

New Model for Public Participation at Sandia National Laboratories: What Comes After Environmental Restoration?

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RECEIVED
FEB 24 2000
S-1

ABSTRACT

As the Sandia National Laboratories' Environmental Restoration (ER) project moves toward closure, the project's experiences -- including a number of successes in the public participation arena -- suggest it is time for a new, more interactive model for future government-citizen involvement. This model would strive to improve the quality of public interaction with the Department of Energy (DOE) and Sandia, by using subject-specific working groups and aiming for long-term trustful relationships with the community. It would make use of interactive techniques, fewer formal public forums, and a variety of polling and communication technologies to improve information gathering and exchange.

INTRODUCTION

Because Sandia is among the first of the national laboratories to reach the closure phase in its Environmental Restoration (ER) project, our proposed combination of proven interactive techniques in a new broader public participation effort is, by definition, an exploratory process. Our proposal is to work with interested citizens in this evolution. Following an early October planning session, the Department of Energy (DOE)/Sandia Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) is now working to help identify the shape of future public participation at the Labs. Other labs and institutions approaching ER closure may be interested in the outcome of this unified approach.

To explain our vision of environmental public participation in the future at the Labs, we begin with some background on where Sandia's program has come from and where it is now. Clearly, some of the efforts during the past five years of public participation activities have succeeded. Others have failed. From all of this, we hope to build a stronger program for the future.

OUR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PAST

Sandia, DOE, and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigators identified more than 200 environmental sites at the Labs' New Mexico site as the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s. This investigative work brought significant media coverage in the Albuquerque area and open concern from some stakeholders, including activist groups, mainline environmental organizations, neighborhoods, and local government. A forest fire in 1989 alarmed neighbors to the east of Kirtland Air Force

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Base, where Sandia is a key tenant. Reports indicating some 61,000 DOE sites had been identified nationally further worried local groups, who expressed fears that Sandia would not get the funding it needed for its cleanup projects.

Through this time, the Labs' small public relations staff was handling most public participation activities. This staff, trained to interface with news media and to follow a strategy of persuading audiences, not listening to them, did its best to allay concerns. But as often happens in the early days of any endeavor, the worst was yet to come. As the Sandia ER staff grew and went to work assessing the sites, groundwater contamination was discovered at several locations. Because (1) Albuquerque is very near the Sandia sites and because (2) groundwater is the main source of drinking water in this high desert city, this aquifer contamination was and is a major concern.

As Sandia and DOE began working locally to determine what kind of public participation activities could be used in association with the ER program, others were doing similar planning at the national level. By the mid-1990s, an executive order and DOE policy on environmental justice were in place. The DOE's Office of Environmental Management also unveiled its charter for a nationwide network of Site Specific Advisory Boards (SSABs) to give advice on issues brought about by the massive cleanup effort. Endorsed by both EPA and the Keystone dialog, the SSAB concept emerged as a DOE preference. The concept has proven to be a valuable experiment in public participation that has worked with varying degrees of success around the country.

OUR MIXED EXPERIENCE

Sandia's own experience has also been mixed. A report to DOE by Kristi Branch and Judith Bradbury (1) cited the role of leadership as a key ingredient in success of local SSABs. Although Sandia wasn't included in the report, this observation rings true with the Sandia board as well. With strong leadership in its early stages, the Sandia SSAB quickly engaged in study of several key issues. These included:

- **land use.** Board members approved recommendations for land use across the Air Force base where Sandia resides. They actively sought stakeholders outside the board to be involved in these discussions to widen their understanding of the issues.
- **strategy to create an on-site storage, treatment, and permanent containment facility for ER-generated wastes.** Board members worked with an existing "working group" in the community. After extensive discussion in a subgroup and before the full board, the Sandia SSAB backed the working group's recommendation with a letter of support to the EPA and other regulators.

At the end of its first year, the Sandia board was being hailed in Washington and elsewhere as a success story for the SSAB concept. Meanwhile, a neighboring DOE advisory board in Northern New Mexico was on the verge of collapse. Those of us in the Sandia ER project were encouraged by our successes. But we shouldn't have been.

Problems seen with other boards soon came to roost at Sandia as well. Here are some examples:

- A push by some members to widen the scope of discussions to include non-ER activities, especially the debate around the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico. Many SSABs found themselves dealing with pressures to broaden the environmental debate. At Sandia, this caused a loss of focus among some members.
- Loss of interest among several groups represented on the board. Among these were a key activist organization, the Sierra Club, and a representative from Albuquerque's City Council. While populated with more female faces and a more culturally diverse membership than most of the DOE's boards, the Sandia SSAB now rightly came in for criticism at DOE headquarters for failing to accurately reflect the diverse New Mexico community. That criticism continues to the present.
- Ineffective administrative support for the board. In the case of the Sandia board, this led to the further loss of membership and diversity. Because no clear-cut mechanisms for board support were spelled out, a variety of approaches were used around the DOE complex. At Sandia, administrative support issues became a rallying point for those interested in attaining "independence" for the group. In fact, members actually incorporated with the idea they might someday seek funding beyond the DOE for their activities. Bickering and in-fighting over these non-environmental issues drastically reduced board membership and credibility during the group's middle years.

After a productive initial period, disagreement about administrative issues, loss of membership, and disagreements as to scope brought progress on environmental advice nearly to a standstill for the Sandia board.

OUR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PRESENT

In 1999 with the help of a new administrating group, a professional administrator, and a meeting facilitator, the board moved beyond bickering over non-ER issues and became a more cohesive group. Members began reaching out to the community again, with some limited success, to widen membership. Several new members focused on key issues that they hope to resolve before the board ceases activities in September.

In October, the DOE's area manager for Sandia, Michael J. Zamorski, announced that the board would not be funded in FY '01 in its present form. He asked members to advise DOE on a public participation approach that would work in the stewardship years that will follow the conclusion of the Labs' ER program.

Even more recently, DOE and Sandia announced an ambitious plan to remove some 60 ER sites from the Labs' Resource Recovery and Conservation Act (RCRA)

permit. With only a few exceptions, this will complete ER work at the Labs. Consensus advice on any or all of these sites, along with a wrap-up analysis of the SSAB experiences for the community, would make for a remarkable final year. The board – much smaller (15 members) than the original 31 members – is approaching the task with a positive attitude and a much more efficient organization.

Part of the board's plan for the coming months is the establishment of a Stewardship working group – a group that will reach beyond SSAB membership to other stakeholders who may want to be involved in watching the Labs' environmental performance for the long haul. It is possible that this group, in association with other task groups formed or forming on the board, will become part of the future configuration of public participation efforts at the Labs.

REACHING BEYOND COMPLIANCE

Why is it that we practice this sometimes black art of public participation? Most of us can answer simply that we are complying with some appropriate regulation or policy. In Sandia's case, we are following the policy of DOE's Environmental Management office that we initiate an SSAB and other appropriate strategies to involve the interested public.

An approach, embracing some of the best practices of U.S. and multinational corporations, would suggest that we do public participation because it is our responsibility (2). As good citizens it is our corporate responsibility to address not only legal and regulatory requirements, but to reach beyond compliance. In some of our most excellent companies and institutions, leaders reach beyond compliance by anticipating public concerns, by preparing to address those concerns before it actually becomes necessary, and by proactively addressing any social impacts caused by their companies.

At Sandia, we embrace the simple, but valid, "policy" that we must do public participation. However, we believe our efforts have also moved beyond this. Several other answers to the "why" question occur to us. Among these is the concept that, in many case histories, public participation has actually resulted in an informed citizenry willing to advocate for a company or institution. Another good reason: technical insight. There are documented cases – at our Labs and elsewhere – where citizen suggestions have led to beneficial alternative solutions, not originally considered by technical staff. From this has grown a sense of trust and mutual respect that we believe never would have existed in the old paradigm of decide, announce, and defend.

THE PRACTITIONERS' TOOLS

To achieve this best practices approach, how does an organization anticipate public concern, prepare in advance and proactively address the concerns? Many public participation professionals develop unique processes for gathering information from their

target communities, disseminating this information and arranging for interactive exchanges between the affected stakeholders and the company or institution.

What we have done at Sandia in the past is to use a limited number of these information gathering, dissemination and exchange tools. This has been largely a function of our emphasis on the SSAB to supply a stakeholder audience. The problems with this approach are numerous. Here is a brief synopsis of some of the issues:

- A loss of diversity on the SSAB weakens the power of consensus decision-making.
- Consistent use of SSAB as a sounding board for environmental issues means some of the most "appropriate" stakeholders may not participate in a given recommendation.
- Board members themselves easily become "burned out," wrestling with non-environmental issues, or issues for which there are more directly impacted stakeholders.

Table I reviews some of the tools and techniques presently used at Sandia and briefly discusses advantages and disadvantages of their use.

Table I: Current Public Participation Tools in Use at Sandia National Laboratories

Tool	Advantages	Disadvantages
Site Specific Advisory Board	Independent forums, SSAB successes have validity in the community. Newsletters provide "independent" information to the community. Often board recommendations help in regulatory disputes	Costly. Many boards meet with limited success in reaching consensus and reaching out to other stakeholders. Board members often spend too much time on issues disconnected from the environment.
National Workshops	Typically paid for by DOE Headquarters, these forums bring key players together from across the complex on specific issues.	They are often unfocused and many are irrelevant to local SSAB issues. In some cases, other forums already exist.
Key Contacts	Gathering information from trusted sources in the community can be valuable in identifying potential problems.	Use of key contacts is a limited scope process for gathering community information. Tends to emphasize the input of a few stakeholders.
NEPA Process	Good intent of addressing the environment before major program changes.	NEPA has become disconnected from environmental issues, institutionalized by agencies and their contractors and is

		losing public participation. Actual information exchanges have been formalized.
Local/Regional Public Meetings	These are good information providers to interested audiences.	Too often they become mediated forums for criticism of government. Often they attract citizens with issues widely different from those to be discussed.
Sandia's Annual Site Environmental Report	A compendium of monitoring and environmental data.	Too technical for most readers, the information tends to be focused narrowly on environmental monitoring.
Mailing list	A needed information dissemination tool.	Most mailing list information tends to be too legalistic and elicits little reader response.

An examination of the Table I tools shows that there is a current emphasis on information exchange at the Labs but not on information gathering or dissemination. Although this is not a bad thing, public participation would be even better if the selection of exchange tools had been more successful.

The key information gathering tools seem to be the SSAB, information from key contacts, and NEPA comments. Tools available for information exchange – SSABs, National Workshops, NEPA, and Local Public Meetings have tended to be much too formalized and stilted to be successful. Of these approaches, SSABs have probably been the most successful forums for exchange. Finally, information dissemination has been left largely to an overly technical annual environmental report and mailings. While a “summary” version of the technical report has been developed, its readership has been very limited. And Sandia’s mailings have been too often legal documents announcing proposed environmental actions at the lab that pose significant challenges for the lay reader to understand.

OUR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FUTURE

The unified approach we are now examining for the future will keep some of the tools of the past and widen the number of techniques applied to public participation. Among the new tools, we are studying are: the development of an internal environmental advisory council, the use of public opinion polling, new printed and web communications, the wider use of “open house” style meetings to foster one-on-one discussion, and subject specific and time-limited working groups.

A Labs policy on public participation – something missing from our early ventures into this arena – is an important next step. Currently, the Labs' community involvement and issues management group (CIIM) is working on a plan to better integrate Sandia management into public participation activities. This plan calls for an internal environmental council or group to help prioritize issues and identify stakeholders prior to community outreach efforts. Similar councils are proposed for business activities, such as purchasing and construction, and for educational activities. Such councils would play a key part in the execution of a corporate policy on public participation.

This approach would help eliminate public confusion and frustration over DOE divisions for funding. As public participation practitioners, it is our belief that such divisions should be transparent to the public, not a factor for obfuscation. "This advisory group is not funded to address that type of issue," is not a good answer in our estimation. "We know exactly who you need to talk to about this," is much better.

Formal Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) and traditional public meetings would be replaced with issue specific, limited-term working groups, an "open house" concept of moving meetings into the community to make them more interactive and less formal, and other public participation techniques. Making use of new tools in an integrated approach will enable the labs to broaden the definition of "environmental public participation" to activities beyond the limited scope of ER.

As the ER program has matured, the opportunities for SSAB advice have begun to narrow. At the same time, operational activities and actions related to the NEPA process could and should be included in this new paradigm. Such an approach would serve Sandia as closure activities conclude and long-term stewardship efforts begin. New publications, including possibly a quarterly environmental newsletter and an annual environmental report will help address a broader concept of "environment" than ER alone.

By working with the Sandia National Laboratories SSAB, the DOE and Sandia would like to develop a plan that would begin the transition to a more effective model. The transition process has begun during this fiscal year with efforts to move from a formal, full-fledged board to less formal, activity-bounded working groups.

One possible outcome is that some of the Task Groups, operating under the current SSAB structure, will continue in the new format. DOE and Sandia have suggested that the current task groups become more clearly defined and that the SSAB help to determine how those with a continuing role would carry on after the dissolution of the SSAB. One Task Group of interest is a Stewardship Task Group, now in its formative stages.

Working groups would meet on an as-necessary basis, but could meet quarterly to receive updates from DOE and Sandia and provide public input on any remaining closure or related activities. As with the SSAB meetings, these quarterly meetings could be advertised in the Federal Register and local media, would be open to the general public and would continue to be held in impacted communities. In addition, announcements of upcoming meetings would be sent to Sandia's extensive stakeholder mailing list with more than 600 community members identified.

This would widen the audience and allow for more diverse representation in the working groups. Outreach to affected communities would continue as well as attempts to ensure that minorities are encouraged to participate. This method also allows for those who in the past have been wary of the formality of the SSAB to become involved. This less formal structure would be more open to involvement from the general public as it would not require application for membership, and would be open to all those who are interested, including current and former SSAB members.

Table II looks at some of the new tools in the proposed unified approach and discusses advantages and disadvantages of their use.

Table II: Proposed Public Participation Tools for Use at Sandia National Laboratories

Tool	Advantages	Disadvantages
External Advisory Council	Independent forum that would meet quarterly with top Laboratories leadership. More time-efficient for both government and volunteers.	Members can be frustrated if their voices are not heard in this setting, leading to charges of "limited access."
Polling, focus groups	While Sandia has some scientific polling instruments in place, wider use could target key environmental issues.	These are more costly information gathering techniques and would need to be factored into the budget.
Quarterly Labs Newsletter, Annual Environmental Report	Ability to use existing internal expertise in communications. Provides broader environmental information to key stakeholders. Can be made responsive with return cards, hotlines, other devices.	More Labs' effort would be needed to disseminate relevant, understandable information, given the loss of the SSAB newsletters and meetings.
Issue-Specific Working Groups	Limited tenure, better motivation and focus, less formal and less costly. This tool tends to result in better	Sandia must provide support infrastructure and factor in budget costs accordingly.

	staff-citizen interactions.	
Local/Regional Interactive Public Meetings	A "non-combative" environment for discussion of public concerns and addressing questions furthers goal of information exchange.	Effort to properly locate these sessions and training for staff members will require increased effort.

CONCLUSIONS

To synthesize our new approach, Table III compares the current and proposed future models for public participation. The multiple technique model of the future is a draft proposal and still has areas that need to be developed more fully. With the help of the SSAB and the cooperation of DOE and Sandia, we hope to make this transition go as smoothly as possible.

Table III: Comparison of Public Participation Models at Sandia National Laboratories

Current Model	Proposed Future Model
Information Gathering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Contacts • SSAB 	Information Gathering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Contacts • Focus Groups • Surveys • Interactive Mailings
Information Dissemination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Web (limited) • Mailing List • Media • Tours (limited) • SSAB 	Information Dissemination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Web • Mailing List • Media Relations • Tours/Exhibits • Interactive Meetings • Quarterly Newsletters • Annual Report
Information Exchange <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSAB • Working Groups • Public Hearings 	Information Exchange <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject-Specific Working Groups • Advisory Panel • Informal Meetings • Public Hearings
Community Involvement Organization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department Level group 	Community Involvement Organization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labs-integrated group to identify and prioritize issues

Costs associated with this new method should be at or below the current funding levels. There would continue to be costs for meeting spaces, facilitators, training, mailings and other outreach activities. New costs for polling activities and publications should also be factored in. As funding allows, community members could still identify individuals to participate in DOE-sponsored national environmental workshops on applicable topics.

Support in the form of a corporate-level policy will help widen the scope of Public Participation and provide a more satisfying experience for citizens who are or may become involved.

Finally, we believe the use of a broader spectrum of techniques will result in better use of stakeholder resources, responses generated from appropriate stakeholders to a given issue and improved decisions for the Laboratories and the community.

Sandia is a multiprogram laboratory operated by Sandia Corporation, a Lockheed Martin Company, for the United States Department of Energy under contract DE-AC04-94AL85000.

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- (1) An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Local Site Specific Advisory Boards for U.S. Department of Energy Environmental Restoration Programs, February 1999, prepared for DOE by Judith Bradbury and Kristi Branch, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.
- (2) *Criteria for Performance Excellence - 2000*, Baldrige National Quality Program, National Institute of Standards & Technology, page 11.