

Petroleum Program Progress

By Steve Hilfiker

It is time for more remediation. After 2 years and 2,000 assessments, the remediation industry should prepare for an increased workload. A spike in remedial activity appears to be on the horizon.

Due to the 2013-2014 legislative mandate to restructure the program and Governor Scott's 2014 directive to be sure all eligible sites are assessed within five years, the program has been out of balance with many assessment and few remedial projects. As assessments are completed, many are headed into remedial phases, which will bring much-needed balance for the petroleum restoration industry.

Progress is being made with site closures, based on recent statistics. The extensive assessment activity is bearing fruit. Based on the March 30, 2016 PRP Dashboard report, we are on track to exceed the closure goal set by PRP of 350 eligible discharges rehabilitated and post one of the highest numbers in the history of the program. This is good data that can be used to educate the various stakeholders.

As of March 30th, there are 2,993 assessments but only 152 in Remedial Action Construction/Source Removal phases. This imbalance is difficult for environmental firms and their subcontractors to manage; more remedial work is needed, and it appears to be on the way. In addition to the expected progression from site assessment to remediation, there are 1,433 discharges in supplemental assessment phases for pending remedial activity and 442 Remedial Action Plans are being prepared.

At the risk of repeating myself, a healthy program depends on a healthy industry. Healthy contractors need a balanced, multi-disciplined staff of engineers, geologists, remedial field specialists, field technicians, and subcontractors, including remedial vendors, drillers, waste disposal firms and laboratories, and the administrative professionals that sustain them. All of these entities need consistency for efficient operations. Hopefully with more remedial work to balance the assessment activity, we (meaning PRP and industry - the team working together as stewards of both the environment and the trust fund) can develop consistency with annual progression of remedial sites. We need to keep all segments of our industry busy.

The substantial amount of pending remedial work should enable us, together as a team, to meet the combined 2015-2017 legislative budget appropriations by June 30, 2017 if the remedial work can be processed in a streamlined manner. We as an industry need to educate legislators who may review program encumbrance and expenditure data that the emphasis on assessment this fiscal year will likely require a carry-over of the funds remaining in the 2015-2016 budget; and that is not a problem because it will fund the much-needed remedial work of 2016-2017. As industry and PRP get more efficient with the restructured way of doing business, I believe we can do it.

The collective goal is to close out these sites expeditiously, while being protective of human health and the environment. In the process, we restore property values, create jobs, improve the economy, and develop momentum for a healthy program.

On March 27, 1995, when former Governor Lawton Chiles ordered the end of the reimbursement program, it took many years to restructure, for businesses to adjust, and for the program to regain momentum. The late 1990s, after the program crashed, was a time of significant change for the environmental industry. We lost many talented professional scientists. Our skilled and highly technical labor market suffered. Many consultants left the state to work in the Texas cleanup program and those that stayed shifted their focus toward real estate transactions and other forms of marketable services.

On February 18, 2013, when the announcement was made about the current restructuring, we, as an industry of both public and private sector scientists, were impacted again. Many of our engineers, geologists, scientists, technicians, subcontractors and the professional administrative support staff had to change jobs. For the past two years, steady progress has been made by the PRP and new jobs are available. We need this momentum to continue. Consistent workflow and funding is imperative.

So, let's finish the assessments, close sites, and get more remedial projects moving forward. Progress is being made and we, as an industry and PRP, are becoming more efficient. Let's take petty issues off the table, move sites along from phase to phase, minimize project down time, maintain site and project relationships, prevent start/stops, maintain scientist site knowledge and work together as a team to get this done.

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