

Changing Times

There's an old saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Old sayings become "old" because, more often than not, they speak the truth. Consider politics. No matter which party is in ascendance, politics is characterized by partisan bickering, bitter wrangling, character assassinations, and righteous pronouncements on topics of little relevance. Ascendent parties may change, but the rest stays the same.

Once upon a time, nuclear waste decommissioning and cleanup could have been characterized by this old saying. In the early 1990s, projections for site cleanup completions looked ahead 40, 50, 60, or more years. People signing up to work on a cleanup project seemed to be guaranteed lifetime employment—not only for them, but for their children as well. And because, in the case of defense project cleanup, the government was paying for it, the money would just keep on coming. New contractors came in every now and then, but, for the most part, everything stayed the same. Clean a little, study a lot, clean a little more, study a lot more.

That was then, however. Boy, have things ever changed now! Nothing in waste cleanup stays the same these days. Instead, what we see are projects with clear end dates—and, sometimes, clear end dates that are creeping *forward*, not backward! We might expect this with the commercial projects; after all, they are not working with government money. But now, even government projects are heading toward the finish line.

Some cases in point, gleaned from the pages of this issue: Fernald just completed a six-year campaign of shipping contaminated soil from the

old uranium processing site to a disposal facility. The site sent 154 trainloads (one million tons!) of material offsite. Fernald is also shipping its silo waste to a waste storage facility in Texas. Fluor Fernald, the site cleanup contractor, expects to complete the cleanup, soil certification, and site restoration by spring 2006. For those of you keeping track, this is several months *ahead* of schedule.

Two huge cleanup sites, the Savannah River Site, in South Carolina, and the Hanford site, in Washington state, report progress in waste shipment campaigns and in waste cleanout operations. In the case of SRS, which is in the midst of a huge waste vitrification campaign, the site expects to save U.S. taxpayers about \$1 billion (\$1 billion!) by improvements in its vitrification process. When you are dealing with a multi-billion-dollar budget, improvements of just a few percent in efficiency can translate to vast sums in savings. Not to mention improvements in schedule as well. Things are changing there.

Hanford is charging away at the tanks cleanout project there. New technologies are helping with the project, and every new technology that works means the end date of the project creeps forward just a bit. Quite a change from the old days when the tanks cleanout project end date stretched into the 22nd century.

There are many other projects reporting similar exciting progress. Rocky Flats, Oak Ridge, and Mound all come to mind. Rocky Flats, once projected to take decades to clean up, will be wrapping up work next year.

There *is* a downside to all this progress: jobs. People who once had lifetime jobs now find that they are working themselves out of one. Yes,



Caution: Changes Ahead

that can be traumatic, but for the enthusiastic, it can also be exciting, because new opportunities are opening up overseas. In the past few months, many noted U.S. decommissioning and cleanup experts have "crossed the pond" to begin work on projects in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Every day, every week, every month, every year, this industry is changing. I'm proud to be a small part of this exciting, dynamic process.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■