

Brownfields 2001

An Exclusive Report by WETP Clearinghouse Staff

Terrorist Attacks Overshadow Brownfields 2001

When Brownsfields 2001 was being planned, little did anybody know that the main topic of discussion would be the largest potential Brownsfield site in the history of the United States--the disaster area where the World Trade Center (WTC) complex was destroyed by terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

The immediate impact of the WTC disaster on the conference was a sharp reduction in attendance. Some 4,000 attendees were expected, up sharply from last year's attendance, but only half this amount showed up. Hotels in the Chicago area were reporting only 20% occupancy. Normally crowded restaurants were less than half full. Taxi cab drivers commented that mid-week traffic downtown was lighter than a typical weekend. The Hyatt hotel adjoining the McCormick place where the conference was held did not have enough business to set up its normally busy breakfast buffet. Among those absent were many high-ranking government officials who were embroiled in planning the government's response to the terrorist attacks.

Not only were many people absent from the conference, but the minds of many people who did attend were elsewhere. Random interviews were conducted on the floor of the conference to get some sense of how the WTC disaster affected them and their programs.

Individuals React to the WTC Disaster

An engineer, originally from Taiwan and now with the Army Corps of Engineers, fought back tears as she promised to go to New York and help to rebuild the city.

Scott, a private-sector waste management engineer from Minnesota, said, "I am still in shock. I used to think I was safe from nasty world events way out in Minnesota, but not any more. We closed down when it happened and sent everyone home to be with their family."

Patricia, a compliance consultant from Michigan, said "I am now scared to death because my two young sons and I live near one of the few storage places for dangerous biological materials, which I've heard is a new area of concern. But on the positive side, I have felt racial lines of discrimination melt away since the [WTC disaster] almost as if we have all been drawn to some higher purpose which unifies us and makes some of our everyday differences seem small in comparison."

Steve, a government waste management analyst, was the length of a football field from the Pentagon when it was attacked. He said, "We have never had to deal with a cleanup disaster of this magnitude on our soil. The site in New York could literally be called the largest Hazmat site we've seen. We have decaying biological materials from thousands of victims, toxic airborne materials from the destroyed buildings, and huge unstable and dangerous structures to deal with. Typical rescue workers are not trained to deal with this myriad of harmful agents and on such a large scale. Civilian volunteers, anxious as they are to help, may needlessly endanger their lives without some training on how to deal with this situation and what proper protective gear to use. We need to learn from this situation. It might not be the last one we see."

Organizations React to the WTC Disaster

A number of companies were quick to point out a redirection of their business strategies as a result of the WTC disaster.

Joe, the representative of a large remediation company, vowed that his company would be moving "Emergency Response" from the bottom of their company's capabilities list to the top priority. "We are used to coming in to clean up an environmental mess that has been a long time in the making; our "emergency response" geared for the occasional situation like an accidental spill. Now, with the impending War on Terrorism, we are gearing up to provide frequent and rapid response to emergencies that we think will be a regular occurrence during the next decade.

Scott, from a previous interview, added that his company would be moving Contaminant Management and Control higher up on their list of priorities. He pointed at the bottom of his display panel at bullet labeled, "Asbestos Monitoring and Control", and said, "that will be moved up when I get back to Minnesota."

A government economist, Richard, complained that "the WTC could not have come at a worse time, since our economy was already so weak. Everybody wants a clean and beautiful environment, but nobody really wants to pay for it. City and local officials are already stretched to pay for clean ups, and many banks are not eager to finance properties that sit on environmental risks. Look at the presentations. I am afraid that the pressure of a sustained war on terrorism will shift already scarce resources away from Brownfields to programs aimed at counteracting terrorism. In a way, the terrorists have added a new layer of potential harm to our environmental landscape--the powerful psychological risk of fear."

Conclusion--We Adapt and Go On

Most of the people we talked to agreed that their lives would never be the same again, but that they would adapt and go on. Timothy, a Ph.D. systems analyst for an environmental consulting company, was the most positive and enthusiastic person we talked to. This was Timothy's idea: "We in the environmental movement have the unique 30-year experience of holistic problem-solving for complex distributed systems which is exactly what is called for [in the War on Terrorist]. There should be a major federal program to organize and transfer this unique knowledge for the fight against terrorists."

The seeds of adaptation and innovation wrought by new survival pressures on both individuals and organizations seemed to already be taking root barely two weeks after the WTC disaster. Margaret, an EPA official, mused as she was leaving the exhibit floor on Wednesday, "I wonder how our exhibit displays will look different next year?"

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