

## A Case for Environmentalism

My husband, who works in the nuclear industry, can have choice words about the people he terms “environmentalists,” the most printable of which is that “they should be regulated.” But then, he’s a political conservative. Me, I tend to be the more bleeding-heart liberal type. Put the two of us together, and you almost get a balanced view.

With this issue’s cover stories focusing on environmental remediation at old nuclear sites (Hanford and Sellafield, both sites stemming from the early days), I think it appropriate to ponder just why these sites *need* remediation in the first place, and why it’s important that the work continue to progress.

Sixty years ago, give or take a couple of months, during some of the darkest days (for the Allies) of World War II, the Hanford Engineer Works rose on the dusty soil of southeastern Washington State, a stone’s throw from the Columbia River. With nothing around for miles but a few sleepy farm towns (two of which, White Bluffs and Hanford, would immediately fade into history), the site was perfect for a secret government weapons project. In the eastern region of the country, near the Tennessee River, a related project mushroomed up.

Buildings went up in a hurry, workers poured into the area, and the projects set about making the raw materials (uranium-235 in Tennessee, plutonium in Washington State) for a conceptual “weapon of mass destruction,” while at a third site, Los Alamos, New Mexico, the cream of the world’s scientists were still working out just how such a weapon could be made.

During the <sup>235</sup>U and Pu production processes, a lot of waste materials were generated—some pretty nasty waste materials. But it was wartime, and the lives and futures of hundreds of millions of people were at stake. So

wastes were dealt with quickly, cheaply, and conveniently—not because of malice or irresponsibility, but because there were larger issues at stake. Besides, at the time, most industries were just “dumping” waste. Remember Love Canal? Remember the totally dead Lake Erie?

World War II was followed by the Cold War, and the sense of threat continued and intensified into the 1950s. So the work of uranium and plutonium production continued, as did other weapons-related work at such new sites as Rocky Flats and Fernald.

But the 1950s were followed by the 1960s, and along with drugs, free love, and antiwar sentiments came the rise of environmentalism. For the first time, really, a critical mass of people questioned how all our government, industrial, and recreational activities affected the environment, and they demanded change.

Can we honestly say that we disagree with their aims and goals? I don’t think so. In the United States, at least, we all enjoy cleaner air and cleaner water and cleaner surroundings because environmentalists made noise.

Today, we all accept as a basic truth that contaminated sites should be cleaned up. We may argue (rightly) about cleanup levels (the problem is, our detector technology will always outpace our cleanup skills), but we don’t argue about the basic rightness of it all. It’s not just nuclear sites; it’s old military installations, old oil production facilities, even old gas stations.

We may shake with justifiable indignation when those with other agendas march under the environmental banner for convenience, while their ultimate goals are more sinister. An antinuclear person is *not* necessarily an environmentalist, just as a pronuclear person is not necessarily a conservative Republican. We



*Working for  
a cleaner  
world*

all are colored in various shades and hues.

Yes, cleanup takes time, we have limited resources, we have honest disagreements with other entities about the limits of technology, and there are other issues. But we do share the same ultimate goals. We all want to clean things up, properly dispose of our wastes. Those of us in the nuclear waste business are all environmentalists, in the best sense of the word. And, we can say to our grandchildren someday that we not only saw and identified a problem, we *did* something about it!—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor* ■