

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS/REFERRALS

DESCRIPTION

Why are there people running around in moon suits near my home? What do you mean “contamination?” What kind? Will it affect my health or the health of my family? Who is responsible for this? Where can I get more information? How long will the cleanup process take?

All of these questions and many more may be asked of you. Being prepared to respond quickly to questions about a Superfund site builds confidence and respect in you and EPA and prevents time-consuming problems later.

USING THE RESOURCE

Taking time to think about what you would want to know if you lived near a Superfund site can help you frame the questions you need to prepare to answer for a specific community. You also may want to talk to a resident or friend who is in touch with the community to determine any volatile situations, reoccurring problems, and other “hot issues.” You should conduct a general community or audience analysis, including the general level of education, cultural diversity, and population size.

TIPS

- Anticipate the scope and range of questions you’re likely to receive, and have answers prepared;
- If you do not know the answer to a particular question, try to direct the person to someone who does know, or find the answer yourself;
- Keep a list of contact persons who could assist you; and
- Recognize that what may seem like an insignificant question to you could be very important to the community.

RELATED TOOLS/RESOURCES IN THE TOOLKIT

- Community Profile, Tab 8
- Presentations, Tab 29
- Public Meetings, Tab 32
- Resource Book, Tab 35
- Workshops, Tab 46

ATTACHED ITEMS WITHIN THIS TOOLKIT

- Attachment 1: Frequently Asked Questions about the Superfund Program
- Attachment 2: Referral Matrix—This matrix lists typical community concerns that are not under Superfund’s authority and indicate the appropriate office or agency to contact.
- Attachment 3: Dos and Don’ts for Question and Answer Sessions—Helpful hints for answering questions during meetings.

ATTACHMENT 1: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SUPERFUND PROGRAM

GENERAL SUPERFUND QUESTIONS

WHAT IS A SUPERFUND SITE AND WHERE ARE THEY LOCATED?

A Superfund site is an area where releases or potential releases of hazardous substances has been reported. The Superfund program identifies and manages these sites within the confines of limited federal funding and human resources. Although slightly more Superfund sites are found in rural/suburban areas than in urban areas, they are found in all types of settings though only a few sites are truly remote from homes or farms.

WHAT IS TYPICALLY FOUND AT THESE SITES?

Because hazardous waste sites are extremely diverse, there is no “typical” site. Many are municipal or industrial landfills. Others are manufacturing plants where operators improperly disposed of wastes. Some are large federal facilities dotted with “hot spots” of contamination from various high-tech or military activities. The chief contributors of the hazardous wastes are in the manufacturing sector.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOLID WASTE AND HAZARDOUS WASTE?

Hazardous Waste includes by-products of society that can pose a substantial or potential hazard to human health or the environment when improperly managed. Hazardous waste possesses at least one of four characteristics (ignitability, corrosivity, reactivity, or toxicity), or appears on special EPA lists.

Solid Waste includes non-liquid, non-soluble materials ranging from municipal garbage to industrial wastes that contain complex and sometimes hazardous substances. Solid wastes also include sewage, sludge, agricultural refuse, demolition wastes, and mining residues. Technically, the solid waste definition also encompasses liquids and gases in containers.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CERCLIS, SUPERFUND, AND NPL SITES?

The Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act Inventory System (CERCLIS)—now called WasteLAN—tracks any hazardous waste site that has been assessed by EPA. Hazardous waste at Superfund sites has been released or poses a threat of being released. Sites determined to be the most threatening to human health and the environment are placed on the National Priorities List (NPL) through a formal rule-making process. Once on the NPL, EPA conducts long-term cleanup actions with the goal of achieving a permanent remedy.

WHAT IS A PRP?

A Potentially Responsible Party (PRP) is an individual or entity, including past or present property owners, operators, transporters, or generators, any of whom *may* be liable for contamination at a site.

SUPERFUND PROCESS

HOW ARE SUPERFUND SITES DISCOVERED?

Hazardous waste sites can be discovered by anyone, but usually local and state agencies, businesses, the U.S. EPA, and the U.S. Coast Guard are among the first to discover one. Anyone can report a potential hazardous waste site problem or emergency to the National Response Center Hotline at (800) 424-8802 or to appropriate state and local authorities.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE IS AN EMERGENCY?

Superfund personnel are on call to respond at a moment’s notice to chemical emergencies, accidents, or releases. Superfund’s number one priority is to protect people and their environment in communities near sites. In an emergency

situation, your community will be kept informed of the steps taken to ensure your safety. After the emergency is resolved, EPA further evaluates the site and determines whether additional action is necessary.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A SITE THAT IS NOT AN EMERGENCY?

EPA tests the soil, water, and air to determine the type and amount of hazardous substances left at the site, how serious the risks may be to human health and the environment, and what type of action, if any, is required. Parties responsible for the contamination at the site may conduct these assessments under close EPA supervision. Their involvement in the study and cleanup process is critical in order to make best use of Superfund resources.

Who is INVOLVED IN THE CLEANUP PROCESS?

Superfund cleanups are very complex and require many experts in science, engineering, public health, management, law, community involvement, and numerous other fields. The goal of the process is to protect the community and environment from exposure to hazardous substances. As a community member, your involvement is very important, and you have the right to be involved in decisions and comment on the work being done.

How do SITES GET ON THE NPL?

EPA has developed a scoring system called the Hazard Ranking System (HRS) to evaluate the dangers posed by hazardous waste sites. EPA uses the information collected during the assessment of a site to develop a HRS score based on the danger the site may pose to public health and the environment and other variables. Sites that score high on the Hazard Ranking System are eligible for the National Priorities List (NPL). Also, a site may be proposed for the NPL if the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) issues a health advisory for the site or if the state chooses the site as a top priority. If a site does not score high enough to be designated a NPL site but is still considered a threat, it may be cleaned up by PRPs or state and local cleanup teams.

WHAT IS A ROD?

A Record of Decision (ROD) is the document that describes the selected remedy and the basis for selecting the remedy. The ROD is produced for each National Priorities List site when the remedial investigation/feasibility study (RI/FS) is completed. The ROD certifies that the remedy selection process has followed the requirements of CERCLA and the National Contingency Plan (NCP), and it describes the technical components of the remedy. The ROD also provides the public with a consolidated source of information about the site.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A LONG-TERM CLEANUP?

Under the remedial program, EPA takes long-term actions to stop or substantially reduce releases or threats of release of hazardous substances that are serious but not immediately life threatening. Removal actions, which are short-term, immediate actions intended to stabilize a hazardous incident or remove contaminants from a site that pose a threat, may be taken at any time in the remedial process. Also, throughout the remedial program, EPA provides opportunities for the public to be informed of and involved in decisions related to the site.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR STEPS OF THE SUPERFUND PROCESS?

The Superfund process begins with a preliminary assessment/site inspection (PA/SI). Usually this is conducted by the state to determine whether the site poses a significant enough potential hazard to warrant further study. The site is ranked using the Hazard Ranking System (HRS), a numerical ranking system used to identify the site's potential hazard to public health and the environment. Sites assigned an HRS score of 28.5 or above are added to the National Priorities List (NPL).

A remedial investigation (RI) is conducted to assess the extent and nature of the contamination and the potential risks. A feasibility study (FS) is prepared to examine and evaluate various remedial (cleanup) alternatives. The preparation of the RI and FS often overlaps and is referred to as the RI/FS. EPA then releases a Proposed Plan, which describes all cleanup alternatives and EPA's preference, for public comment. After reviewing all public comments, EPA selects a remedial plan and outlines the choice in a document called the Record of Decision (ROD).

Remedial design (RD) begins after the ROD is final and includes engineering plans and specifications for the selected cleanup alternative. Then the actual site work, or remedial action (RA) can begin. After RD/RA activities have been

completed, a site is monitored to ensure safety and effectiveness of the response. Certain measures require ongoing operation or periodic maintenance to remain effective. If there are indications that a problem or problems have arisen, immediate action is taken to make the site safe again and allow for continued cleanup activities.

Why does the cleanup process take so long for some sites?

Early action can correct many hazardous waste problems and eliminate most threats to human health and the environment. However, some types of contamination problems require long-term action. These include, for instance, restoring groundwater quality and protecting wetlands, estuaries, and other ecological resources. Often contamination problems are caused by years of improper pollution control and may take years, even decades, to clean up.

How many sites have had all cleanup construction completed?

As of September 1997, over 86% of the sites (over 1,300) on the Superfund National Priorities List (NPL) were undergoing cleanup construction or were completed. All cleanup construction was completed at 498 Superfund sites, representing well over 30% of the sites on the NPL.

Who pays for these cleanups?

Superfund cleanup is paid by the parties responsible for contamination or by the Superfund Trust Fund. Under the Superfund law, EPA is able to make those companies and individuals, responsible for contamination at a Superfund site, perform and pay for the cleanup work at the site. EPA negotiates with the responsible parties to induce them to pay for the planning and cleanup work, which is supervised by EPA. EPA can use Superfund Trust Fund money to pay for cleanup costs and then attempt to get the money back from the responsible parties through legal action.

What is the difference between remedial and removal actions?

A removal action is an immediate response to protect people from threats posed by hazardous waste sites. Remedial actions are long-term cleanups designed to prevent or minimize the release of hazardous substances and reduce the risks to public health and the environment.

How can I get involved in the cleanup process?

To find out how you can get involved in the process contact your local or Regional Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC) or Community Advisory Group. CICs are responsible for: (1) providing the public with the opportunity to participate in technical decisions; (2) informing the public of planned or ongoing actions; and (3) identifying and resolving conflicts. Community Advisory Groups seek out community representatives with diverse interests and facilitate their involvement in the Superfund process. If there is no Community Advisory Group in your area, contact your CIC to inquire about how to establish one.

SITE-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

How do I find information on this particular site?

An information repository containing current information, technical reports, and reference documents regarding a Superfund site, is usually located near the site in a public building, such as a public school, city hall, or library, for the convenience of local residents.

How can I find site documents, such as permits and notices?

Several sources of Superfund documents and document information exist. The Superfund Document Center, Superfund Docket, National Technical Information Service (NTIS), and Public Information Center (PIC) are among them. Each resource plays a different role in the distribution of Superfund documents and information. Several of these documents are included in the information repository near the site.

What are my options for gathering information?

Community members may check their local library, contact their state and federal representative or EPA regional office, or browse Superfund's home page on the Internet at www.epa.gov/superfund/.

Is all the information on a site accessible to the public?

Yes, all information concerning Superfund sites is legally accessible to the public. Copies of EPA site files can be obtained by submitting a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. EPA headquarters has a FOIA office (below) and EPA's Regions have Internet home pages for FOIA information and requests. See the Regional home pages for links to the Freedom of Information home pages.

How can I find out about remedies being used to clean up contamination at a site?

You can locate the Record of Decision (ROD) for your site using this Superfund Web site: www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/rods/. The abstract from these documents provides clear, concise information on all suggested remedies. Fact sheets are produced about your site and about remediation methods similar to those in use at your site. A Superfund automated phone system is available for you to request reports and brochures or pose questions at (703) 413-0223.

What is my state doing to aid in the cleanup of this site?

Through recent Superfund administrative reforms, EPA is attempting to enhance the role of the states in the cleanup process. EPA is developing a deferral program to encourage qualified states and Native American tribes to address sites currently in the queue to be considered for inclusion on the National Priorities List using their own laws. To find out about your state's participation in the program, you may contact your state's environmental division or hazardous waste office usually located at the state capital. This portion of your state government works closely with EPA on Superfund issues.

What is a Community Advisory Group, what do they do, and is there one set up for this site?

An excellent way for communities to participate in site cleanup decisions is to form a Community Advisory Group (CAG), which typically consists of community representatives with diverse interests. Its purpose is to provide a public forum for community members to present and discuss their needs and concerns related to the Superfund decision making process. To determine whether or not a CAG is in place for a particular Superfund site, contact the EPA Regional Office of Community Involvement.

What is a Technical Assistance Grant? How do I get one?

The Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) program awards grants of up to \$50,000 for qualified citizens' groups to hire independent technical advisors and communicate technical comments to community members. The technical advisors assist the community in understanding and commenting on the technical issues associated with cleanup decisions. Your community may be eligible for a TAG if it is affected by a Superfund site that is listed or proposed for listing on the National Priorities List. More information about Technical Assistance Grants is available from your Regional EPA Community Involvement Coordinator.

Will the health and ecological effects of this site be long term, even after the cleanup process is completed?

Regardless of how long it takes to complete Superfund site cleanup, a site cannot be closed officially until all threats to human health and the environment are removed. This means that cleanup may be completed on one or more sectors of a site, but if cleanup is continuing elsewhere at the site, the site cannot be closed. Even after a site is closed, monitoring is performed on a regular schedule for many years to ensure the safety of those in neighboring communities.

ATTACHMENT 2: REFERRAL MATRIX

The following matrix provides you with general topics and offices to which you may refer community members who have questions that may not fall directly under the realm of Superfund. Office titles may vary slightly from region to region.

| TOPICS | REFERRAL |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treatment storage disposal violations of currently operating facilities | U.S. EPA, Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) Office, Division of Enforcement |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pending landfill locations • Status of pending landfill permits | U.S. EPA, RCRA Office, Division of Permits |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incinerators | U.S. EPA, RCRA Office |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Assessments, including those on lead-based paint, radon, and asbestos. <i>(Superfund performs risk assessments in relation to human health and the environment, while ATSDR performs health assessments.)</i> | Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry (ATSDR) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Assessments concerning “cancer clusters” | ATSDR |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How individual property values are affected by environmental conditions • Information about property values in a prospective purchasing area • Disclosure laws concerning property values | Local resources, such as real estate agents, appraisers/assessors, local taxing authorities/planning commissions, and banks/lending institution officials |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anything dealing with drinking water and water for domestic uses (<i>e.g.</i> wells, water treatment, waste water facilities) | U.S. EPA, Office of Water Management; Safe Drinking Water Hotline (1-800-426-4791) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemicals leaching into the water supply, including phosphates and nitrates, and heavy metals, such as lead, magnesium, and iron | U.S. EPA, Office of Water Management |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air quality concerns, including stationary sources in cities | U.S. EPA, Office of Air Quality |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emissions from cars or large transport services (such as trains, buses, air planes, or tractor trailers) | State or local Departments of Transportation |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pesticide applications | U.S. EPA, Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances (OPPTS) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counties who produce or use services that generate hazardous waste | U.S. EPA, Oil Pollution Prevention & Response Program |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spills or dumps into water resources (including rivers, streams, ponds, or lakes) • Runoff from local farms | Local or county Health Departments; Fish and Wildlife Service |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about the health of fish in the area (<i>e.g.</i>, are they edible?) • Fish kills | Fish and Wildlife Service; State or local public Health Department |

ATTACHMENT 3: DOS AND DON'TS FOR QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS

The following suggested “dos and don’ts” can help you better serve your community.

PRIOR TO MEETING WITH THE COMMUNITY

- **DO** perform an audience analysis to learn about its size, education level, primary language, etc.
- **DO** obtain accurate information and be completely honest.
- **DO** decide on key points you want to make and double check that you have the appropriate information.
- **DO** create handouts if necessary, including important statistics, an information contact, graphs, pictures, site maps, and text that is easy to understand.
- **DON'T** ignore the demographics of your audience.
- **DON'T** try to fool community members.
- **DON'T** believe you know it all.
- **DON'T** come to a meeting unprepared.

DURING THE QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

- **DO** be honest and accurate. Your credibility depends on it.
- **DO** stick to your key points.
- **DO** lead. Take charge, but don't overpower.
- **DO** raise your key messages.
- **DO** offer to find out information you don't have if a question is raised about it.
- **DO** explain the subject.
- **DO** stress the facts.
- **DO** explain the context.
- **DO** give a reason if you can't talk about the subject.
- **DO** state your points emphatically.
- **DO** emphasize what is being done to correct the problem.
- **DO** state your conclusions first, to get your main points across, then back them up with facts.
- **DO** try to be as open with the community as possible.
- **DON'T** lie.
- **DON'T** improvise.
- **DON'T** react passively, but **DON'T** be overly aggressive or rude either.
- **DON'T** dwell on negative allegations.
- **DON'T** guess, because if you are wrong, your credibility, as well as EPA's, will be lost.
- **DON'T** discuss hypothetical questions.
- **DON'T** assume that the facts speak for themselves.
- **DON'T** use jargon.
- **DON'T** dismiss a question with “No comment.”
- **DON'T** stress any individual errors or negligence.
- **DON'T** withhold information or fail to acknowledge the facts.
- **DON'T** let your message get lost in details.
- **DON'T** hesitate or refuse to give proprietary information.



After the Question and Answer Session

- **DO** volunteer to get additional information community members request.
- **DO** volunteer to be available if a community member wants to go over something with you.
- **DO** provide methods for community members to reach a representative with future requests or inquiries.
- **DON'T** give one individual exclusive information.
- **DON'T** refuse to talk any further with members of the community.
- **DON'T** avoid or ignore community members' requests, or deny community members the means to find any and all public information— this is one of your primary responsibilities.