

EPA Information

Industry and Community Consultation

Issued March 2004

EPA 345/04: This information sheet replaces the old EPA Information Sheet No. 23, issued in July 2001.

Introduction

Is your industry regarded as a welcome and trusted part of the community in which you operate?

Industry's continued ability to operate effectively is increasingly dependent upon the community's confidence in how well it conducts its business; this applies particularly to an industry licensed to operate under the *Environment Protection Act 1993* (the Act). For some activities licensed under the Act, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) requires the establishment of processes for community consultation.

In this document, 'community' refers to industries, businesses and the public. Communities are not homogeneous groups of people but rather comprise sub-groups that differ in age, gender, ethnicity, life values, employment status, religious beliefs, disability, and in many other ways.

Industries that generate noise, odours, air emissions, dust or other discharges as a result of their operations often attract community concern and complaint, especially when these impacts are not confined within industry property boundaries. In some instances, industries have changed their operational practices as a direct result of community concerns. Through liaison and dialogue with neighbours, industry can develop and maintain a mutual understanding, and establish procedures and strategies likely to provide the best possible outcome for everyone.

This approach is not new; for example, 'Responsible Care' is an initiative of the chemical industry to improve the health, safety and environmental performance of its operations and increase community awareness of the industry. The community's right to know what is happening within the chemical sites in its local area is central to Responsible Care.

In South Australia, a number of industries recognise that long-term success is strongly linked to a co-operative approach with the community in which they are located. These industries actively communicate and interact with their neighbours on an on-going basis.

Some councils in metropolitan Adelaide facilitate community environment forums with representation from residents, industry, state government agencies and council. The forums are a



valuable platform for the community to voice its concerns, and also encourage industry accountability and the development of community consultation.

In each case, establishing openness, effective communication and participation are central to developing lasting partnerships between the industry, the community and other relevant stakeholders.

The challenge for industries in South Australia is to develop valuable partnerships with the communities in which they operate, and to respect and contribute to their quality of life. Increased understanding and trust will reduce conflict, avoid unpleasant surprises and benefit the environment in which we live and work.

Industry needs to adopt community consultation and participation, not as an added extra, but as a core aspect of its business strategy. A progressive company will try to establish a good working relationship with the people in its neighbourhood. It will try to be a good neighbour, and it will try to contribute to the community in which it operates.

This information sheet contains ten simple but effective strategies for industries wishing to undertake community liaison and consultation with their neighbours.*

Step 1: Do some preliminary assessment and find out what the local community thinks about your plant

Put yourself in the shoes of your community neighbours, and then ask yourself the following questions.

- Would you *really* like to live next door to your plant? If not, why?
- Does your plant have any off-site effects?
- Do you have an EPA licence or licences?
- Is there potential for improvement?

If you answer 'no' to the first question, or 'yes' to the others, you could probably benefit from an improved relationship with your neighbouring community.

You can do this in a range of ways including surveys, door-knocks, meetings or open days. Think about who the 'community' is. Doing this will help you to better target your efforts.

Step 2: Listen to the community and accept that different people's perceptions of your company are real for them

Be prepared to really listen and try to understand what the community thinks. This can sometimes be a challenge as you may experience cynicism, mistrust and anger, and hear misinformation about what you do.

Resist the urge to defend yourself—especially in the early stages of consultation. You will find out a lot more about what views exist and ultimately develop more credibility if you are prepared to listen.

People's perceptions of your plant are real for them. This does not make them right, nor do you have to agree. Some of the most significant actions you can demonstrate are to show that you are willing to understand the views of the community.

* Adapted from *The Ten Steps To Successful Community/Industry Consultation*, courtesy of EPA Victoria.

Step 3: Don't think that the problem is that the community doesn't understand

Your efforts will be more successful if you consider what you might be doing that makes it difficult for the community to understand you.

Don't 'expert out' people—work to make technical information more easily understood. It takes some preparation on your part but it is worth it.

Step 4: Be prepared to share the decision making

Develop real opportunities for the community to contribute to project planning.

This means having 'joint ownership' of the consultation process—it doesn't mean that the community 'takes over' and makes all your decisions for you. You will find that usually that's not what people want. People generally want to be able to live without experiencing off-site effects from your plant.

Do have some tentative ideas and strategies in mind but don't simply impose them on the community. Find out what other people think. This will show that you recognise the value of the community as a resource in the process.

Step 5: Make sure you allow enough time for consultation to occur

Attempting to involve the community early in the process can mean that it will take a little time to plan. It will mean seeking views and reaching consensus about actions but it can be a good investment in the longer term, leading to a local community with greater confidence in your plant's activities.

Step 6: Involve senior staff in the consultation process

The community needs to see that you are serious about consultation. Have staff involved from your company who have the power to make decisions and get things done.

You will gain further credibility if other staff responsible for the day-to-day running of your plant attend meetings. This helps to ensure that the community's concerns are also heard by staff responsible for the operation of the plant.

Step 7: Develop ongoing environmental awareness training for your staff

If you don't already do it, set up processes (preferably ongoing ones) to ensure employees have regular training in sound environmental management practices and an understanding about preventing off-site impacts of the plant's activities.

Step 8: Set up an effective complaints response system

Develop a system that effectively responds to community complaints. Provide staff with training in how to effectively deal with these complaints, and publicise this service in the local community.

Step 9: Develop communication tools

Use a variety of communication strategies to help the community find out about your activities. These could include newsletters, Internet sites, articles in the local paper, open days, information hot lines and publicly accessible information centres or shopfronts. Provide the community with feedback on outcomes following discussions about your activities.

Step 10: Welcome open scrutiny

Offer the community the opportunity to verify the environmental 'soundness' of your activities. Accept the use of credible independent technical experts to verify your claims, and be prepared to accept the costs for doing this.

References

Environment Protection Agency 1995, *Community Consultation and Involvement*. One module in a series on Best Practice Environmental Management in Mining, Commonwealth of Australia.

Environment Protection Authority, State Government of Victoria 1996, *Ten Steps to Successful Community/Industry Consultation*, EPA Information Bulletin, Publication 520.

Maywald, S 1989, *Consulting with your community A guide to effective and equitable community consultation techniques for local government and associated organisations*, Commonwealth of Australia and the Local Government Community Services Association of South Australia.

Responsible Care program: www.pacia.org.au

FURTHER INFORMATION**Legislation**

Legislation may be viewed on the Internet at: www.parliament.sa.gov.au/dbsearch/legsearch.htm

Copies of legislation are available for purchase from:

Government Information Centre
Lands Titles Office, 101 Grenfell Street
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