

CLOSING IN ON CLOSURE: PERSPECTIVES FROM HANFORD AND FERNALD

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SUMMARY

Webster's dictionary defines war as "... open and declared *armed* hostile conflict...." In World War II, the "war to end all wars," the *arms* dramatically changed from machine guns and incendiary bombs to nuclear weapons. Hanford and Fernald, two government-run sites, were part of the infrastructure established for producing the fissile material for making these weapons, as well as building a nuclear arsenal to deter future aggression by other nations. This paper compares and contrasts, from a communications point of view, these two Department of Energy (DOE) closure sites, each with Fluor as a prime contractor.

The major differences between the two sites – Hanford in Washington state and Fernald in Ohio – includes the following: timing of closure, definition of end state, size of the site and workforce, DOE oversight, proximity to population centers, readiness of local population for closure, and dependence of the local economy on the site's budget. All of these elements affect how the sites' communication professionals provide information even though the objectives are the same: build public acceptance and support for DOE's mission to accelerate cleanup, interface with stakeholders to help ensure that issues are addressed and goals are met, help workers literally work themselves out of jobs – faster, and prepare the "host" communities to deal with the void left when the sites are closed and the government contractors are gone.

INTRODUCTION

Webster's dictionary defines war as "... open and declared *armed* hostile conflict...." In World War II, the "war to end all wars," the *arms* dramatically changed from machine guns and incendiary bombs to nuclear weapons. Fernald and Hanford, two government-run sites, were part of the infrastructure established for producing the fissile material for making these weapons, as well as helping to build a nuclear arsenal to deter future aggression by other nations. Hanford, originally referred to as the Gable project, marked its 60th anniversary in March 2003; Fernald celebrated its 50th in May 2001. Both sites had ended "production" by 1989 and embarked on a new mission of cleaning up the legacy waste – hazardous and nuclear – left behind. Now designated closure sites by the Department of Energy (DOE), both installations have Fluor as a prime contractor. Fluor has been the prime cleanup contractor for DOE's Richland Operations Office at Hanford since 1996 and DOE's prime contractor responsible for all cleanup operations at Fernald since 1992.

GEOGRAPHIC/ DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

The two sites differ in their physical size, location to major metropolitan areas, and the size of their workforce in relation to the population of their “host” communities.

In terms of physical size, the Hanford Project dwarfs Fernald. Hanford facilities and personnel are in pockets, but stretched out for miles across the reservation. At Fernald, employees and facilities are stretched out, but most are within walking distance of one another.

Hanford, often referred to as the world’s largest environmental cleanup project, covers more than 580 square miles in a relatively remote region of southeastern Washington state at the convergence of the Yakima, Snake, and Columbia Rivers. With an annual budget exceeding \$2 billion, Hanford is essentially the reason for the existence of its surrounding communities, collectively known as the Tri-Cities. Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco have a combined population of about 160,000. Larger metropolitan areas such as Spokane, Seattle, or Portland are least a 2-1/2-hour drive. The Tri-Cities’ economy is extremely dependent on Hanford as about 40% of the money spent in the community comes from the site’s employees. Therefore, as cleanup progresses, “life without Hanford” becomes more than people losing jobs, it is a community fighting for its continued existence – a community that not only wants the radioactive and hazardous waste removed, but also needs the economic stability that the site’s work and contractors bring. Hanford currently has about 10,000 employees spread across three DOE field offices and four major contractors. Fluor is the site’s largest employer with more than 4,000 bargaining-unit (slightly less than 50%) and salaried personnel.

On the other hand, Fernald is a relatively small site of just 1050 acres, located 18 miles northwest of Cincinnati, Ohio, which has a strong, diverse economic base and fairly large job market. Unlike Hanford, Fernald has always been a small fish in a big pond. While Fernald pumps hundreds of millions of dollars (\$324 million annual budget) into southwest Ohio, northern Kentucky and eastern Indiana, the site really doesn’t have much of a job or financial impact in the community. Instead, corporate giants like Procter & Gamble, General Electric, Kroger, and Delta make up the top tier of employment with a myriad of middle and smaller size, diversified businesses throughout the tri-state region. Once 2,000 strong, today’s workforce at Fernald now stands at about 1,600...and falling: about 50 DOE-Fernald Closure Project personnel, and 1269 Fluor Fernald and 500 subcontractor employees. The Fernald Closure Project is part of the DOE Ohio Field Office with roughly 40 personnel supporting the site’s cleanup mission.

SAME MISSION...DIFFERENT VISIONS

Hanford and Fernald have the same mission: safely cleaning up the radioactive and hazardous waste left behind from decades of producing nuclear weapons. That said, however, the vision of what “cleaned up” actually entails and really looks like in the end is different for the two sites. This situation exists for three main reasons: Hanford has just begun its “closure” mission, while Fernald is in the final stretch; Hanford is a larger and more complex site with multiple, diverse waste streams; and Hanford’s oversight by three separate field offices complicates decision-making.

With Hanford's closure date more than 30 years away – 2035, the site is just beginning to deactivate and demolish facilities, and clean up waste sites and the groundwater. The task is enormous: 1,700 waste sites, 450 billion gallons of liquid waste (dumped into the soil), 70 billion gallons of contaminated groundwater, 53 million gallons of tank waste, 9 reactors, 5 million cubic yards of contaminated soil, and 17.8 metric tons of plutonium-bearing material, just to give a partial list. Further, the gradual transition from operations and engineering personnel to a preponderance of D&D/craft workers has just begun...with each reduction of force evidence that not only the size, but also the skills, of the workforce is changing.

And though the DOE has hopes of beating the 2035 date by as much as 10 years, the public process for deciding the end states of the various areas of the site is also in its early stages. In addition, at the same time buildings are being closed and taken down, a new facility, the Waste Treatment Plant is being built. Two other factors further complicate the situation: Hanford's role as part of the Manhattan Project under the National Historic Preservation Act that makes such facilities as the B Reactor potential "museums," and the fate of the Fast Flux Test Facility (FFTF), which the DOE has slated for D&D – a decision being challenged by interested parties who are fighting to keep the reactor as a source of medical isotopes. As a result, workers and the community are grappling with the concept of closing the site, which in turn makes it difficult to convey messages built around life without the DOE and its contractors.

Fernald, referred to as the Fernald Closure Project (FCP), is doing just that – closing. Less than three years away from closure, the site – once a uranium production plant – is experiencing dramatic changes in its skyline. Buildings are being torn down and areas once contaminated are being turned back to usable land – all visibly signaling to the employees and the stakeholders that closure is near. For nearly 10 years now, employees have coped with the idea of working themselves out of jobs and have come to accept the inevitable.

Fernald employees understand that the project's days are numbered. A countdown on the site access road and a popup box on their computers serve to keep this message front and center. Now with that reality comes the challenge of motivating employees to work themselves out of a job – more safely and faster than ever before.

The \$4 billion cleanup, which began in earnest in 1992, will be complete more than a decade sooner than original estimates. When the cleanup is complete, plant neighbors will have a 900-acre park with a 100-plus-acre onsite disposal facility, resting atop a clean aquifer. So few and simple words to describe many years of work, community involvement, and mutual cooperation among regulating bodies, agencies, and interested groups!

COMMUNICATIONS...DEALING WITH THE REALITIES

Communications involves more than transmitting information. The message must be delivered in a way that the audience understands and acts to produce the desired outcome. To the communications professionals at Hanford and Fernald, the audiences often appear as "legion"! However, when it really comes down to it, in addition to the client (DOE) and its regulators, there are only three main groups: employees, public-at-large, and stakeholders, served through

internal communications, external communications and media relations, and public involvement. As this section discusses, the way Hanford and Fernald provide information to their employees represents perhaps the greatest difference between the sites, as far as communications is concerned. The second most significant difference lies in Public Involvement.

Internal Communications

Closure sites have several things in common: more bargaining-unit employees from the building trades, more construction, more heavy equipment, aging infrastructure, shrinking footprints... and rumors about layoffs and reductions in benefits that run rampant. As a result, the need for communications in general, and communications about safety in particular, is greater than ever before.

At Hanford, where the transition from operations to D&D activities has just begun, *closure* is a new word being added to the site's vocabulary. Therefore, internal communications focus on working safely and changing a mindset from the stability of long-term employment to the time-sensitive tasks and instability associated with a closure site. On the flip side, Fernald's challenges run more in the vein of helping employees prepare for a change in work status, either through retirement, new non-Fernald employment opportunities, or additional education. Of course, working safely is always a key message.

Though many techniques are used in transferring information, face-to-face communications often prove the best, though not necessarily the easiest. At Hanford, for example, with multiple shifts, and a massive "campus," holding a single all-employee meeting is usually impractical. Yet, even if a single all-employee meeting were to be held, there's no one central place that's either convenient or large enough for everyone to gather. The only facility that can even accommodate Fluor Hanford's 4000-plus employees at one time is off site, nearly 20 miles from the closest Hanford facility.

Further, while all-manager meetings are more manageable and usually conducted in two shifts in a facility close to the site, personal messages from the President or other senior staff are broadcast to all employees using a video-streaming process that can be accessed by computer. This approach, too, has its challenges, as not every employee has a personal computer and not every computer has sound capability. The latter situation has required that closed-captioning be added to the video. Because Fluor manages five distinct projects, each with its own challenges, facility-specific communications are handled by Project Directors and Facility Managers, supported by the centralized Fluor Hanford Communications staff. Needless to say, as the site "closes in on closure," many things will change as they have at Fernald.

Ten years ago, Fluor Fernald could hold an all-hands meeting and seat a majority of the workforce. Today, no facilities exist on-site to gather a large group. Off-site locations are fairly close, but viewed unfavorably because of travel and time off the project. Some communications media like *InfoChannel*, an internal cable television systems that reaches monitors mounted in offices and break rooms across the site, are no longer usable because fewer centralized locations exist and the site's infrastructure is being dismantled.

The print medium for both sites has changed over the years as well. At Hanford, the *Hanford REACH* chronicled work at the site since cleanup began. Originally begun in 1990 as a contractor newspaper, the *REACH* became a DOE publication, issued in hard copy, for all site employees and stakeholders in 1994. It shared the ups and downs of cleanup in more than 600 weekly issues, until it was discontinued in September 2003. In its place have come individual, contractor-specific weekly electronic newsletters to employees. Fluor Hanford's publication, called *FYI – Fluor Your Information*, produced in cooperation with the site's occupational-health provider, contains articles and vignettes on project challenges and successes, benefits, safety and health, employees, and upcoming events. Until September 2002, Fluor Hanford also pushed an electronic company-focused newsletter to its employees' "desktops" daily.

Like Fluor Hanford, Fluor Fernald has had multiple publications. *Let's Talk* has been produced since 1997 for supervisors to use as talking points when meeting with their employees. *Let's Talk* contains information on safety, project updates, plus other important work and benefit information. Employees on the other hand received *News to Use*, a weekly publication catering to employees' information needs. In 2002, *News to Use* ceased and *Let's Talk* became the resource for both supervisory and field personnel. Today, *Let's Talk* is still produced weekly and sent electronically to more than 600 employees with hardcopies sent to the various job sites.

Both sites also send electronic general messages to all employees concerning such topics as safety and organizational and personnel changes. With Fernald on the heels of closure, more than 70 *Employee Updates* and *Messages from Jamie* (Closure Project Director) were produced in 2003 – the most produced in any single year to date. This need will continue until mid-2005. For Fluor Hanford, messages from the President and other senior management numbered more than three hundred.

Fernald also uses a large white message board as a communications vehicle. The board is located next to the security checkpoint as employees and subcontractors enter the project. Though message length is limited, safety messages and site milestones are easy to communicate on this medium that nearly everyone sees.

Despite all these various modes of communication, however, Fluor Hanford and Fluor Fernald still rely heavily on front-line supervisors for communicating with employees. In many instances, wage/bargaining-unit employees do not have computer access, and therefore, supervisors are expected to address key subjects during shift safety briefings, stock material distribution racks, and ensure that message boards are kept current. Recent communications surveys at the sites support this direct approach, as employees have indicated they prefer face-to-face communications with their supervisors and managers.

External Communications

DOE cleanup sites seem to act as magnets for media attention – Fernald and Hanford are no exception. In the mid to late 1980s, Fernald appeared on just about every major network television news program, newspaper and magazine in print. In the mid-1990s the *Cincinnati Enquirer* began a series of articles by reporter Mike Gallagher entitled, "Danger and Deceit." Those stories triggered even more television coverage locally. For the last few years, Fernald

has enjoyed light, generally positive media coverage. However aggressive self-reporting on Fluor Fernald's past and active "whistleblower" cases, has given the *Cincinnati Enquirer* a steady stream of information resulting in more local print and television coverage.

Hanford, too, has had its share of media coverage, though its remoteness from major population areas has helped in keeping a relatively low profile. Getting reporters to come to Hanford is difficult, which can be both a blessing and a curse. Some coverage, especially with the trade press, has been actively pursued when there's good news to tell, such as removing the "burping" tank from DOE's watch list or meeting a Tri-Party Agreement milestone for moving spent nuclear fuel out of the K Basins. But most has been unwelcome – particularly in the early '90s when the *Spokesman Review*, a newspaper out of Spokane, ran a series of articles called the "Train Wreck Along the River of Money" that focused on the perceived "waste" of money at Hanford, and the coverage of the explosion and fire at the Plutonium Refinishing Plant and the ensuing legal battles. With Washington state literally split down the middle by the Cascade Mountains, the press sits in two camps. The local press, the *Tri-City Herald*, follows issues at the site in painstaking detail and regularly carries interviews of DOE, contractor, and regulator personnel on "hot" topics. The west-side press, however, with links to national media, rarely does first-hand interviews and usually reworks stories published in the Tri-Cities' local press.

One of Fernald's biggest challenges is limiting the number of stories that go right from the "Local" section of the paper, directly into the television teleprompter. To help diffuse stories that are particularly one-sided, Fluor Fernald calls each local affiliate in the morning following a story to see if the producers are interested in Fernald's perspective. This proactive approach helps repeat stories die down quickly.

At Hanford, the TV and radio stations run fairly balanced stories the majority of the time. While newspaper articles are still fodder for local TV and radio, the reporters and station managers are usually willing to listen to both sides of the story before airing a piece, though multiple contractors and DOE field offices often result in a confused, if not inaccurate, presentation.

Of course in working with all media outlets, Fluor Hanford and Fluor Fernald respond to inquiries in a professional, complete and expedient manner. Both provide local and trade-press reporters with timely access to the organizations' top level of management, as well as press releases, fact sheets, photographs, and video footage to make covering stories easier. The Communications departments give TV stations b-roll tapes that give a unique vantage point – footage they couldn't shoot on their own because of potential damage to equipment in certain contaminated facilities and more stringent access requirements in light of 9-11. This responsiveness and openness has gone a long way toward convincing news outlets that the cleanup is happening safely and efficiently and by people that really care about the well being of area stakeholders.

Now and in the near future, both Fernald and Hanford are in the enviable position of communicating the completion of some very big projects. The dismantling of the last production building, completion of waste pit shipping operations and removal and shipment of Silo 3 waste are a few of the major milestones for Fernald in 2004. At Hanford, completing the stabilization and packaging of all the plutonium at the Plutonium Finishing Plant, which produced more

plutonium “buttons” for defense applications than any other U.S. facility, and having all of the spent fuel out of the K Basins are two accomplishments that bear notice. Fluor will aggressively communicate these stories locally, with the trade press and in Washington, D.C., in an effort to show progress and build greater confidence in DOE’s Environmental Management program.

Public Involvement/Communication

Stakeholders play a major role in any site’s cleanup. Hanford and Fernald have very active citizen advisory boards and special interest groups that weigh in on cleanup progress and post-closure issues. And here’s where the two sites differ radically.

At Fernald, with the site literally counting the months ‘til closure, stakeholders are more interested in the immediacy of closure and ensuing stewardship issues. For Hanford groups, however, the focus is still on ensuring DOE’s commitment to cleaning up the site, setting priorities, monitoring progress, complying with the Tri-Party Agreement, and advocating for funding. Simply said, Fernald is already “becoming” its end state, while the end state has yet to be defined for Hanford, and in fact, the public participation process for determining what “closure” really means is really just beginning. Further, DOE’s new policy, DOE Policy 455.1, “Use of Risk-Based End States,” will definitely affect both the process, if not the outcomes, of decisions regarding cleanup.

During the past year at Fernald, there’s been a shift from needing information on cleanup status to greater communication and public participation on closure and stewardship issues. If not for the Silos Project, which will be retrieving waste in ’04 and treating waste in ’05, stakeholder focus would solely be on post-closure issues. In addition, over the last 20 years, the number of neighbors interested in Fernald has dropped dramatically. For the most part that’s a good sign because people have confidence in DOE’s and its contractors’ ability to manage the cleanup. Others, about 12-18 citizens, continue to take a leadership role for the community and rarely miss any of the public meetings. Many of these people belong to Fernald Residents for Environmental Safety & Health and/or the Fernald Citizens’ Advisory Board. The Fernald Citizens’ Advisory Board represents Fernald at DOE’s Environmental Management Site-Specific Advisory Board.

Neighbors are also very interested in seeing a Multi-use Education Facility built where certain records and photographs could be housed for public viewing. So until that issue is addressed public interest will remain high. They also want to know more about how the Office of Legacy Management will work to ensure that the property, including On Site Disposal Facility, is maintained once EM’s mission is complete.

On the other hand, Public Involvement at Hanford is heating up around such issues as removing tank waste, accepting waste from other states, and shipping transuranic (TRU) waste to WIPP. Further, there’s no lack of interested and vocal parties: the Columbia Riverkeeper, the Government Accountability Project, Hanford Communities, Hanford Watch, Heart of America Northwest, Hanford Natural Resource Trustee Council, Oregon Hanford Cleanup Board, Lower Columbia Basin Audubon Society, Oregon Department of Energy, and the Hanford Advisory Board (HAB). Perhaps the two most influential local groups are the Hanford Natural Resource

Trustee Council and the HAB. The Trustee Council is a collaborative working group chartered to address natural resources by the release of hazardous substances from the site. Members of the Council include such groups as native Americans (Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Yakima), the states of Washington and Oregon, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of the Interior, DOE, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife. The HAB provides recommendations and advice to the DOE, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Washington Department of Ecology. Composed of 31 seats, the HAB represents Hanford on DOE's Environmental Management Site-Specific Advisory Board.

Like Fernald, the community is also interested in preserving the history of the site. Groups have formed to promote the area's heritage. Friends of the Hanford Reach focus their efforts on protecting the Hanford Reach, a national monument, and establishing the Hanford Reach Interpretative Center. Another organization, the Columbia River Exposition on History, Science and Technology (CREHST), which traces its beginnings back to 1962 when the Atomic Energy Commission opened the Hanford's Visitor Center in Richland, manages a full service museum that tells the dynamic story of the region from the prehistoric age, to the atomic age and beyond. Both organizations are vying for supporters and funding regionally and nationally.

CONCLUSION

Communications at both Hanford and Fernald play a key in providing information to employees, stakeholders, and the public-at-large. Yes, the Fernald Closure Project is nearing its end, but communication challenges will continue. Public Affairs and project management will carry a majority of the load internally, externally and to key stakeholders. To that end, the Fernald cleanup will be a great story when it's done, but fade away quickly on the local level. Most of the workers displaced by closing will move on to other jobs in the area. The effect on Cincinnati as a whole will be slight. What remains of the property should be an asset to the community... an end state reached thanks to communication and public involvement.

What lies in store for Hanford still remains to be written...and communicated.