

**Fernald —As Closure Approaches
Changing Public Participation Is Not an Easy
(or Popular) Task**

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ABSTRACT

Public participation at a closure site evolves. In large part it's driven by the players – neighbors, DOE, contractors, regulators and to some extent, the media. At Fernald, public participation became an integral part of the decision making process in the late 80's. At that time the Department of Energy was really just beginning to understand the extent of environmental contamination caused by 40 years of uranium metal production.

Today, as cleanup nears an end (Figure 1), the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board and other key stakeholders stand at a crossroads. The DOE Office of Environmental Management is working with the Office of Legacy Management and its' contractors as they prepare to take over stewardship of the site. DOE is chartering Local Stakeholder Organizations, LSO's, made up of elected officials to serve as the voice of the public. The transition at Fernald will likely be more difficult than at other cleanup sites. Many area stakeholders have 20 years of time committed to this project. For most, Fernald was an emotional subject that effected their community and families. Change isn't easy.

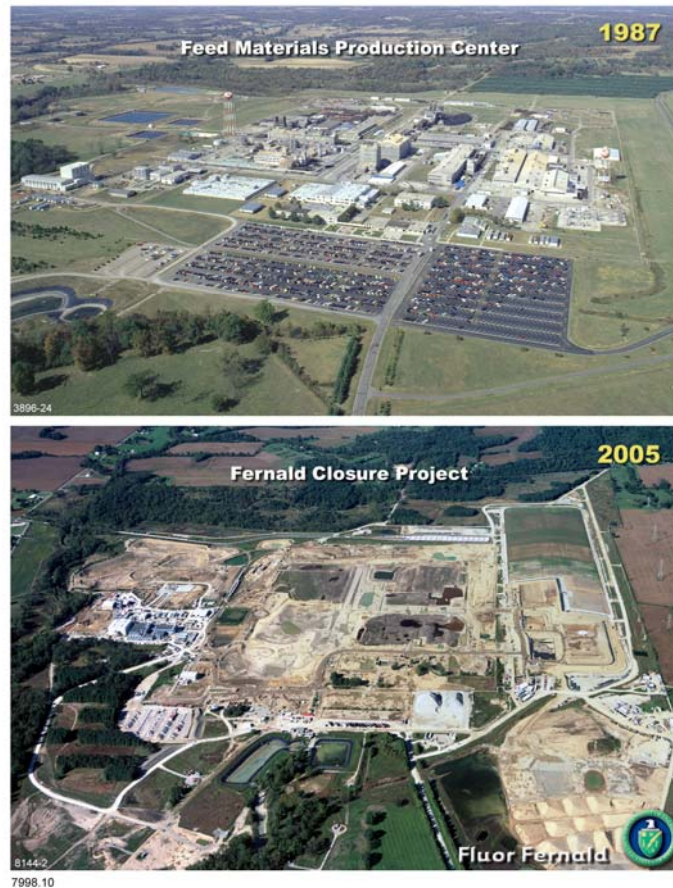


Fig. 1. Fernald “Then” and “Now.” The project landscape changes daily with closure approaching in 2006.

INTRODUCTION

Public participation at a closure site evolves. In large part it's driven by the players – neighbors, DOE, contractors, regulators and to some extent, the media. At Fernald, public participation became an integral part of the decision making process in the late '80s and early 90s. At that time the Department of Energy was really just beginning to understand the extent of environmental contamination caused by 40 years of producing uranium metal. To give the public one voice, the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board (FCAB) was formed. Its job was to make recommendations to DOE regarding cleanup levels, the cleanup approach, and ultimately, the final look and use of the site. Since 1994, the FCAB has had a tremendous influence in shaping the course to closure. The Advisory Board proposed the “balance approach” to waste management, a decision that will ultimately save nearly \$3 billion in cleanup costs. This approach calls for on-site disposal of a majority of Fernald's contaminated waste (e.g., soil, building debris) while shipping legacy waste and other more concentrated waste streams off site. More recently, when Fernald needed to change its approach to treating Silo waste, the FCAB was heavily involved in selecting a waste-stabilization technology. When concerns arose over the potential hazard of inhaling airborne contaminants associated with extracting, packaging and shipping Silo 3 material, the FCAB urged Fluor Fernald to incorporate a chemical additive into the operation to agglomerate the powdery byproduct. This step added yet another level of safety into an already robust packaging and shipping design. The FCAB continues to closely monitor the progress of both Silo 3 and Silos 1 and 2 Projects.

THE FUTURE OF FERNALD

In 1999 and 2000, the FCAB hosted a series of “Future of Fernald Workshops.” The Advisory Board made a concerted effort to attract individuals and groups with backgrounds in nature, environment and education. These groups were sought based on their potential interest in the site post-closure (see Figure 2).



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Fig. 2. Stakeholders discuss how to make the Fernald property an asset to the community at Citizen Advisory Board “Future of Fernald” Workshop held at the Crosby Twp. Senior Center.

During these workshops, stakeholders had a chance to express their views on how the site would look and possible use for the 1,050-acre property. Would the land be open for light industry? If the land were to be used as a park, what kind of park? Would there be trails through the restored areas? What kind of trails – bike or pedestrian? Will there be a fence around the property? These and many other questions, which included the need for establishing a Multi-Use Education Facility, were asked.

From these Workshops with the public came this vision statement:

A Stakeholder Vision for the Future of Fernald

Adopted by Fernald stakeholders at the third Future of Fernald Workshop, 9/26/00

Fernald stakeholders envision a future for the Fernald property that creates a federally owned regional destination for educating this and future generations about the rich and varied history of Fernald. We envision a community resource that serves the ongoing information needs of area residents, education needs of local academic institutions, and reinterment of Native American remains. We envision a safe, secure, and partially assessable site, integrated with the surrounding community that effectively protects human health and the environment from all residual contamination and fully maintains all aspects of the ecological restoration.

Today, as cleanup nears an end, the FCAB and other key stakeholders stand at a crossroads. The DOE Office of Environmental Management (EM) is working with the Office of Legacy Management (LM) and its contractors as they prepare to take over stewardship and long-term maintenance of the site. In fact, for

the past year LM has been actively setting up shop. They are playing an equal role with EM in Fernald public meetings. LM's contractor, Stoller, has hired seasoned personnel from the project to bring continuity to key positions with public interaction. DOE is also chartering Local Stakeholder Organizations, LSOs, made up of elected officials to serve as the voice of the public. LSOs are being established to provide DOE guidance on post-closure issues. Township trustees from Ross, Crosby and Morgan Township in southwestern Ohio have been meeting with LM and stakeholders to determine if the post-closure and public involvement needs of the site warrant forming an LSO. Clearly the decisions surrounding remediated DOE sites are less "charged" than those associated with environmental contamination and public health. Fernald neighbors have confidence in the cleanup levels established early on under each Record of Decision. The core of the decision-making effort now really centers on how best to return the property as an asset for the community.

In light of the changing mission, and the changing complexion of each site, DOE also looking to bring in new members of the public who have a broader, and in some cases, more recognized constituency base than some current stakeholders. After several decades of active involvement by some stakeholders, DOE is also looking to bring some new faces and ideas into the process.

TWO DECADES OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The transition at Fernald will likely be more difficult than at other cleanup sites. Many area stakeholders have 20 years of time committed to this project. For most, Fernald has been an emotional subject that affected their community and families. One group in particular, Fernald Residents for Environmental Safety and Health (FRESH), has been a fixture at Fernald public meetings for the past two decades. In 1984, FRESH President Lisa Crawford learned her family was drinking from a well contaminated with uranium. From that point on, Crawford and her neighbors organized in an effort to find out more information on the extent of the contamination and its effects on public health. Crawford and FRESH members became the face of a public betrayed by their government. With perseverance and commitment, the group became subject-matter experts on the affects of radiological contamination. Members of the FRESH core group are frequently asked to speak at local and regional conferences on their fight to clean up Fernald. They gradually began networking with stakeholder groups from other DOE sites to form a cohesive force that couldn't be ignored. With commitment, media savvy and hard work came recognition by the DOE, local representatives, the media and the public. When Lisa Crawford picked up the phone, Congressmen, Assistant Secretaries and reporters took the call.

As the risk issues at Fernald have faded with the progress of cleanup, so has most of the fire that caused FRESH to mobilize in the beginning. Public involvement has moved from determining acceptable cleanup levels, to looking for cleanup options, monitoring the progress of cleanup, and finally long-term monitoring and public access. While the issues have changed and are less charged, FRESH is reticent to ease up on the throttle. What does a grass-roots organization do once their cause no longer exists? Change isn't easy.

CONCLUSION

For most members of the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board, site completion will bring welcome relief. Several members of the Advisory Board are near the end of their professional careers and looking forward to retirement. Attending several FCAB and public meetings each month for the better part of 15 years is a considerable commitment. In addition to normal meetings, members spend even more time at home studying or preparing to discuss specific Fernald issues. Most members of the Advisory Board are willing to walk away from Fernald once the cleanup is complete. They are ready to spend their free time

and energy in new pursuits. The Fernald public is fortunate to have had such a dedicated group of citizens looking out for their community.

Besides the FCAB and FRESH, the general public's interest in Fernald has faded. Cleanup is a long process, even accelerated cleanup. Quarterly "Countdown to Closure" public meetings are lightly attended by the general public. Media interest in the site for the most part has waned. New inquiries about the status of the cleanup are often the result of a high school or Jr. High class project.

At Fernald, public participation has changed and will continue to change. Open communication has been a major factor in the success of the project. Decisions regarding Fernald's cleanup were made based on balanced information and in cooperation with all parties - DOE, regulators, and stakeholders. DOE is committed to stay the course, but realizes the decisions and opinion leaders change as Fernald's new mission takes shape. While LM and EM are working hard to make a smooth transition, there aren't many examples the public can refer to as an example of how a completed cleanup site is developed, managed and utilized. Once some of these unknowns are answered, the need for public involvement will drop dramatically after one year of closure. By then, maintenance and management of the property will become routine.

What's unique about Fernald compared to some other DOE cleanup sites is the remedy for cleaning up the aquifer. Pumping and treating the contaminated aquifer on and off Fernald property could continue for another decade after the declaration of physical completion. DOE will need to maintain some level of public involvement to keep the community informed of the cleanup progress. For the most part, this issue has taken a back seat to other more pressing risks over the years. The general public has confidence in the aquifer treatment operations and the people responsible for those operations. Both the system and the staff will remain intact after 2006.

If a Multi-use Education Facility comes to fruition, curricula will be developed and LM will have the opportunity to bring kids to the site as well as Fernald education programs to area schools. What has yet to be determined is how readily local educators will take advantage of the rich history of Fernald both during the Cold War and later in the cleanup era. Will an Educational Facility be a sustainable part of Fernald's future?

Once the education and maintenance elements of the site become routine, public confidence in the remedy and use of the property will forgo the need for formal public involvement in the future. Fernald will then be added to the growing list of successful DOE EM cleanup projects.