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**DOE's Environmental Management Site-Specific Advisory Board: The Roles, Work, and Assessment of the Constituent Local Boards - 13587**

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**ABSTRACT**

The charter for the Department of Energy's Environmental Management (EM) Site-Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) was approved under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) in 1994. With a unique mandate to provide public input on issues associated with the cleanup of nuclear legacy sites in the U.S., the EM SSAB comprises eight local boards, which are based at major EM sites. While each board is unique to the community in which it is located and reflects the diversity of the local population, the boards are governed by FACA, related regulations, and DOE policies that are intended to standardize agency advisory board operations.

The EM SSAB local boards are made up of a diverse group of citizens who want to understand the mission and goals of the EM program and to help EM achieve those goals for the benefit of their communities. Some are quite passionate about their mission; others need to be coaxed into active participation. Maintaining productive relationships and a supportive environment for effective board operations is the challenge of board management for DOE EM and the board members themselves.

DOE draws on research findings and best practices literature from academics and practitioners in the field of public involvement in its board management practices. The EM SSAB is also evaluated annually under the law to ensure that the investment of taxpayer dollars in the board is warranted in light of the contributions of the board. Further evaluation takes place at the agency and site levels in order to identify what aspects of board functioning the agency and board members find important to its success and to address areas where improvement is needed. Board contributions, compliance factors, and measurable outcomes related to board products and process areas are key to agency commitment to ongoing support of the boards and to participant

**\*The opinions expressed in this paper are the authors' and are not the opinions of the U.S. Department of Energy, Strata-G, LLC, or RSI, Inc.**

satisfaction and thus continued member involvement. In addition to evaluation\* of these factors in improving board effectiveness, the agency draws on the experience of members to create best practices for the EM SSAB, as a unique form of public involvement. Four areas that have been identified by local board Chairpersons as important to their local board operations are

- Enhancing communication between technical and non-technical board members
- Building on common ground toward recommendations
- Public involvement in EM SSAB local board activities
- The EM SSAB annual work plan process

The first three areas are addressed below by current or former chairpersons of the EM SSAB: Ralph Phelps, former Chairperson of the Northern New Mexico Citizens' Advisory Board; Susan Leckband, former Chairperson and current Vice Chairperson of the Hanford Advisory Board; and Val Francis, Vice Chairperson of the Portsmouth (PORTS) SSAB. In addition, Eric Roberts, facilitator of the PORTS SSAB, has contributed to the section on public involvement. In a separate paper for this session, Ralph Young, Chairperson of the Paducah Citizens' Advisory Board addresses the EM SSAB annual work plan process.

## INTRODUCTION

*Public participation in environmental assessments involves a shift away from an approach in which only scientists participated in gathering and synthesizing information, and reflects increasing acceptance of the idea that nonscientists possess knowledge and expertise that complements the expertise of the scientific community and can help improve environmental understanding, particularly when it is applied to practical problems.* Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making, Thomas Dietz and Paul C. Stern, Editors; National Research Council; p. 158; National Academies Press, 2008. [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12434](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434)

The EM SSAB has just one charter, but its primary mission—to provide the EM program with advice on issues related to the cleanup of legacy waste at eight sites—is carried out by the eight local boards. Those boards have 15-31 citizen members, who are appointed by the EM Assistant Secretary upon nomination from EM managers at the field sites. The FACA requires the boards to be balanced, and, as these boards are intended to be representative of their respective communities, the membership is chosen to reflect the diversity of the local communities. Members are not required to have any specific education or experience; what is required of all members is an interest in their community as it relates to the cleanup and a willingness to learn about the cleanup process.

\*This paper will use the terms “evaluation” and “assessment” interchangeably. Some social scientists make a distinction in these terms for scholarly discussions. This paper is not academic, however, and will use the words as synonyms, as they are used in common speech. This paper will also use the terms “boards” and “committees” interchangeably, acknowledging that within the framework of FACA, the local boards discussed here are technically committees, operating under the umbrella of the EM SSAB, the chartered advisory board.

Although some exceptions are allowed, membership is term-limited to a total of six years. This is designed to allow more members of the community to serve on the board. At some sites, interest is great and applications for membership far exceed the number of openings; at other sites, getting applications from members of geographically remote and historically unengaged communities is a challenge.

The federally chartered advisory boards are overseen by the General Services Administration's (GSA) Committee Management Secretariat. GSA requires the agencies to submit data on their advisory boards annually and to verify that a need exists for the continuation of the chartered board. The information requested is specific and mostly quantitative:

- dates of EM SSAB meetings and names and occupations of its members;
- estimated annual cost to DOE to fund, service, and supply the EM SSAB;
- reports and recommendations submitted by the EM SSAB, including those of local boards and ones generated by the EM SSAB Chairpersons on cross-complex issues; and
- cumulative statistics for acceptance (in whole or in part) of board recommendations.

For FY 2012, the EM SSAB reported 64 recommendations and complex-wide costs of about \$4 million. Since 1994, the EM SSAB has generated 1438 recommendations to the agency, 74% that were accepted, 16% that were accepted in part, and 10% that were reported as not accepted. The data is available to the public at <http://www.fido.gov/facadatabase/>.

Other information required by GSA in narrative format includes impacts of board activities, including increased trust in Government, major policy changes, advances in scientific research, increased customer satisfaction, implementation of laws or regulatory requirement, reorganized priorities, reallocated resources, and cost savings. GSA also wants to know if the agency provides the committee with feedback regarding actions taken to implement recommendations or advice offered and through what means; how the advisory committee (or board) accomplishes its purpose, how the membership is balanced, why the committee (board) is necessary, and whether any meetings are closed (if so, justification must be provided).

Such data and information reporting, of course, cannot provide a complete picture of the effectiveness of advisory boards, including the EM SSAB. This is recognized by GSA and the EM program.

## FEDERAL ADVISORY BOARD ASSESSMENT

### *Performance Measurement*

*An important and potentially contentious issue surrounding the use of advisory committees is how to judge their success. A general review of readily available literature regarding federal advisory committees suggests that the success of an advisory committee is fundamentally linked to a precise, unambiguous knowledge of the objectives and purposes of the particular committee (i.e., knowing exactly what needs to be accomplished and how to accomplish it) and is generally judged in terms of actual contributions made towards decision-making. However, the determination of the value of the contributions made or evaluation of committee performance is more directly tied to the unique function of the committee.*

*To address that unique need, the Secretariat contracted with the Gallup Organization to conduct a series of focus groups among federal officials and advisory committee participants and managers to gain and incorporate insights and guidance from federal officials, federal advisory committee members, and federal advisory committee managers on the specific performance measures that would be appropriate for advisory committees. Differences between committees that deal with technical and grant/peer review issues and those that deal with policy recommendations were also sought. U.S. General Services Administration website: <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/category/21245>)*

Recognizing the importance of good public participation practices for the federal advisory process, the GSA periodically works with experts in the public participation field and with research groups in order to ensure highly functioning federal advisory committees. In 2004, GSA commissioned the Gallop Organization to conduct focus groups with federal advisory board members to determine what characteristics members found most important to the success of their boards. The findings underscore the importance of group processes and effective board leadership; as you will note, the characteristics that are identified are found in effective group processes in most environments; they certainly are not unique to successful federal advisory boards. GSA identified the following "Most important ingredients for committee success":

- Good selection of members
- Effective chairperson
- Interface with stakeholders
- Positive relationship between the agency and the committee
- Resourceful liaison/administrative staff

Other subsidiary characteristics also were identified in the research as important to committee success:

- Fair operating procedures and guidelines
- Well-run meetings
- Consideration of both majority and minority opinions
- Effective working relationship with senior government managers and other stakeholders

- Access to senior managers and technical experts, as needed
- Recommendations or contributions have a positive impact on the public or external stakeholders
- Results of committee's work are available to others

*The Advisory Committee Engagement Survey, Best Practices Report, the Gallop Organization, March 2004, <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/category/21245>.*

The survey report encourages federal agencies to address process factors and participant satisfaction, among other things, in working with their advisory boards. The findings guide those responsible for board management on behalf of an agency in the direction of evaluating criteria related to the quality of interactions, not just outcomes of the process. This is a critical facet of board management, because if the process is not satisfactory to board participants, the agency will not be able to attract members valuable to the accomplishment of board objectives and process problems will consume valuable time with members, distracting from deliberation of the issues for which recommendations have been requested. In such cases, the legitimacy of the entire process could be called into question, undermining the potential for valuable input to the agency.

#### **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ASSESSMENT \***

*When done well, public participation improves the quality and legitimacy of a decision and builds the capacity of all involved to engage in the policy process. It can lead to better results in terms of environmental quality and other social objectives. It also can enhance trust and understanding among parties. Achieving these results depends on using practices that address difficulties that specific aspects of the context can present.* Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making, Thomas Dietz and Paul C. Stern, Editors; National Research Council; p. 2; National Academies Press, 2008.  
[http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12434](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434)

There is a large and still growing body of literature on various criteria and methods for assessing public participation, in general, and for government public involvement processes, in particular. Below are two summaries of outcome and process criteria that are often identified by researchers in the public participation field as key areas for performance and measurement. Each criterion is intentionally broad, allowing for further definition within the context of a particular form of public engagement.

\*This section is not intended to provide an exhaustive overview of literature on public participation evaluation, but rather to bring some scholarly perspectives to the discussion. It does, however, focus on methodology and case studies of the public participation experience in environmental, scientific and technological matters.

**Outcome criteria:**

For public participation in government decision-making, four broad, positive outcome criteria and example indicators are identified by Warburton et al\*:

- Improved governance (indicator: increased trust in government)
- Social capital and social justice (indicator: increased equality of access to decision making)
- Improved quality of services, projects, programs (indicator: cost savings; more durable, less conflict-ridden decisions)
- Capacity building and learning (indicator: greater awareness and understanding of issues; could contribute to future decision making processes)

\**Making a difference: A guide to evaluating public participation in central government*, Warburton, D., Wilson, R., Rainbow, E., Involve, London, UK, 2006, <http://www.involve.org.uk/evaluation-guide/>

**Process criteria:**

Four broad process areas by researchers Rowe and Frewer\*\*:

- Resource accessibility (appropriate resources for task)
- Task definition (clarity on nature and scope of task for process)
- Structured decision making (a clear path toward decision making by group)
- Cost-effectiveness (investment in particular process must make sense for outcomes sought)

**Acceptance criteria:**

To provide legitimacy to the process, five areas required for acceptance are provided by Rowe and Frewer\*\*:

- Representativeness (a broadly representative sample of the affected public)
- Independence (deliberative process should be independent, unbiased)
- Early involvement (public involvement before decision making begins, “as soon as value judgments become salient”)
- Influence (input from process should clearly impact policy)
- Transparency (including the selection of participants, decision-making process, and reporting)

\*\**Public Participation Methods: A Framework for Evaluation*, Rowe, G. PhD, and Frewer, J. L., PhD, *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 2000.

This paper cannot explore each of these criteria, but introduces them to provide context for EM SSAB assessment discussion; the factors identified for effective public involvement can be used in the creation of goals and performance measures by citizen advisory boards, including the EM SSAB.

**EM SSAB ASSESSMENT**

The EM SSAB is one of a few—and among the longest standing—citizen’s advisory board in federal government. In attempting to improve evaluation of this board, EM relies on assessments

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that have been conducted by the program and several researchers. In addition, EM, like other sponsors of public involvement activities, must create evaluation criteria that are specific to EM SSAB performance and process goals.

In addition to the annual comprehensive review required by GSA, EM SSAB local board staff currently collects the following information for a board-wide review:

1. What were the major contributions of the local board this year to site activities?
2. Did the board recommendations result in cost savings for the agency and/or new approaches to site work? Did the board provide community support or indications of opposition on current directions in cleanup activities that helped the site to move forward more effectively?
3. How did board activities contribute to wider community involvement at the site and/or otherwise support community relations?

This evaluation exercise is intended to tell EM senior management whether the sites are getting valuable input or whether the agency needs to modify its requests to the board to ensure its efforts are focused in areas where the agency seeks its input. To obtain more input related to the value of the board's work, managers at the Nevada National Security Site are asked to complete an annual survey on board contributions. Other sites are being encouraged to conduct similar surveys.

In addition to management evaluations, each local board compiles a list of its achievements; these lists are brought by the local board Chairpersons to each bi-annual Chairperson's meetings, where the achievements are presented to the EM Assistant Secretary or designee.

Members of the local boards at the EM sites are also asked to assess board progress and their satisfaction with the board through surveys and other means. Most sites annually survey board members for feedback on their board's achievements, processes, and management. They are also asked to evaluate their local board's accomplishments against the work plan that each board creates for the year.

Because the questions posed to members differ from site to site, survey results cannot be compared meaningfully at this time. Greater coordination of survey questions would be valuable to board management. Overall, however, when board members are asked if they believe their boards are effective in providing recommendations to DOE-EM, the answers are positive. In addition, board members at all surveyed sites indicate that they have adequate information to make recommendations and generally report positive relations with site managers and subject matter experts who present information to them. Board members also tend to believe that they are a diverse group and consider dissenting opinions. Areas of concern include doubt that the agency is accepting their advice as often as they believe it should and uneven participation in board discussions by members.



Because EM chartered the EM SSAB as a representative board as opposed to an expert board (gathering diverse community views rather than expert views), public perceptions and involvement should be evaluated as a measure of the perceived legitimacy of the board within the communities where they operate. Some board staffs have evaluation cards available at each meeting for members of the public who want to register their opinions on the meeting and board operations. One board, the Oak Ridge Site-Specific Advisory Board, currently is trying to get approval from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to conduct an online community survey to obtain public perceptions of the board, as well as input on issues that residents would like to see the board address. Under the Paperwork Reduction Act, all public surveys need OMB approval. Approval from OMB to survey the community through passive mechanisms, such as the Internet, would help with assessing public perceptions of board legitimacy and effectiveness.

External to the agency, at least five studies have focused on the EM SSAB local boards, three of them led by Judith Bradbury and colleagues at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (operated by Battelle for the U.S. Department of Energy). Within the scope of this paper, it is not possible to convey the breadth of findings and recommendations from these various studies. Each research report acknowledges the differences in remediation needs, local issues, board membership and various other dynamics at the various sites. The studies have identified practices that the researchers believe contribute to successes and difficulties board operations; those practices are similar to those referenced earlier in this paper as important to effective public participation, in general. Points of agreement among the researchers about the EM SSAB are that the board is contributing significantly to the efficient cleanup of the nuclear legacy waste sites and that DOE-EM has demonstrated commitment and responsiveness to the advice and recommendations of the local boards.

Another indicator of EM SSAB effectiveness are awards from non-agency sources. For particular achievements in their communities, two local boards of the EM SSAB have been recognized for excellence in public participation: the Environmental Protection Agency's 2006 *Citizen Excellence in Community Involvement Award* was given to the Oak Ridge SSAB, and the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board received the 1999 *Outstanding Organization of the Year Award* from the International Association of Public Participation.

### Assessment Challenges

***Public participation processes are more successful when they include the full spectrum of parties who are interested in or will be affected by a decision.***  
*Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making*, Thomas Dietz and Paul C. Stern, Editors; National Research Council; p. 118; National Academies Press, 2008. [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12434](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434)

Within the FACA board structure, membership diversity and balance must be maintained to ensure that taxpayer dollars are not spent for input from narrow, special interests. Congress, in passing the Federal Advisory Committee Act in 1972, requires federal agencies and the Executive Office of the President to ensure diversity and balance among participants whenever



they convene individuals to gather group advice. (Individual advice and advice from elected public officials is exempt from FACA.)

Although the law does not apply to non-US government public participation activities, experts in the field of public participation identify diversity and balance as essential to legitimate group deliberations, in general. As the National Research Council report summarized, "For many environmental issues, well-organized interests, including industries, local political and economic coalitions, and environmental groups, are well prepared to engage in participatory processes. But ... many individuals who may feel substantial effects from a decision may not be organized in a way that facilitates their easy engagement. ... Therefore, if participatory processes are to take public concerns into account equitably, care must be taken to include the voices of those who are not well represented. **Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making**, Thomas Dietz and Paul C. Stern, Editors; National Research Council; p. 118; National Academies Press, 2008. ([http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12434](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434), p. 199)

The NRC also notes social justice concerns when diversity and balance is ignored: "Some interests nearly always have greater influence on the decision-making process than others and use the opportunity of deliberation to influence the opinion-forming process and advance their specific interests on the agenda. Thus, public participation processes can easily mirror the power distribution in society rather than level it." *ibid.*, p. 63

To provide legitimacy and value to the recommendations, and to be compliant with FACA, the composition of the local EM SSAB boards must reflect a wide diversity of community views. Toward diversity, inclusivity, and opportunities for involvement, there must be clear and transparent membership and balance criteria. In addition, there must be active recruitment of under-represented, affected people and board processes that provide orientation to relevant subject matter and that facilitate inclusiveness in board deliberations.

Evaluating a federal advisory board for diversity requires a clear definition of the issues to be addressed by the board (i.e., the scope of work) and the range of views that could reasonably contribute to deliberations within that work scope. GSA requires agencies to set criteria for diverse membership in light of the committee's function, to set goals for ongoing recruitment and improvement, and to report to GSA on progress every two years when the advisory board charter is reviewed and renewed or terminated.

Two other aspects of diversity and the related concept of inclusivity deserve brief note. Advisory board size is necessarily limited so that group deliberative processes can be effective. Accordingly, the EM program does not rely on the EM SSAB local boards for all of its public involvement, nor does it judge the success of its outreach and involvement activities by EM SSAB achievements alone. Public participation by any agency must be evaluated for its overall diversity, inclusivity, and the provision of multiple avenues for involvement. EM encourages the broadest public participation possible for the EM SSAB, however, in order to maximize the resources devoted to supporting such boards..

## The EM SSAB Chairperson's Experience

In addition to improved, ongoing evaluation, good advisory board management must draw on the experience of its members in the creation of best practices. Such practices in key areas of board operations are greatly influenced, and unachievable without member support, especially that of the Chairpersons. Some important areas for the local boards of the EM SSAB are explored below.

***Scientific complexity and uncertainty do not preclude effective public participation. How the knowledge is introduced and used in the process matters more than the characteristics of the knowledge itself. What matters is now the scientific information is integrated into the process.*** Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making, Thomas Dietz and Paul C. Stern, Editors; National Research Council; p. 118; National Academies Press, 2008. [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12434](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434), p. 181

### **Core Issue 1.** *Working Effectively With Technical and Non-Technical Board Members*

Author: Ralph L. Phelps, Former Chairperson, Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board

In order to execute the mission of the EM SSAB to provide advice and recommendations to DOE-EM, each local board strives to maintain a membership which represents the diversity of the communities that are affected by the environmental restoration activities within the board's scope. Although diversity of stakeholder groups such as local government, tribal nations, civic groups, minorities, and academia is important, to be really effective, board membership also must include both technical and non-technical members.

The type of advice a local board offers the DOE typically reflects the progress of restoration work at the site. Characterization, selection of corrective measures, actual waste mitigation and transition to long-term stewardship presents local board opportunities for different levels of technical and non-technical input. Some board inquiries, analysis, and discussions are very technically based, and some are less so, being instead responsive to community perceptions. In every case, a resulting recommendation becomes stronger when the entire board membership contributes to its development.

To this end, EM SSAB members need to work together with mutual respect for the strengths each one brings to the discussion table. Every member has strengths and weaknesses, but all members together make the board an effective instrument for reflecting the diverse views of the community on environmental issues. Inherently technical issues, i.e., recommendations on well drilling methods, always benefit from non-technical perspectives, such as the need for simplified terminology or enhanced descriptions.

The role of the Chair is key in establishing the working environment for the board that encourages all members to participate in discussions and recommendations. There will always be technically strong members who may seem intimidating in their knowledge, but almost every

issue has a “soft skills” aspect where the non-technical members have strengths that provide valuable insights. These members often need to be given the opportunity to speak in a welcoming environment of respect.

Using the Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board as an example, it has proven very helpful for the members to get to know each other as people (and not just resumes). The Board achieved this relationship-building through open discussions at Board and committee meetings, where everyone is given an opportunity to contribute, and through field trips and social events (every meeting includes dinner together). Board members have found that when a technically strong member knows and understands where a non-technically strong member is coming from in a discussion (and vice versa) the dynamics of respect, trust and openness function to make a very effective Board.

**Core Issue 2: *Building Consensus to Make Decisions\****

Author: Susan Leckband, former Chairperson, current Vice Chairperson, Hanford Citizens Advisory Board

Boards operate more effectively when they are moving in union to achieve their goals. Consensus means that all Board members must participate in the issue at hand, and the Board Chair plays a significant role in ensuring effective participation. Before the meeting comes to order, the Chair should arrive early and greet Board members and others arriving to attend the meeting. He or she should demonstrate a positive attitude and respect for participants and shake hands, look them in the eye, smile, and tell them how appreciated they are. After all, they are choosing to spend their valuable time participating in the work of the Board.

A Board Chair can then provide opening remarks and set the tone of the meeting and ensuing discussions. A few rules of thumb include

1. Establishing general requirements for participants, i.e., civility, turning off mechanical devices, respecting others’ opinions, role of the facilitator, and general rules of behavior and operation;
2. Introducing, with a short explanation, the issue or topic of discussion and provide any background necessary to enable a participatory discussion with enough information to ensure that participants have a grasp of the issue. (This may include printed background materials, which, if possible, should have been distributed to participants prior to the meeting.);
3. Identifying overall goals for the discussion.

The Board Chair can help move the Board to consensus by clearly defining the desired outcome by

1. Ensuring that participants understand what “product” will be developed and to whom it will be transmitted;
2. Ensuring that participants understand the potential consequences of any product;
3. Remaining flexible within the discussion framework while keeping the discussion on topic.

The Board Chair can help facilitate the discussion towards consensus by

1. Continually surveying the room and participants, ensuring that all are given equal opportunity to speak;
2. Reminding participants of the goals (as needed);
3. Engaging reluctant members in a respectful way, ensuring them that their opinions and observations are valuable;
4. Facilitating group negotiation to develop compromise language acceptable to all when diverse opinions are expressed (using positive reinforcement of overall goals as a guide);
5. Repeating what has been agreed upon so that all in the group clearly understand;
6. Identifying next steps, if any are needed;
7. Closing with a positive statement, recognizing the hard work of all participants and thanking them.

\*Authors note: Although the Hanford Advisory Board seeks consensus in decision making—meaning all members must agree on a recommendation in order for it to be submitted, with rare exceptions—the other boards of the EM SSAB do not. The value of reaching consensus, in fact, has been questioned by some social scientists for its failure to capture and, perhaps, its tendency to diminish expression of minority opinions. Bailey, Grossardt, and Ripy argue, for instance, that consensus decision making works best in small, homogeneous groups, where backgrounds, values and beliefs are similar. Nonetheless, finding common ground is important to any process that results in group advice. *Technology, Quality and Performance Metrics: The Future of Public Involvement in Transportation Decision Making*, Bailey, K. PhD; Grossardt, T., PhD., Ripy, J.; 2011, self-published, p. 3, 7)

**Core Issue 3:** *Public Involvement and Board Activities: Taking Important Information to the Community.* Author: Eric Roberts, Facilitator, and Val Francis, Vice Chair, Portsmouth Site Specific Advisory Board

The eight local Boards of the EM SSAB are tasked with providing advice and recommendations to DOE-EM on matters affecting the environmental management program. As representatives of their respective communities, board members evaluate regulatory decisions, DOE-EM cleanup actions, and work prioritization through the prism of their local community values and expectations. With each DOE-EM site anchored in a unique community, represented by a distinct set of values, environmental challenges, and economic concerns, as well as a wide spectrum of trust levels for DOE, it is appropriate that each site engages its local community and maintains a constant discourse on EM's mission and vision, both locally and corporately.

In addition to work plan activities of the local boards, information is shared with the public and input is actively sought, as part of the CERCLA process and as a standard business practice for DOE on other issues that will directly affect the community, the environment, or future use of the site. Often, the local EM SSAB boards become a central location for this information to be shared and a pivotal component of DOE's public outreach program. Public engagement at board meetings and committee meetings involves educational presentations, announcements of

timelines and upcoming decisions, as well as opportunities for DOE and its contractors to interact with members of the general public. As the boards deliberate their potential advice and recommendations, the viewpoints, opinions and concerns of local stakeholders are weighed heavily in the decision making process. An integral piece of the recommendation development process, public comment periods provide interested members of the public an opportunity to have their voice heard prior to a vote on any recommendation or advice. It is commonplace for a few highly engaged and outspoken members of the public to ensure they are part of the dialogue by taking part in the public comment periods that are a part of every EM SSAB public board meeting. Additionally, board members continually interact with their communities through business affiliations, social groups, religious organizations and other community based organizations and boards. These interactions, more than any other factor, dictate a board members voting preference as they consider advice and recommendations to offer DOE on cleanup decisions.

The efforts of the Board leadership, DOE, and support staff to manage these “off-line” discussions and interactions determine a Board’s success when considering emotionally charged topics. Certain discussions within the realm of the cleanup mission are obviously more heated than others. Discussions centering on on-site waste disposal, budget cuts and work prioritization, end state planning and future use, and transportation and/or treatment of high level wastes are examples of topics that naturally trigger an emotional response. It becomes the obligation of the boards to educate themselves, and to a lesser extent, help educate the public in order to eliminate some of the fear and emotion associated with these decisions. An educated membership that understands both the specific topic as well as the long-term vision can, with the help of DOE, board leadership and support staff, engage a broader spectrum of the public in meaningful dialogue, bring back pertinent information and opinions to board discussions and ultimately, produce better advice and recommendations for DOE.

## **CONCLUSION**

The EM programs at the various sites understand and act on the need for board evaluation in order to ensure that resources (meaning, of course, taxpayer dollars) devoted to board support are justified and that board contributions are valuable to the agency. To date, the EM SSAB experience has been found to be valuable; the boards are effectively providing input from their communities to the agency regarding the mission work of the program.

The authors believe that an expansion of evaluation for more comprehensive and comparable information across the site boards will help the agency and members with ongoing process improvement and with ensuring that these boards are as effective as possible. The advisory board process also must continue to be informed by good research on effective public participation in similar forums.