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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is committed to keeping the citizens of Nevada informed about activities that relate to the high-level nuclear waste repository program. This paper presents an overview of the Yucca Mountain Project's public interaction philosophy, objectives, activities and experiences during the two years since Congress directed the DOE to conduct site characterization activities only for the Yucca Mountain site.

The public interaction philosophy is founded on four fundamental principals: seek input from the public in designing programs; communicate at every opportunity with the public; always be accessible to the media; and identify and address controversial issues as they arise. Over the last two years the public interaction program has met these objectives and produced positive results.

INTRODUCTION

The DOE Yucca Mountain Project Office in Las Vegas directs the work to determine if Yucca Mountain is a suitable site for a high-level nuclear waste repository. The Project is committed to an open information policy. The public affairs plan defines this approach as a "policy intended to establish and maintain effective communications with the news media and the public and to create a climate of public understanding about the Yucca Mountain Project."

This paper presents an overview of the Project's public interactions, including the philosophy, objectives, activities and preliminary results.

BACKGROUND

Effective public information policies and plans must be built on an understanding of the public. In Nevada, it is essential to understand the State's past relationships with the Federal government and the people's perception of nuclear issues.

Eighty-seven percent of the land in Nevada is federally controlled. Nevadans are skeptical about the federal government in general and DOE in particular. This is the state that experienced above-ground nuclear weapons testing in the 1950's, and brought to the West the Sagebrush Rebellion to reclaim federally-controlled land. Nevada fought the Air Force's proposal to base MX missiles on desert racetracks. It had no speed limit on rural highways

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before the federally mandated 55 mph limit. Nevadans are a strong, tough, smart and independent bunch of people who love their state and want to protect it.

In 1989, according to a local newspaper's poll of its reporters, the state's opposition to a high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain ranked as the number two story of the year. Almost all of Nevada's politicians believe their opposition to the repository project has helped them get elected.

As you know, explaining anything connected with the word "nuclear" is not an easy task. When the public hears the word nuclear, it thinks of Hiroshima, Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. As Carl Gertz, manager of the Yucca Mountain Project says in many of his presentations, "What people misunderstand, they fear and what they fear they distrust."

PUBLIC INFORMATION PHILOSOPHY

The Yucca Mountain Project philosophy on public information is founded on four fundamental principals: seek input from the public in designing the program; communicate at every opportunity with the public; always be accessible to the media; and identify and address controversial issues as they arise.

Public Input

For the past year and a half, the Office of Institutional and External Affairs has contacted a number of citizens in various parts of Nevada to help plan semi-annual Project Update Meetings. These are regular people, some of whom are connected with the Project either officially or unofficially, and some of whom have no connection other than as interested Nevadans. These contacts are not a scientific poll, but do represent people from throughout the state and a variety of backgrounds. The results have been interesting. It is evident that people aren't attuned to the Project's timeline and don't have a feel for how the big pieces fit together. They're concerned about social, economic and transportation issues insofar as these issues might affect their lives. They are not particularly concerned about documents, but want to know more about what they have seen in the paper or heard on TV. Public interest can vary widely depending primarily on where people live, although respondents universally say they're pleased that DOE took the time to ask. Some of the same people are contacted again six months later, and in the majority of the cases, it is found that they really want to express their opinions.

Communicate at Every Opportunity

The more communication the better. The Project has accepted every invitation it has received to make presentations and discuss the Project with the public. In the last year, the Project has made more than 60 presentations in the State of Nevada and had exhibits at over 20 fairs and shopping malls. A major force in the outreach program is Project Manager Carl Gertz. If you've met Carl, you know that Carl has the traits necessary to represent a controversial program to the public. He listens to people, he sympathizes with them and he is credible. Over the past two years, a small cadre of scientists and non-scientists has been developed to make presentations and staff exhibits on the Project. These are people who personally feel it is important to communicate to the public about this Project.

This year additional speakers have been recruited and the Project is becoming more proactive in identifying public speaking opportunities.

Media Accessibility

Just recently, a member of the project staff spent a few hours with a new reporter from the largest television station in Las Vegas providing background information on the Project and a tour of the Project facilities. This media personality said the individual she replaced told her how the DOE people would always return phone calls, go on camera anytime, and spend time explaining the issues.

Compliments such as this are indicative of the Project's media accessibility policy. The local and regional media know the Project's phone number and that they will always receive a response to their questions. Only about once every two or three months does a day go by when a story does not appear in the local media about the Project. Also, in coordination with DOE/Office of Civilian and Radioactive Waste Management, the Project responds to national and international media requests. Last year the Project was reviewed closely by representatives from the British Broadcasting System (BBC), for the production of an hour-long documentary on Yucca Mountain. In addition, members of the media are encouraged to visit Yucca Mountain. Tours are coordinated through DOE/Nevada Operations Office/Office of External Affairs (DOE/NVO/OEA).

Address Controversial Issues

Once in touch with the media, what are the subjects of interest to the public? Controversial issues must be identified, evaluated, and addressed immediately. The Project does not have a perfect batting average in identifying exactly what is going to become an issue with the state or the media, but in general the Project has been successful in this area. The DOE can't afford to take a great deal of time to decide how to handle an issue that is controversial. The types of past issues addressed include the discovery by Project scientists of evidence of volcanic activity in the vicinity of Yucca Mountain that was more recent than originally thought; the release of the Szymanski report and subsequent reports which discussed alternative conceptual models at Yucca Mountain; and the issuance of quality assurance stop work orders to some Project participants. In all these cases, the Project took the initiative to hold a press conference to release the information as soon as possible to local media and answer all other media inquiries expeditiously.

OBJECTIVES

Establishing realistic objectives is extremely important in any public information program. As stated before, the Project is committed to an open information policy. A primary objective of the Project is to communicate a few basic facts about the program to the public:

- 1) Yucca Mountain is not the site for a repository, only the site to be studied to determine if it is suitable;
- 2) If Yucca Mountain is not a safe place for a repository, a repository will

not be built there;

- 3) The program has a great deal of technical oversight: the State of Nevada, local governments, Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board, U.S. General Accounting Office and the nuclear utilities, all play a role in reviewing and commenting on Project activities.

A second major objective is to lay the groundwork for public confidence in the repository program. The public information activities are planned and conducted with these objectives in mind.

PUBLIC INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

There are a number of ways that the Project attempts to keep the public informed about Yucca Mountain. The types of activities conducted are not new; rather, they are very basic to a public information program. What makes the program more interesting and challenging is the politically sensitive environment associated with the Project. Everything the Project does is scrutinized and has the potential to become an issue of public debate.

One of the most successful public information events are the semiannual Project Update Meetings. The meetings begin with a general introduction including a discussion of current events, which is followed by topical presentations. Emphasis is focused on putting information in terms that can easily be understood by the general public. That means using common terms, simple graphics, pictures and uncluttered, non-bureaucratic slides. The presentations focus on subjects that people have indicated they wanted to hear about through citizen surveys. The transportation of high-level radioactive waste is always an issue, and the social and economic effects are particularly important to those living near Yucca Mountain. One portion of the last meeting was devoted to volcanism at and near Yucca Mountain because of public interest in the subject. At the update meetings topical displays and exhibits are scattered around the meeting room with technical staff standing by to talk to the public and discuss issues with them. At each of these meetings, (the fourth in the series is scheduled for March 1990), state and local governments are invited to participate. State representatives did share the agenda with DOE at the very first meeting, but after that have declined to participate contending it is a DOE meeting and the people should be given the opportunity to speak directly with DOE. Interestingly enough, most people polled after the first meeting preferred having "both sides" present.

Other public interaction activities include responding to invitations to speak to community groups, business and civic groups and local government representatives. One of the more memorable invitations to speak during the past year was from a church study group that met after Sunday services. When services were over, the congregation just turned around and Carl Gertz proceeded to talk from the back of the church projecting viewgraphs on a side wall.

A major public information accomplishment for the Project during the past year was the opening of a Yucca Mountain Information Office in Clark County. It joined an information office in Beatty, near the site, that has been in operation for the last two years. In both offices, the public is provided with information material, technical Project documents, exhibits and audiovisuals.

The offices, staffed seven days a week, serve as a point of contact where people can get answers to questions, seek employment postings, and hold information meetings. The Clark County office has only been open a short time, but already we have had several school groups and scout troops tour the facility.

The Project also offers periodic public tours to Yucca Mountain and the NTS. These tours are scheduled through the DOE/NVO/OEA. The general NTS tour includes a discussion of the waste-management program and distribution of Project information. A state-of-the-art facility near Yucca Mountain to house rock core and environmental samples is a popular stop on the tour. In addition to tours, the Project provides technical documents and public information materials to libraries throughout the state, and to people on the Project mailing list. Formal public hearings are held as required on program milestone documents, and the Project is working to broaden the involvement of the University of Nevada system in various Project-sponsored research activities.

RESULTS

The comments received from the public indicate Nevadans have an "open mind" about the repository issue and desire more factual information.

In general:

- o The Project Update Meetings are well received. There are usually a few demonstrators at the meetings in Las Vegas and Reno. When the meetings start the demonstrators usually come in and listen. They seem to enjoy engaging Project personnel in conversation during and after presentations.
- o When talking to people during presentations and at fairs and shopping malls, most people are not opposed to the Project.
- o A number of polls have been conducted by the State of Nevada and the U.S. Council for Energy Awareness on behalf of the nuclear utility industry. The findings can be debated, but it appears that even though most people would rather not have a repository in Southern Nevada, they are willing to listen and discuss the issues of concern.

A better approach to measuring the effectiveness of the public interaction program is needed. This will be a major goal of the program in the coming year.

In conclusion, the success of public information activities can be difficult to measure, but there are indications of progress. Talking to the residents of Pahrump while planning a public meeting, or discussing earthquakes with a senior citizen as part of a presentation is vitally important. Public understanding and acceptance of a project as controversial as Yucca Mountain does not occur overnight. But improving public understanding is a goal of the Yucca Mountain Project and one that is critical to its success.