

The Evolution of Community Engagement Through Ongoing Services Provided by the Fernald Preserve Visitors Center – 17402

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ABSTRACT

The Fernald Preserve is located on the site of a former uranium-processing plant that underwent extensive environmental remediation followed by comprehensive ecological restoration. It is managed by the US Department of Energy Office of Legacy Management and is located approximately 29 kilometers (km) (18 miles) northwest of Cincinnati, Ohio. Remedial activities and subsequent ecological restoration have converted the site from an industrial production facility to an undeveloped park, encompassing a series of wetlands, prairies, and forested communities. Although the remediation of buildings and soil contamination was completed in 2006, site aquifer remediation is ongoing and remains a topic of interest to the community. Much of the site is open to the public, with approximately 11 km (7 miles) of year-round walking trails within the 425-hectare (1050-acre) site. The Fernald Preserve Visitors Center is open Wednesdays through Saturdays and site staff are available to accommodate program requests as needed.

The Visitors Center was originally requested by stakeholders involved in developing recommendations for the site's final land use. Stakeholders requested a "multi-use educational facility" that would recognize the site's history, serve as a source of site information, and recognize the contributions of energy workers during the Cold War. This building was converted from a warehouse built to support site cleanup and was ultimately awarded a Platinum rating by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The Visitors Center was designed to accommodate site history exhibits, free meeting space for nonprofit groups, and public interpretive programs. It was opened to the public in 2008, and today's ongoing visitor services are continually adapted to meet the needs of current stakeholders. Over time, the interpretive services have evolved to include more diverse onsite cultural and natural history public programs, events, and activities.

Today's community engagement efforts include public and private onsite programs and exhibits, public and private offsite programs and displays, meeting space, and regular open hours for the Visitors Center. This paper presents the various methods used to engage the greater Cincinnati community at the Fernald Preserve.

INTRODUCTION

The Fernald Preserve is located on the site of a former uranium-processing plant that underwent extensive environmental remediation followed by comprehensive ecological restoration. It is managed by the US Department of Energy (DOE) Office

of Legacy Management. Remedial activities and subsequent ecological restoration have converted the site from an industrial production facility to an undeveloped park. Today, much of the site is open to the public, with approximately 11 kilometers (km) (7 miles) of year-round walking trails within the 425-hectare (1050-acre) site. The Fernald Preserve Visitors Center is open Wednesdays through Saturdays and interpretive staff seek to engage the community through Visitors Center exhibits, meeting spaces, walking trails, wildlife observation, private programs for organized groups, and public programs. Engaging the public and creating connections between the community and the site is part of the site's mission to serve as a community asset, as determined by the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board in 2006.

DOE established the Fernald Citizens Task Force in 1993 as a citizen's advisory board for the Fernald facility. DOE, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency asked questions of the board including "what should the use of the future Fernald site be?" Ultimately the board recommended to DOE that the site should become an undeveloped park with an emphasis on wildlife. In 2006, the same advisory board concluded their 13 years of service and sent a final letter to the Secretary of Energy, recommending a multi-use education center serve as a cornerstone of the Fernald community's vision for the future [1]. To accomplish this, DOE included a warehouse as one of several buildings identified for beneficial post-closure reuse. The Operable Unit 3 Record of Decision was modified to allow the beneficial reuse of certain buildings and structures at the site [2].

FERNALD PRESERVE VISITORS CENTER

The vision for the future developed by the stakeholder groups was realized in 2008 with the public opening of the Fernald Preserve and the Fernald Preserve Visitors Center. Stakeholders and the University of Cincinnati's College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning worked collaboratively to design the Visitors Center. A warehouse originally built to support the site's cleanup was converted to become the Visitors Center. It was awarded a Platinum certification by the U.S. Green Building Council, which sponsors the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, a nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of environmentally friendly "green" buildings. The Visitors Center was designed to offer site history exhibits, free meeting space for nonprofit groups, and space for public interpretive programs. The Visitors Center also serves as a repository for site history and remediation information, including a resource room with a computer available to the public for document retrieval from the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) Administrative Record (Figure 1).

Policies and procedures were developed to receive, approve and track requests for use of the community meeting room and for various interpretive programs [3].



Figure 1. The Fernald Preserve Visitors Center

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Community engagement is a principal component of legacy management activities at the Fernald site. This continues DOE's commitment to transparency and stakeholder engagement established during site remediation. The Fernald *Comprehensive Legacy Management and Institutional Controls Plan* contains provisions for public involvement, including a Community Relations Plan [4].

Field Trips

At the time of the opening of the Fernald Preserve site and Visitors Center in 2008, Community Relations staff conducted a high percentage of programs offsite, including small group programs at local schools, at community meetings, and other venues. The focus has shifted to more onsite programs since the new facilities have become available and the public can access the site. Both in 2008 and now, most programs provided for school groups (primary, secondary, and college) include a component of biology, ecology or other science, in order to accommodate science curricula standards (Figure 2).



Figure 2. College environmental science students participate in an onsite program.

Public Programs

In addition to field trip programs, Community Relations staff initiated an ongoing variety of public programs. Events are typically tied to a seasonal theme and highlight natural cycles, such as bird migrations, spring wildflowers, fall foliage, lunar eclipses, and the like. A monthly promotional schedule of public events is distributed routinely to a database of email contacts, and the list is promoted at exhibits, public programs, and at the Visitors Center reception desk. The programs are also posted under current community activities on the local newspaper's website.

PROGRAM EVOLUTION

During 2014, a re-evaluation of onsite and offsite interpretive program offerings led to efforts to reach a wider audience with a greater range of interests. Slightly declining program attendance indicated efforts should be made to reach new audiences and boost public engagement at the site. These efforts included:

- Additional public activities in the cultural history arena, targeting schools, senior groups, and the general public (including retired workers). Public events were scheduled in honor of National Day of Remembrance for nuclear workers (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A group places the Fernald production era in historical context using Visitors Center exhibits.

- Some new programs cater to a mobility-limited audience. These include lecture-type programs with optional follow-up hike components, and self-guided, craft-focused activities. Plans have also been made to pave one of the walking trails during 2017 to enable greater access for all community members.
- Several seasonal, self-guided programs were developed and are now offered annually. These allow guests to attend at their leisure during a specified span of hours. As an example, a temporary self-guided monarch butterfly interpretive walk and milkweed seedling giveaway is made available to visitors during May to coincide with the season for planting home gardens (Figure 4).

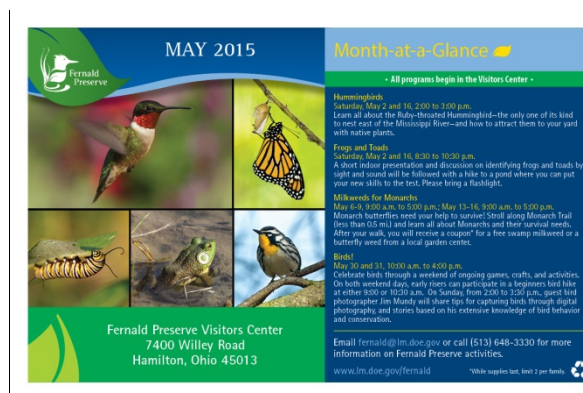


Figure 4. Promotional public program flyer from May 2015.

- Efforts to network with regional conservation, education, and history organizations have increased. New opportunities to set up exhibits promoting the site and its interpretive services have emerged from this effort (Figure 5). For example, the Cincinnati Public Schools invited Fernald Preserve staff to participate in a social studies teacher in-service day and local 4-H programs had Fernald Preserve staff set up displays at regional county fairs.



Figure 5. Fernald Preserve participates as an exhibitor at a regional natural areas management meeting.

- New programs have been designed specifically to meet the needs of the local Girl Scout organization; these are published in a brochure and distributed through appropriate channels. This effort promotes both interpretive program services and facility availability. These efforts resulted in increased services to Girl Scouts (Figure 6).
- Site literature and the website were updated to include descriptions of services and offerings, including programs and a reservation system for meeting space; contact and scheduling information is now included on most site literature. Visitors Center staff business cards are updated to make contact and scheduling more convenient for the public (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Fernald Preserve was identified as a 2015–2016 Premier Program Partner by Girl Scouts of Western Ohio.



Figure 7. Fernald Preserve Visitors Center staff business cards.

CONCLUSION

The stakeholder vision to create ongoing connections with the regional community is supported by evolving site interpretive programs and facility services. The site interpretive program strives to engage the public and serve as a community asset to all, including academia, community groups, individuals, and any interested parties.

REFERENCES

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