ORDNANCE REMOVAL AND THE PUBLIC: PUBLIC AFFAIRS AT FORMERLY USED DEFENSE SITES

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People don't like bombs in their backyards.

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. Huntsville Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is tasked to remove ordnance and explosive waste from formerly used Defense sites as part of the Defense Environmental Restoration Program.

During ordnance removal operations, we keep the public informed. We do this for three reasons:

-- the government has an obligation to keep the public informed about its ongoing missions;

-- people fear unexploded ordnance; harbor misconceptions about it; or don't understand safety precautions;

-- adverse publicity or negative political attention can stop an ordnance removal effort.

The Right to Know

Although it's a trite expression and often misused, the public DOES have a "right to know." And the Defense Department is obligated to provide information with minimum delay. A document known as "Department of Defense Information Principles," signed by the Secretary of Defense in 1983, states: "It is the policy of the Department of Defense to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress and members representing the press, radio and television may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy.... Information will be made fully and readily available...."

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.

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Bombs Are Scary

Because they have a right to know, the public demands information about our projects. They are 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 these 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;

-- the military never returned uncleared land to the public domain;

-- 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.

The Show Must Go On

The third reason we keep the public informed is important to us. The public, through its elected leaders, can shut a project down. Although their nature is to ensure public safety, ordnance removal actions are not immune to criticism. Fear feeds on itself to panic the population. Some environmentalists perceive that we intend to damage the environment. Special interest groups attack our projects to enhance their own agendas. And politicians work to keep their constituents happy, even if it means demanding changes to a "perfectly good" removal plan.

Informing the Public

Like other environmental programs, ordnance removal falls under various laws -- CERCLA, SARA, NCP and DERP. All make provision for public participation. Huntsville Division keeps the public informed by holding public meetings, interacting with local officials and providing information to the media.

Combat Community Relations

Because of unexploded ordnance's danger to the public, removal actions often are quickly planned and quickly executed. At Huntsville Division, we've developed a process we like to call "Combat Community Relations." This involves gearing up rapidly to hold a public meeting the day before a project starts. When we have a more-detailed project with longer lead time, we may have several public meetings before we begin work.

Public meetings come in a variety of styles. Some are planned for large groups in a metropolitan setting. Others are small "public opportunities" for local residents at remote 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.

The Division also establishes a local repository for information about the project. This is usually at a local library or other accessible site.

The Mayor Wants to Know

Local officials represent the people who elected them. As such, they have a desire to know about the project. In fact, they have a right to know about the project. We have found that, if we brief officials early and keep them informed, they tend to support our efforts. They also have been a great help in providing information about the local community and even in getting equipment or facilities.

Conversely, officials who were not contacted before we made public announcement tended to resent our neglect. They asked many pointed and embarrassing questions and were reluctant to support the program.

In our ordnance removal projects, we try to determine the local political structure and contact the appropriate leaders. Sometimes that contact is through a phone call or personal visit. At the very least, we try to send them a news release before we provide it to the media. We invite them to our public meetings and listen when they talk.

Reporters Can Help ... Really

Those connected with the military often view the press as the enemy. Well, some of them are. But normally not the reporters we work with. That's because our projects are generally at remote sites

where we work with local reporters. National reporters can invade a city, dig for dirt and alienate sources. A local reporter has to live in the town and work with sources long after the story has been written. They're generally fair and open minded. This doesn't mean a local reporter won't write a negative story -- it means he or she generally won't attack you unless you deserve it.

More important, reporters provide the best way to reach the public. One story can reach more people instantly than we could reach in a month. We have found that media coverage usually 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 more routine to the viewers. It quickly becomes "old news" which does not upset the community.

Before we begin work at a site, we send local reporters two documents. The first is a news release, which describes the project, the contamination and the removal project. The second is what we call a "media alert." It alerts the reporter that we plan a "media day" concurrent with the start of the project. The media alert gives the reporter information about where and when to visit the site, what type of camera to bring and whom he or she can question.

We hold media days for two major reasons: they are a good vehicle to provide information and "visuals" to the reporter and they gather all the reporters together at a time and place of our choosing. The second factor keeps reporters from constantly interrupting work, while providing them with the opportunity they seek.

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 the reporters safe. When the reporters arrive on site, they are given a safety briefing and are escorted by Public Affairs personnel. They can watch any action, talk to any government or contractor personnel, ask any questions and photograph any operation. Generally, they cannot photograph detonations, but that is because of the safety distances required. At one remote site with open fields, we were able to let reporters photograph detonations.

Throughout the project, we in Huntsville Division or the local Corps of Engineers District continue to update the media and answer questions.

Conclusion

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