DOE and Sandia and presented to the New Mexico Environment Department for removal from DOE and Sandia's environmental permit. Twice the SSAB organized ad hoc committees to review the sites. They studied the risk data associated with the sites, interrogated the site investigators and made recommendations on the disposition of the sites. This process is not completed. Although the remaining sites are not likely to come in as great a frequency or amount as they did during Fiscal Year 2000, environmental sites remaining on the Sandia permit will need to be addressed with public involvement participation over the next four years.

The Community Resource Information Office is a place for the community to obtain information and for working groups to meet to address questions or issues about the Sandia ER Project. One of the efforts of the CRIO staff will be to encourage public interaction and find interested citizens to help in developing and implementing a process to address the review of remaining environmental sites, prior to their removal from the Lab's permit with the state of New Mexico.

The CRIO is already hard at work with several dozen volunteers who have formed into three task groups to help the Sandia ER Project develop a long-term stewardship plan. The groups began meeting this spring, before the SSAB was disbanded, and many of their members are former board members. Others are from outside of the board experience and represent a spectrum of stakeholders needed to create the kind of well-rounded approach to plan for the long-term care and monitoring of the few Sandia environmental sites that will not be fully restored.

A continued emphasis by this group is the need to broaden public participation beyond "the usual suspects" to get new ideas and energy into the process.

The goal of the task groups is to develop recommendations for Sandia by this spring and then to follow the drafting and approval process as the citizen-authored stewardship document evolves into a workable plan for the Laboratories and the community. The long-term nature of stewardship and the many local, state, and federal agencies impacted by it, make the continued participation of stakeholders in this process imperative.

As the Sandia ER Project matured, the opportunities for SSAB advice began to narrow. The SSAB was further limited because operational activities at the Laboratories, such as waste transportation, Labs activity related to the NEPA process and other environmental issues outside the scope of ER, were not included in the SSAB paradigm. The CRIO staff will assist in directing these kinds of issues to the appropriate DOE organizations to meet specific public participation needs. The CRIO will also provide information regarding environmental-related meetings beyond the scope of the Sandia ER Project via email courtesy notification mailing as funding allows

## **TOWARD THE FUTURE**

The combination of internal changes in attitude and approach to public participation with the evolution in the status of the Sandia ER Project opens the door for a wide variety of future possibilities for working with the public.

Funding opportunities associated with Long-Term Stewardship and the kinds of issues involved (such as the need for multi-generational vigilance) suggest possible relationships with the local school district, nearby institutions of higher learning, museums, and a variety of other institutions. We are only beginning to explore these possibilities with our citizen volunteers. Growing emphasis on environmental justice issues similarly offers the possibility of working closer with nearby neighborhood associations, pueblos, and even commercial entities.

**WM'01 Conference, February 25-March 1, 2001, Tucson, AZ**

The integrated concept at Sandia is only beginning to bear fruit in terms of improved community – Laboratories interactions. The seed for developing new public approaches to issues has been planted. It will be interesting to see how it grows in the coming years.