

ORDNANCE REMEDIATION AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:
KEEPING THE PUBLIC FROM UUBLOWING UP..

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In the Ordnance and Explosive Waste Remediation Program, a good public involvement program keeps people from "blowing up," literally and figuratively. First, it keeps the public informed about ordnance dangers. Second, it allows the public to get involved, keeping them from "blowing up" at the government and the ordnance contamination problem.

Huntsville Division, US Army Corps of Engineers, is the Corps' Center of Expertise for Ordnance and Explosive Waste Remediation. We work with Corps of Engineers districts across the nation at both active and formerly used Department of Defense sites. Dangerous unexploded ordnance exists on private property, sometimes in great quantities. Former ordnance plants, depots, arsenals and training areas, long abandoned by the Defense Department, now house industrial parks, wildlife preserves and subdivisions. In fact, of over 7,000 formerly used Defense sites, about 1,300 have the potential for ordnance contamination.

Why do we have a public involvement program at these formerly used Defense sites? We have three reasons:

- It's the law. The government has an obligation to keep the public informed about its ongoing environmental actions.

- It helps the public. People fear unexploded ordnance, harbor misconceptions about it, or don't understand safety precautions.

- It helps us. Adverse publicity or negative political attention can stop an ordnance removal action.

It's the Law

Like other environmental programs, ordnance removal falls under various laws: CERCLA, SARA, the NCP and DERP. All of these laws mandate public participation.

Environmental actions can be emergency in nature or non-time-critical. Laws mandate an intense public involvement program for the latter, but have fewer requirements for emergency actions. We have found that, for those actions which are time-critical, we can meet many of the requirements by carrying out three actions.

1. We set up and hold a public meeting. In the process of setting up the meeting, we coordinate with local officials, representatives of other government agencies, and special interest groups. We learn about the community and how to meet its special needs. And we invite the public to listen to us while we listen to them. Public meetings become a

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win-win situation for us and the community.

Public meetings come in a variety of styles. Some are planned for large groups in a metropolitan setting. Others are small "opportunity sessions," for local residents in remote or rural sites. Whatever the presentation style, all include:

- Briefings by project managers, ordnance removal contractors and other key individuals.
- Opportunity for public comments and questions.
- Offering of printed material, including fact sheets and maps.
- Informal discussion before and after the meeting. People who won't stand up during a public session will talk one-on-one after the meeting.

2. We set up an information repository. Usually established in a library near the work site, the repository contains the archives search report, fact sheets, work plans and other information.

3. We work with the media. Reporters provide the best way to reach the public. One story on television can reach more people instantly than we could otherwise reach in a month. We have found that media coverage does not alarm local residents. Quite the opposite, it often calms them. A story aired on television casts our workers as experts and makes the process seem routine to the viewers. Once aired or printed, the story about our work soon becomes "old news," which does not upset the community.

One key factor of our media relations program is our "media day." For each site, we set up a day where reporters can visit the site, interview the experts, and take photos or video.

Make no mistake, reporters will come as close to the action as they can, with or without your permission. We have found that media days meet their needs in a friendly fashion. We invite them to come and see what we're doing. Equally as important, it brings them on site at a time and place of our choosing. We tell them this is their one-and-only opportunity to come to the site and talk with the experts. It works.

Our basic premise in setting up media days is that we have nothing to hide. Our only concerns are that we provide accurate information and that we keep reporters safe. When the reporters arrive on site, they are given a safety briefing and are escorted by Public Affairs personnel. (This keeps them safe and reinforces our message that safety is our paramount concern.) They can watch any action, talk to any government or contractor personnel, ask any questions and photograph any operation.

Public Involvement Helps the Public

Added to our obligation to inform the public, we try to keep them safe from unexploded ordnance. Bombs, projectiles and grenades were made, after all, to kill people. We try to impart safety information when we publicize our projects.

The public demands information about our projects. They are sometimes alarmed about the danger to themselves, and -- especially -- their children. If a grenade in the woods is bad, an artillery round

near a school is a disaster waiting to happen. The possibility of chemical warfare agent is a nightmare.

Though the public generally understands that ordnance is dangerous, they have misconceptions about it and the military's role in removing it. Some of the misconceptions are:

- Old ordnance makes a nice souvenir.
- Ordnance can somehow hurt you even if you leave it alone.
- "Duds" didn't explode when they were fired, so they won't ever explode.
- Chemical warfare agent exists beneath the soil as a gas that, if released, can kill thousands.
- DERP actions come under the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Organizations which currently own former DoD sites are somehow financially or legally liable for the ordnance and its removal.
- DoD is performing a "cover up."
- The military is cooperating with local politicians for nefarious reasons.

Public Involvement Helps Us

The third reason we have public involvement is somewhat self-serving -- it helps US. It puts us on good terms with the local community and reporters and helps things go more smoothly. The good press helps us show others that we are doing a great job. And, most important, public involvement helps keep us working on the project. That's because, if the public gets upset, its elected leaders can shut a project down.

Although their nature is to ensure public safety, ordnance removal actions are not immune to criticism. Without public involvement, fear can feed on itself to panic the population. Some environmentalists can assume we plan to damage the environment. And 4 special interest groups can attack our projects to enhance their own agendas. If any of these groups become disgruntled and contact their elected officials, we will have trouble. Never forget that politicians work to keep their constituents happy and get reelected, even if it means that they demand changes to what you think is a "perfectly good" removal plan.

Conclusion

In ordnance removal projects, Huntsville Division works hard to keep the public informed. Through long experience, we have found that providing constant and accurate information to the public helps us to better serve the nation.