

## **ASTSWMO POLICY POSITION PAPER ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

### **BACKGROUND**

The history of community involvement in the environmental field has been one of staggered improvement across the nation. The process, priority, and status of community involvement differs significantly not only from each of the 50 States and six Territories, but also from program to program, and site to site. Community involvement is dependant upon program priorities, agency lead (State, Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], Department of Defense (DoD), or other lead agency), program statutory requirements, resources, community economic levels, community interest, and project manager focus. These inherent differences have contributed toward the level of frustration expressed by citizens, regulators, and responsible parties.

Community involvement is a requirement of most federal and/or State environmental regulations and should be adhered to by all parties. It is important that the lead agency, with the responsible parties' support, provide uniformity of program implementation nationwide. A consistent commitment to community involvement as a programmatic priority will minimize commonly identified challenges. While the commitment needs to be consistent, the approaches should recognize that communities are unique and have specific needs that vary from site to site.

### **CHALLENGES**

- Community involvement is often initiated late in the cleanup process after project teams have conducted investigations and developed final decisions.
- Community involvement programs have not consistently attempted to reach out to, and involve the full range of stakeholders, including local communities.
- Community involvement requirements, issues, and concerns are often viewed by technical staff as a nuisance and an impediment rather than as a necessary element of the process that facilitates implementation of remedial objectives.
- Community involvement goals become irrelevant as government agencies and responsible parties hold to their positions as ultimate decision makers in the remedial process. Consequently, the collaborative effort required for successful community involvement frequently does not occur.
- The community involvement process is compromised when financial and personnel resources are constrained or not integrated during initial project planning.

- While stakeholder input is consistently solicited, it often has no apparent impact on the final decision.

## **POSITION**

It is ASTSWMO's position that community involvement and outreach be a core priority of environmental agencies. At a minimum, the following should be considered:

### **Ensure Community Involvement:**

- It is crucial that all stakeholders be informed and updated on environmental issues in a timely manner and be afforded a process for meaningful input at all levels of decision-making.
- Regulatory agencies and responsible parties must promote an active role for the public in the remedial process in order to understand the communities' needs and encourage a collaborative approach to project implementation.
- Lead agencies should document and report how and why community input has or has not impacted project decisions

### **Maintain and Develop Partnerships:**

- All parties involved must be committed to a collaborative and consistent approach that considers both the community and regulatory agencies' needs. The lead agency need not abdicate decision-making authority, but should encourage dialogue with impacted communities to ensure that mutually-determined goals are identified and implemented.
- Customized community involvement strategies should be developed to encourage understanding and responsiveness among diverse interests that can increase public support of proposed environmental policies and remedial decisions.

### **Dedicate Funding and Resources:**

- Lead and regulatory agencies should invest in the resources and staff expertise necessary to implement effective community involvement.
- Managers should anticipate and integrate the appropriate level of community involvement in budgets and schedules for the duration of remediation and long-term operation and maintenance.

## **CONCLUSION**

The ASTSWMO Board of Directors encourages its membership to work towards assessing the applicability of these challenges and principles to identify current State needs in improving community involvement processes. ASTSWMO will continue to enhance and promote effective

community involvement practices through close coordination with other associations and agencies.

Adopted by the ASTSWMO Board of Directors, July 17, 2012 in Big Sky, Montana.