

FEMP-2420

CONF-950868--35

The Fernald Envoy Program: How Face-to-Face Public Involvement is Working

BY
Jack Hoopes*

Charles Hundertmark (Jacobs Engineering)

Jerry Jordan (University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio)

FERMCO *
Fernald Environmental Management Project
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, Ohio 45253-8704

For Presentation at the
Environmental Remediation '95
Denver, Colorado
August 13-18, 1995

*Fernald Environmental Restoration Management Corporation with the
U.S. Department of Energy under Contract No. DE-AC24-92OR21972

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Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

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Abstract

In March 1994, the Fernald Environmental Management Project (FEMP), initiated the Fernald Envoy Program as a tool for strengthening public involvement in the restoration of the Fernald site, a former U.S. Department of Energy uranium processing facility which ceased operation in 1989 and became an environmental restoration site. Based on the concept that opinion leaders play a key role in the flow of information, the Envoy Program was developed to link Fernald with opinion leaders in community groups. In February and March 1995, the University of Cincinnati Center for Environmental Communication Studies, under contract with the Fernald Environmental Restoration Management Corporation, conducted an evaluation to determine how the Envoy Program was functioning in relation to the original Envoy Plan. A quasi-experimental design was applied using telephone surveys of opinion leaders in groups with envoy representation and in groups without representation. Findings validated the effectiveness of the program and also identified areas for program improvement.

Introduction

Since 1993, the FEMP has implemented a series of initiatives to broaden public participation. These have included a public affairs counseling program(1), the Fernald Citizens Task Force, communication training, and restructured public meetings using more interactive break-out sessions. The most recent innovation adopted was the Fernald Envoy Program, initiated in February 1994. The Envoy Program was initiated in response to the growing consensus that mass media campaigns alone are ineffective in influencing the public. Since the mass media systematically edit and distort information, more direct routes to involved publics are necessary in order to keep those publics informed. The Envoy program was created to broaden the direct, interpersonal exchanges between Fernald and its stakeholders.

The Opinion Leader Concept

Since the 1940s, communication researchers have been interested in the relative influence of the news media and other channels of communication in the formation of

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

public opinion. A formative work in the field was a study of the 1940 presidential election which was intended to demonstrate the prevailing theory at the time, that the news media was had a direct and powerful impact on public opinion. What the researchers found instead was that interpersonal communication seemed to have a more immediate impact on political decisions. They concluded that ideas flow through a two step process, from the news media to opinion leaders, and from opinion leaders to the broader population via face-to-face communication.(2)

Subsequent research suggests that there are complex interactions between direct media effects and interpersonal channels of information. But, in many cases, most people rely on opinion leaders as sources of information and as interpreters of information received through mass media sources. These opinion leaders are generally people of higher education, greater affluence, and higher social status than those they influence. Research has suggested that, while the mass media play a role in creating awareness of innovations and new ideas, the opinion leaders play an important role in influencing how people respond to these ideas, formulate attitudes, and actually make decisions based on that information.

The opinion leader concept has been more fully explored by researchers focusing on the process of innovation diffusion. Communication researchers studying how decisions to adopt innovations are made have suggested that the news media and change agents play a major role in creating awareness of innovations and new ideas, while opinion leaders play a more important role in the persuasion stage of the decision making process.(3)

The Envoy Program

In March 1994, the FEMP initiated the Fernald Envoy Program as an effort to identify opinion leaders within Fernald stakeholder groups and develop direct relationships with them. Fifty-eight DOE and FERMCO volunteers were selected to act as Envoys. Each was assigned to specific local government boards, environmental advocacy groups, and civic organizations. The Envoy plan called for Envoys to serve as "eyes and ears," establishing open relationships with opinion leaders and bringing public concerns to the attention of Fernald management. Envoys were charged with listening to the concerns of their specific stakeholder groups and providing that information to Fernald Management at a time early enough to influence the decision making processes. Additionally, Envoys alerted the opinion leaders to the fact that the Envoy could serve as a fast, open and honest source of information about Fernald. Thus, the opinion leaders were provided with an alternative to mass media sources of information and hand an interpersonal channel through which they could provide input into Fernald activities.

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

Fernald Envoy Assessment

A general assessment of the Envoy Program was conducted to determine its effects on stakeholders' perceptions of Fernald. A variety of survey data was collected and analyzed by the Center for Environmental Communication Studies (CECS) at the University of Cincinnati. The CECS contacted 111 persons representing 92 local community groups. Complete interviews were conducted with 61 people representing a total of 54 groups. Responses from partial interviews are included in this assessment wherever it is appropriate.

Initially, 55 community groups were identified by the Public Affairs Department at Fernald as having Envoys assigned to them. An additional 37 groups who are not involved in the Envoy program were identified by CECS to serve as control groups. Control groups were selected strategically from a list of community groups in the greater Cincinnati area. Groups were chosen as controls based on their similarity to groups with Envoys. The Fernald Envoys identified the opinion leader (or leaders) within each community group that has an Envoy assigned. The Envoys produced a list of 74 contact persons representing 55 community groups with Envoys. The remaining 37 people who were contacted were representatives of control groups (groups who do not have Envoys). Names were chosen by CECS from listings in the Cincinnati phone book.

Forms of Assessment. Program evaluation was accomplished through the use of three different interview formats. The goal of this assessment was to obtain an honest, objective characterization of how the Envoy program is functioning. Certainly, one way to get such an assessment is to ask the groups involved to provide a direct evaluation of the program. So, roughly one half of the people representing groups with Envoys were targeted for direct assessment. That is, 29 representatives were interviewed and asked direct questions assessing the group representatives' perceptions of the Envoy program and its effects. They were also asked their groups' general attitudes toward Fernald and how they felt about Fernald's efforts to involve the public.

A second form of assessment was also employed. The second half of the people representing groups with Envoys were targeted for indirect assessment. That is, these representatives were asked general questions about their group's attitudes toward Fernald and also asked how they would go about providing input into Fernald activities or get information about Fernald. The Envoy program was not mentioned by the interviewer unless the contact person initiated the topic. This was done to avoid sensitizing the group representative to the goals of this assessment. Twenty-eight of these indirect assessments were completed.

In the final form of assessment (control data), persons representing groups without

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

Envoys were interviewed about their groups' attitudes toward Fernald, how they would provide input into Fernald activities and how they get information about Fernald. They were not, of course, asked about the Envoy program.

Awareness and Use of the Envoy Program

Program awareness. All parties surveyed were asked two identical, preliminary questions. First, they were asked to explain exactly how they would go about providing input into some activity at Fernald if they felt like they really needed to do so. Second, they were asked how they would find out the whole truth about some activity at Fernald if they needed to. Interviewers recorded all comments, but one purpose of these questions was to see if the contact person would spontaneously mention the Envoy as a channel of input or as a source of truthful information. Of 54 persons representing groups with Envoys, 26 did mention the Envoy program when explaining how they would provide input into Fernald activities; 28 did not. Twenty-two of these 54 contacts identified the Envoy program as a source of truthful information; 32 did not. Of the 54 contacts responding, 30 mentioned the Envoy program in response to at least one of the two introductory questions; 24 did not spontaneously mention the program.

Envoys as information sources. The group representatives who were questioned directly about the program were asked to rate the amount of information provided to their groups by their Envoys, (1=no information at all, 10=a great deal of information). For those 27 contacts, the average rating was 6.6. The representatives in the direct assessment also rated the accuracy of the information received from the Envoys (1=totally inaccurate and 10=totally accurate). The average response was 7.7.

The 27 representatives who were surveyed indirectly were simply asked to rate how much information their groups generally receive about Fernald. The average rating for this group was 5.9. Thus, groups with Envoys report receiving a moderately high amount of information about Fernald. Generally, groups believe the Envoys are providing accurate information.

Fifteen representatives from groups without Envoys responded to a question asking them how much information their groups received about Fernald (1=no information, 10=a great deal). The average rating for these groups without Envoys was 2.4.

All 54 representatives of groups with Envoys were also asked to identify the sources from which they thought most of their group members receive the bulk of their information about Fernald. Sixteen of the 54 representatives identified the Envoy program as a major source. However, the most frequently mentioned sources were the mass media; 30 of the

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Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

54 mentioned some mass media source as a primary source of information.

Envoys as channels for group input. Parts of the interviews were designed to assess the extent to which groups use the Envoy program as a channel for providing input into activities at Fernald. Respondents who were evaluating the Envoy program directly were first asked an open-ended question about how common it is for members of their groups to tell the Envoy their concerns about Fernald. Responses indicate that members seldom express their concerns to Envoys. While interviewers recorded all comments, they also provided a judgement of the representatives' responses. That is, while listening to the group representative, the interviewer made a judgement about the group's use of the Envoy (1=Envoy not used at all, 10=Envoy used a great deal). The most common rating was 1 (6 cases). The average rating was 4.7.

Additionally, respondents provided a self-rating. They were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1-10, how often their group members told the Envoys their concerns about Fernald. The self-ratings were mixed, the average rating was 4.8. While 7 of the 25 respondents gave a rating of 10 (the Envoy was used a great deal), 17 gave ratings of 5 or below; 11 gave ratings of 1 or 2. Respondents who were evaluating the program indirectly were asked two questions similar to those asked of the direct evaluators. First, these respondents were asked an open-ended question asking them to identify who members of their group talked to when those members wanted to express some concern about Fernald. Of the 27 respondents, 13 mentioned the Envoy program in some form. These respondents were also asked how often their group members actually tried to provide input to Fernald, (rating 1=never, 10=very often). The average self-rating here was 4.0.

However, these results are best interpreted in comparison to the responses from groups without Envoys. Of the 33 group representatives contacted, only 12 would provide any rating of how often their group members try to provide input into activities at Fernald. All 12 of these respondents gave ratings of 1 or 2, indicating that their groups very seldom, if ever, attempt to get involved in activities at Fernald.

Effects of the Envoy Program

General attitudes. All group representatives were asked initially to give an indication of their group's current attitude toward Fernald. Most of the Envoy groups had a neutral attitude toward Fernald (26 cases), 18 had a positive attitude and 9 indicated a negative attitude. Among the 12 representatives of groups without Envoys who gave a response to this question, 6 reported a negative attitude toward Fernald and 6 reported a neutral attitude. None reported a positive attitude.

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

All respondents were also asked whether or not their groups' attitudes about Fernald had changed over the last six months. For the groups with Envoys, 51 representatives responded. A majority (28 cases) said there had been no change in their group's attitude. Twenty-one of the 51 respondents claimed that their group's attitude had improved and 2 said their attitude had gotten worse. For the groups without Envoys, 14 representatives responded, and all 14 indicated no change in their groups' attitudes over the last six months.

A more informative view of trends in attitudes can be derived from a consideration of the data on current attitudes in association with data on attitude changes. A total of 50 respondents from groups with Envoys gave answers on both topics. It is informative to note that of the 18 respondents who indicated that their groups now have positive attitudes, 12 stated that their groups' attitudes had improved over the last six months. Six said there had been no change, none said that their attitudes had gotten worse. Of the 24 respondents who said their groups now have neutral attitudes toward Fernald, 6 indicated that attitudes had improved in the last six months; 18 indicated no change and none indicated a worsening in attitude. Of the 8 respondents who claimed their groups now have negative attitudes, 2 indicated that their groups' attitudes had actually gotten better over the last six months, 4 indicated no change and 2 indicated that their groups' attitudes had gotten worse.

In sum, it appears as though the vast majority of groups with Envoys have either a neutral or positive attitude toward Fernald. More notable perhaps, is the fact that attitude shifts seem to be toward a more positive view of Fernald. This shift seems to have occurred mostly within groups who now report positive attitudes toward Fernald. That is, a significant portion of groups now reporting a positive attitude toward Fernald indicate that their attitude has become more positive over the last six months. Likewise with groups now reporting a neutral attitude toward Fernald; a significant portion reports that their attitude has recently improved. It is also worth noting that some portion of the groups reporting a negative attitude actually indicate a recent improvement in attitude.

Attitudes toward public involvement. All respondents who were evaluating the Envoy program in a direct manner were asked how much they thought the input given to the Envoys affects Fernald activities. Again, interviewers recorded all comments, but interviewers also gave ratings indicating how much effect the respondent thought Envoy input had on Fernald activities (1=no effect, 10=great effect). Responses were mixed; the average rating was 4.7. Eight of the 23 respondents gave an answer such as "none" or "hardly any" and received a rating of 1 or 2. Seven respondents indicated that they thought their input to the Envoys had a great deal of effect; they were given ratings of 8-10.

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

Group representatives evaluating the program indirectly were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 how much they thought their groups' input into Fernald affected activities of Fernald. The average self-rating was 3.0. A similar pattern was apparent in the groups without Envoys. They were asked to indicate how much they felt their input into Fernald affected activities at Fernald. Their average self rating was 3.3; none gave a rating above 5.

All respondents were also asked if they thought management at Fernald was really serious about using input from the public in management's decision making. Interviewers rated their comments on a scale of 1 to 10 (1=not serious, 10=very serious). The average rating for the 50 representatives who gave answers was 6.1. Among the groups without Envoys, 12 representatives gave responses. Their average rating was 4.1; ratings were very mixed, 6 were given ratings of 5 or above and 6 were given ratings below 5.

Finally, all respondents were asked to provide a rating of how open they thought Fernald management is in telling the public the truth about what is happening at Fernald (1=not open at all, 10=totally open). The average of this self-rating by the groups with Envoys was 6.9. Forty-four of the 50 who responded gave ratings of 5 or above. So, generally, management at Fernald is seen by the Envoy groups surveyed as being very open and honest in their discussions of Fernald activities. The average rating by representatives of groups without Envoys was 4.1. Ratings were much more widely dispersed in this control group. Eight of the 13 who responded gave ratings below 5; 5 gave ratings of 5 or above.

As a general evaluation, all representatives who rated the Envoy program directly were asked to give a global rating of the program. Specifically, they rated the program on a scale of 1 to 10 (1=very bad program, 10=very good program). The distribution of ratings is displayed in Figure 7. The average self-rating of the program was 7.6. Twenty of the 22 who provided ratings gave ratings of 5 or above. Fifteen gave ratings of 8 or above. So it appears as though the Envoy program has strong support within groups that have Envoys assigned to them.

General Conclusions

General cautions about data interpretations. In order to protect the integrity of this evaluation, this research was conducted by the Center for Environmental Communication Studies using all the procedural safeguards characteristic of scientific research. However, these findings, like all research findings, should be interpreted with some caution, keeping in mind the potential biases inherent in the methods used. Specific to this study, it is important to note that all interviews were conducted with group representatives identified

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Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

by the Envoys themselves. It is possible, (although there is no evidence to support this speculation) that Envoys chose representatives whom they knew favored the program. Also, it is important to keep in mind that, in many ways, the groups who have Envoys assigned to them are self-selected. That means, of course, that no group had Envoys forced upon them and therefore it is possible that the opinions of extremely hostile or cynical groups within the community are not represented in this research.

Envoy functions. Recall that the Envoy program was initiated with two specific objectives in mind. First, Envoys were to function as a channel for community groups to provide input into decisions at Fernald and second, Envoys were charged with providing reliable information to those community groups. Findings here indicate that the Envoys are fulfilling both functions, but not with equal success.

Results suggest that the Envoys function mostly as a source of information for their groups. Generally, groups with Envoys indicate that they receive a moderately high amount of information about Fernald, especially when their ratings are compared to groups without Envoys. And, the groups who evaluated the Envoy information believe that the Envoys provide good information. The fact that most of the groups with Envoys did not mention the Envoy in response to the question about finding out the real truth about something at Fernald may indicate that the Envoys are seen as a good source of routine information, but that other sources may be more appropriate in an urgent situation.

Perhaps most significant is the fact that the groups with Envoys still identify the mass media as the sources through which they receive most of their information. It may be that even though groups with Envoys are receiving a significant amount of information from the Envoys, that information supplements, rather than replaces, information from media sources. This is consistent with research-based models of information flow and with research supporting the concept of the news media as an agenda setting communication channel.(4) Thus, it may be important in planning an Envoy-type program to include interpretation of media coverage as an Envoy role and to prepare Envoys for this role.

Results also suggest that providing a channel for input into Fernald is a secondary function of the Envoys. Groups seem to use the Envoys more as information sources than as channels for input.

Finally, it is worth noting that groups with Envoys indicate that they are much more likely to try to provide input into Fernald than groups who do not have Envoys. So, while Envoys seem to be providing information to group members more than they are gathering information from them, it appears as though simply having an Envoy might influence groups toward greater participation.

Program effects. Probably the most conspicuous effect of the program is revealed

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

by the groups' direct ratings of the Envoy program. Groups with Envoys like the program. There is also good evidence that the program has helped improve the attitudes of the groups that have Envoys. This is apparent in the trends data. Current attitudes are generally positive, and groups with Envoys indicate generally that their current attitudes reflect recent improvements of attitude. This trend is especially apparent when considered in light of the fact that the groups without Envoys indicate no recent attitude changes.

At least two other, very positive, effects are apparent in the data. Groups with Envoys assigned to them seem convinced that Fernald management wants input from the community. It is also apparent that groups with Envoys see Fernald management as very open about what they are doing. Both of these findings are most apparent when groups with Envoys are compared to groups who do not have Envoys.

The most apparent negative finding concerned groups' attitudes about the effect of the input they provide to Fernald. Responses were very mixed, but generally, groups do not seem to believe that their input really affects Fernald activities in a direct fashion. The Envoy program seems to have little effect on this attitude. Note that groups without Envoys rated the effect of their input at roughly the same level as groups who have Envoys assigned to them.

This general attitude that community input is ineffective may reflect the fact that management is not using information provided by Envoys. Or, it may be that the groups who are providing input through the Envoys are not being made aware of how their input is being handled. Finally, it is also possible that some decisions that the public would like to influence are not made locally at the Fernald site. Therefore, influencing those decisions would be well beyond the scope of the Envoy program.

Based on the assessment of the Envoy program, several actions have been initiated to strengthen the program. In order to improve the program as a two-way communication channel, protocols were changed to improve the flow of information from community groups to Fernald management. In addition, measures are being taken to increase feedback to community groups about the influence of their communication on Fernald decisions. In the area of training, a workshop on interpersonal communication skills has been developed and is being delivered for the Envoys. The training particularly emphasizes skills to strengthen the ability of Envoys to develop information actively in order to bring community concerns proactively to Fernald management. A second workshop is in development on how the news media works. This workshop will be designed to provide the Envoys with tools for interpreting news media coverage of Fernald.

The assessment described above focused on opinion leaders in organizations with Envoy representation. At least three areas of additional research would be valuable for

Control No. 1576
Jack Hoopes, APR
FERMCO
P.O. Box 538704
Cincinnati, OH 45253-8704
Phone: (513) 648-4910 Fax: (513) 648-6903

understanding the functioning of the Envoy Program. First, opinion leaders who were interviewed were identified by the Envoys. No objective effort was made to identify the accuracy of the assessment of Envoys that the respondents were true opinion leaders. It would be useful to know how effective Envoys are at identifying opinion leaders in groups, and it would be useful to understand how closely the evaluations of opinion leaders are to the opinions of the broader memberships in their groups. Second, it would be useful to determine whether the constructive impacts of the Envoys within their assigned groups flow into the community more broadly. And finally, it would be useful to assess Fernald management's use and assessment of the Envoys as a channel of communication with stakeholders. The assessment also suggests that a better understanding of the impact of media coverage on opinion about Fernald needs to be developed.

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Authors

Charles A. Hundertmark, APR, Jacobs Engineering Group Inc., 2155 Louisiana Boulevard NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110, Phone: (505) 880-2588, Fax: (505) 880-2525

Jerry Jordan, Ph.D., Center for Environmental Communication Studies, University of Cincinnati, 620 Teachers College, Cincinnati, Ohio 45221-0184, Phone: (513) 556-4474, Fax: (513) 556-0899

Jack Hoopes, APR, Fernald Environmental Restoration Management Corporation, P.O. Box 538704, Cincinnati, Ohio 45253-8704, Phone: (513) 648-4910, Fax: (513) 648-6309