

INNOVATIONS CONFERENCE -- ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

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MANGES: My name is Ellen Manges. I'm a senior advisor. I work for the assistant administrator in charge of EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

So, when you deal with a very difficult, large, superfund site, you're dealing with one of our worst case sites. There are approximately 1,500 superfund sites in the country. We're actively managing around 300 right now. They're in various different phases. Some have been closed down and others are in the pipeline.

But, as you can imagine, they're very complex problems, dealing with a lot of environmental conditions, a lot of it underground and unseen. And there's a lot of science that goes on behind it, a lot of investigative scientific results that are really hard to communicate to folks.

So, when you're dealing with the communities around these -- these sites, you -- you can see that people get concerned. These folks who -- who are dealing and living in and around these -- these sites, we're -- we're talking about environmental and human health concerns. People want to know -- am I being affected by the pollutants and the contaminants that -- that are on this site?

There are tremendous social and economic issues associated with some of these sites. We spend, in some cases, hundreds of millions of dollars and spend, in some cases, decades trying to clean up some of these problems that are so big and complex.

So, around that site, sometimes you can get some social stigma that might affect property values, that might affect the quality of life in the area.

There's also this issue -- it's not just not in my backyard. It's already in their backyard. Our programs, especially our superfund program, are actually out there in these folks backyards right now, working with people and -- and having to explain to them what's happening and what's going on.

In many cases, we don't know what's going on when we first encounter them. We have to be able to explain this in an open and honest way to people.

One of the things we -- we have difficulty at at some of these sites, they're usually either very remote locations, like mountain -- or mining areas out in the -- the Midwest or in the -- in the -- the West or they might be urban areas where old industrial areas.

So, we have a lot of environmental justice-type situations or minority communities or disadvantaged communities that may have trouble engaging in a very scientific and complex process.

So, addressing these challenges, what do we do when we go in to -- to deal with these problems? We're having to go and -- and do some very complicated stuff ourselves, very complex investigations, groundwater investigations. We're doing a lot of sampling. There's a lot we have to do to understand what's going on there, but you can't just do this in a vacuum. You're -- you're right in folks' backyards, right? You're affecting their economies.

So, we really have done a good job in the superfund program, which has been doing it for 30 years now, of involving -- bringing them in as much as we can. Historically, that's holding a public meeting, putting a -- a notice in the paper and -- and releasing your very complex report in a repository at the local library.

We do a lot of going out and meeting with people around these sites and communicating with them, but, with this administration, in particular, our assistant administrator, they want to do more. I think I heard somebody over here say, "More than just make the information available, we need to get the information to people," because a lot of these communities don't have the resources, the knowledge, the education, to really participate in a complicated process.

So, our challenge is to get our people who are out there doing these investigations to really value the input and the -- the knowledge that these folks might bring that can participate in our process and get a meaningful process set up so that they can really participate in this complicated, very personal process.

But it's not about reaching consensus. There's no way we're going to get everybody to agree on what we're doing because it is so emotional. There's a lot of money at stake or in -- involved in cleaning up these sites.

Property values, local folks have different interests in how the property should be used at the end of the day. It's not about getting everybody on -- to agree with what you're doing, but getting everybody to participate and understand what you're doing is key.

So, to do that, we have to really come up with technology in new ways to make this very complex information accessible, transparent. We need -- when we do our decision-making at these sites, we have to do it in a way that people can trust and have access to and be able to see.

When -- you know how scientists are. We want to take the information, study it, look at it, understand it before we really talk about it publicly. Well, we've got to be more comfortable about bringing people into the process as we move forward.

And create opportunities so that all parts of the community can participate, not just the ones who have the interest and the wherewithal and the money and the knowledge to participate because that's who you -- who you'll see show up at these sites, but, also, the economically disadvantaged or environmental justice communities who may not even know you're having a meeting. You've got to go out and make sure they know you're having a meeting and make them understand why they should participate.

I'll focus really on some of the things we do. When we first have a superfund site go on -- go -- go live, we spend time and spend money right up front interviewing citizens, understanding them. We'll hire a contractor to go out and actually develop a community involvement plan.

We will provide help in setting up a community advisory group with -- with the local government, with all interested people who have a -- a stake in that -- that community or problem.

We also make technical assistance available to our communities. We provide grants. We have a special contract that we'll go and actually get them an advisor who's -- has the technical wherewithal to come in and really work with the community to understand what's going on.

You can see some of the other issues I've listed here. We try using Web 2.0 and cell phone technology, texting, to help them understand the information, but there are digital divide issues there.

Partnering with local institutions is another thing we're doing. Job training initiatives to really help a community train their people to be able to participate in the clean up, actually maybe be a hazardous waste cleanup worker.

And then another key thing we really try to work on is simplifying this complex information so they -- the local community understands it.

Across all of those lists of eight programs, we are really trying to get -- we have 16, specific actions we're trying to -- to really make our programs prioritize and -- and value again the need to go out and work with communities and -- and incorporate into our processes.

And you can see the list of things. I'll give you a website for some of the unique things we're doing here that you can look at later.

Our current focus is to make sure all of our programs are really go into a -- an environmental problem situation with a plan. Our superfund program does it. They're required by a statute to do a community involvement plan, but let's make sure that those plans are effective, that we're able to use it throughout the life of the projects that we're working on.

We want to improve our training to -- to our employees who work with communities and really get them the training and resources they need to work with communities to bring them into the process.

One thing that we're really excited about is creating this community engagement network where our -- we -- we probably anywhere from 500 to 1,000 people who really work closely with communities. We want to bring them together, somehow, in an online interactive way and -- and I've seen some of the work here that does, like Within3 and some other platforms that we're very interested in exploring to make people more aware, internally within EPA, what we're doing, but then also to make it available to the public, to practitioners, to other people who might be involved.

We have a report that we just put out on all of this and you can find it online at -- at this website ...

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