

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Community Engagement During Contaminated Site Cleanups

Experts have established a clear link between living near places contaminated with hazardous materials and enduring long-term mental and physical health problems. Cleaning up such sites plays an important role in safeguarding the health of people in neighboring communities by reducing their exposure to hazardous materials. Nonetheless, cleanup activities may sometimes pose new risks as workers disturb contaminated soil or water. The people most likely to be affected by contaminated sites, and subsequent cleanup efforts, often belong to marginalized populations whose health and livelihoods may already be compromised.

In recent years, Washington's civic leaders have taken steps to ensure those people directly affected by such sites are not only heard, but their views are also integrated before and during cleanups. To incorporate community concerns into its cleanup decisions, the Department of Ecology conducts outreach and gives members of the public opportunities to comment on proposed actions throughout the cleanup process.

While certain aspects of community engagement are mandated by laws and regulations, such as the Model Toxics Control Act and the Resource Conservation and Cleanup Act, the extent to which such engagement consistently influences site cleanup decisions remains unclear. The 2021 Healthy Environment For All Act, along with objectives outlined in Ecology's strategic plans, underscores the significance of robust public involvement in agency decision-making to advance environmental justice and equity goals. However, residents affected by contaminated sites and proposed cleanup activities may face obstacles that hinder them from giving feedback on the cleanup process, such as language barriers or limited time to attend public comment meetings. Unless cleanup programs overcome these obstacles, they cannot ensure they have addressed the concerns of all community members in an equitable manner.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will examine the collection and incorporation of public feedback for cleanup programs managed by Ecology; it specifically excludes nuclear waste cleanup programs. The audit will also consider the role of the Department of Health as it relates to Ecology's cleanup activities. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What engagement approaches does Ecology use when working with communities affected by contaminated site cleanup efforts?
2. Does Ecology tailor its approach to meet the specific needs of each community?
3. Does Ecology consistently and equitably gather, consider and integrate feedback from affected communities into its cleanup efforts?



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