



March 26, 1999

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10
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Subject: Tri-Parties Response to Public Comments

Dear Messrs. Clarke, Fitzsimmons and Hall:

Citizens have played a key role in helping guide Hanford cleanup decisions. Given the consequences of a less-than-successful cleanup, and the fact that opportunities for formal comment and to influence cleanup decisions are limited, it is imperative that the Tri-Parties respond quickly, clearly and directly to public comments, concerns and suggestions.

Certain public involvement activities are already required of each of the Tri-Parties. We believe the following recommendations are consistent with these requirements, and will result in better opportunities for the public to participate in cleanup decisions, and to better understand how and whether public input is considered.

1. The Tri-Parties should proactively inform the public about how comments influence decision-making. If public input influenced a decision - one way or the other - that result needs to be clearly and quickly explained. When possible - quickly summarize the flavor of comments and provide a response. A more detailed response (such as a comment response document) can come later. For example, "The (agency) was considering doing (whatever action). We conducted three public meetings and had a 60 day comment period. We received about 150 comments. Although we're still studying the comments, the vast majority of these comments opposed our proposed action because (briefly explain why). Based in large part on these comments, we are reevaluating our conclusions, and will now consider (the action)..." The Tri-Parties should convey this information through a number of different communication methods, including direct mail, news releases, posting on each of the Tri-Parties' web sites, and stories in the Hanford Update and Hanford Reach.

2. When responding to a public comment, whether through the mail, comment response documents, or other methods, use clear, simple language. For example, if the agency agrees with a comment, say so: "We agree..." If it disagrees, say that as well, and then explain: "We disagree with your comment and here's why..." If there is a question, directly answer it. If possible, begin the answer with "yes" or "no." The detailed explanation should follow, but a commenter should be able to immediately determine the answer.
3. If public comments have been received concerning some upcoming decision, and that decision is delayed - for whatever reason - the public should be provided updates on the decision-making process. A short statement through the media, through direct mail and on the internet can at least allow the public to know why a decision is being delayed and when it may be made.
4. Make greater use of the internet by posting upcoming and pending decisions, comment periods and responses, on all three agencies' websites. However, don't rely entirely on the internet as the sole means of communicating with the public. It is simply one additional tool.
5. In addition to the use of comment response documents, we encourage the Tri-Parties to use other methods of responding to the public, when practical. For example, when there are just a few comments from a few commenters, a response by phone to these people may be appropriate prior to a written response.
6. Provide some type of follow-up opportunities for all comment situations. All written responses should include a contact name and phone number. At the time comments are being solicited, consider offering commenters their choice of the form of a response, such as e-mail, a letter, or a phone call. We understand this may not always be possible, particularly on those issues where there are a large number of commenters.
7. In most cases, "Comment Noted" is not an acceptable answer to a concern raised by a commenter.

We look forward to your response and to periodic progress updates on this matter.

Very truly yours,

/s/ Marilyn B. Reeves, Chair

Hanford Advisory Board

cc: James Owendoff, Department of Energy Headquarters
Paul Kruger, Deputy Designated Federal Official
The Oregon and Washington Congressional Delegations
Michael Gearheard, Environmental Protection Agency
Dan Silver, Washington Department of Ecology

This advice represents HAB consensus for this specific topic. It should not be taken out of context to extrapolate Board agreement on other subject matters.

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HAB Consensus Advice # 92

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