UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

SEP 28 1990

OFFICE OF
SOLID WASTE AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

OSWER Directive #9230.0-17

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Using State and Local Officials to Assist in Community Relations (Superfund Management Review: Recommendation #43.K,L)

FROM: Henry L. Longest II, Director
Office of Emergency and Remedial Response

TO: Director, Waste Management Division
Regions I, IV, V, VII, VIII
Director, Emergency and Remedial Response Division
Region II
Director, Hazardous Waste Management Division
Region III, VI, IX
Director, Hazardous Waste Division
Region X

Community Relations Coordinators, Regions I - X

Purpose: To increase communication with the public by involving State and local officials.

Background: The Superfund Management Review (SMR) found that EPA's communication with citizens near Superfund sites is not as frequent as site managers and community relations staff believe necessary due to limited resources and the difficulties encountered in accessing remote sites. The SMR suggested that, as a "way of coping with resource and distance problems," EPA use State and local officials to augment our own efforts in community relations. The SMR also pointed out, however, that it may not be appropriate to use State and local officials where we and they disagree about the course of action. According to the SMR, "such disagreements make it both difficult and inappropriate for a State or local official to represent EPA." (Superfund Management Review, p. 5-10)

Our experience tells us that, under certain circumstances, State and local officials can be effective contributors to community relations activities. Citizens often feel more

comfortable communicating with an official who is a member of their community, and who may have first-hand knowledge about a site. Many Regions already use State and local officials, and, in some Regions, the State actually has the lead for community relations.

Objective: To discuss specific methods for using State and local officials to increase Superfund's communication with the public.

Implementation: The following recommendations describe the use of State and local officials to serve as liaisons, to provide and maintain information, and to assist in public meetings.

1) Use State and local officials as a liaison between the public and EPA. Because State and local officials often are very well-informed about a site, its history, and the affected community, they can serve as effective liaisons between the public and EPA, channeling information and communications between the interested parties quickly and aptly. For example, Regions can designate an official as a point of contact. The official could then field inquiries from the public and relay them to the appropriate person in the Region or link a Regional staff member with concerned citizens or community leaders. Furthermore, as the local officials become familiar with both the Superfund process in general and cleanup activities at the site, they will be able to handle more of the routine questions themselves, thereby helping EPA, as well as the public.

Using local officials as a liaison also helps increase the frequency of communication with the community, particularly when a site is far away from the Regional office. In some cases, this may be the best or only way to ensure adequate communication. Because local officials will ordinarily live nearer the site than do Regional staff, the community has easier and more frequent access to them than to EPA staff. However, Regional staff must also visit the site and meet with the community on a regular basis.

While using State or local officials as a liaison, there are several points to consider before making that decision. First, local officials frequently are not well-versed in Superfund community relations. Local officials can be effective in this role only where Regions educate them about the Superfund process and, of course, keep them fully informed about site progress.

Also, State and local officials assisting with community relations must still perform the role to which they were appointed or elected. That role may require them to be involved at the site in an official capacity in which they might have to "wear two hats." This makes it especially important to define the officials' roles when the community relations plan is being drafted, or in the case of State officials, when the Community Relations Coordinator first assesses the State's capability for taking the lead for community relations.

Finally, even where State and local officials are assisting EPA, the Region needs to retain control over the release of site information. Our experience indicates that it is appropriate to give State and local officials a significant but clearly supporting role in community relations activities. This assistance may not be appropriate in every Region, and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Thus, Regions should evaluate not only the relationship between EPA and such officials, but also the relationship between the officials and the community, before seeking their assistance. Furthermore, although the involvement of State and local officials can increase communication with the public, it cannot and should not be a substitute for EPA's direct involvement with the community.

2) Use State and local officials to maintain and provide information. As noted earlier, Regional offices are often located far away from a site. Some Regions find it helpful to use State, and more often local officials, to help establish and maintain information repositories near the site. Because local officials frequently have first-hand knowledge of the site, they can help determine convenient places for the repository. Where State or local officials are helping in this way, it is especially important that Regions provide the officials with documents for the repository as soon as they are available.

Some States have developed what have proven to be effective communications tools and systems of their own for providing information to the public. Regions often copy or borrow these aids, such as mailing lists, and save time by not duplicating the effort that went into creating them. Regions should learn what communications tools and systems are available through their States as early in the community relations process as possible.

State and local officials' knowledge of and experience with a site and its history, and especially their understanding of the community, provide a wealth of information for the Regions. EPA

can utilize State and local officials' knowledge and experience to identify people to interview for the community relations plan, to gather background information for fact sheets, and to review press releases and other documents. Capitalizing on this first-hand source of information allows Regions to begin the community relations process faster and helps target the effort for the particular community. Because of their ties to a community and their history with a particular site, State and local officials can be an extremely valuable group of effective communicators of site information. These officials represent a resource whose potential to contribute should not be underestimated.

3) Use State and local officials to assist in public meetings. Having State or local officials introduce EPA Regional staff or otherwise participate in a public meeting helps visibly demonstrate a mutually supportive working relationship among the Region, State and local officials, and the community. Both the appearance of cooperation and the underlying relationship require, of course, that Regions maintain frequent contact with State and local officials to keep them informed of site progress and the schedule for public meetings.

Regions also should include State and local officials in dry runs of the meeting to confirm their role at the meeting. If the officials' role includes speaking, the dry run will provide a final opportunity to understand their view before it is aired to the public. These dry runs may also help to resolve issues prior to a public meeting where there are known differences of opinion between the State or local official and EPA.

Some Regions also use community organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, to assist in public meetings. Members of the organization can provide introductions and even moderate the meeting. Although not State or local "officials," organizations like these are viewed as impartial parties, and consequently make excellent third-party moderators. Using such organizations also demonstrates to the community the Region's willingness to include as many members of the community as possible in the community relations process.

Conclusion: Using State and local officials to assist Regions in community relations activities can be an effective way to increase the frequency and consistency of community relations at Superfund sites. In order for it to be effective, Regions must solicit assistance from the officials early in the community

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relations effort; ensure that the officials are educated about how Superfund works; and maintain an avenue of communications with the officials to keep all parties well-informed. State and local officials will often have great credibility with citizens and their cooperation and participation can help greatly to build public confidence around Superfund cleanup activities.

For further information regarding the involvement of State and local officials in community relations, please contact Melissa Shapiro of my staff at FTS 398-8340 / (703) 308-8340 or Jeff Langholz at FTS 398-8341 / (703) 308-8341.