

OUTRAGE OR OUTREACH IT'S EACH FACILITY'S CHOICE

By: David T. Ramirez, *Petrochem Magazine*

PETROLEUM AND CHEMICAL FACILITIES, using in-house handpicked members, are preparing worst-case scenarios for accidental chemical releases. These efforts are in response to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Air Act requirement to the industry for a Risk Management Plan by June 1999. With compliance, the industry hopes to ensure safety and inform the public about the industry's ability to deal with any situation arising in one of its facilities.

But if an actual incident were to occur at a facility, what might seem easily controlled and minor in a written risk communication plan might prove devastating in the long run due to lost reputation, reduced bottom line and heightened public ire, in spite of the plant's best efforts. Mary F. McDaniel, Unocal Corporation's previous Health and Environmental Education Manager and currently a partner of McDaniel-Lambert, Inc., a health and environmental consulting firm, is an attorney and physician who maintains everything a facility does prior to an incident ultimately determines the success of its Risk Management Plan.

If the site has an active community outreach program and maintains open lines of communication before, during and after the incident, the incident's aftermath can be minimized. Instead of creating a media frenzy and community fear, a facility could be rewarded with increased respect and credibility. It is unreasonable to conduct operations in a community behind a locked gate and, suddenly, when an incident occurs, expect the public and the media to trust the plant's sincerity, she said. "Besides, this regulation is an extension of the people's right to know. The [Risk Management Plan] takes the people's right to know to the next level," McDaniel explained. "You just don't invent something under the table and pull it out and surprise people. You should let the people in when planning. There is a tremendous payoff if a plant does this."

Citing public relations expert Peter Sandman, McDaniel maintains when risk is perceived as exotic or unfairly imposed, people become angered. "Take the emotional component out by dialoging with the community," she stated. "Do the hard work now and reap the benefits later."

As part of the EPA's regulation, industrial facilities must post their worst-case scenarios on the Internet. This compliance effort could undermine the industry's attempt to inform and reassure the public about its well-being. "If the facility hasn't had any prior contact with the community, it could be upsetting to the facility's neighbors to suddenly be made aware of the potential dangers to their safety," McDaniel warned. "Information posted this way will draw the attention of two groups of people: the computer literate and environmental activists. The computer types simply will read the information and go on. However, the environmental activists will be watch dogging the entire process, making sure all facilities comply while looking for any discrepancies or inconsistencies from one

facility to the other. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because it will help keep us on our toes."

In teaching her clients risk communication techniques, one of the major lessons learned by students is "...people aren't robots or automatons; it's very scary for a plant worker [during a crisis] to face a woman at the fence with a baby at the breast, frightened about her child's safety," she said. When a plant interacts with the public in the risk management process, then plant management starts thinking differently. "They start looking differently at their operations and a change occurs where they first think of how the community is affected by their operations."

McDaniel revealed companies go through different stages of communications awareness, similar to individual changes observed by psychologist Maslow in his Hierarchy of Social Needs. The first awareness stage is when a company simply fulfills requirements. The next level is when the company attempts to make their communications easily accessible and understood by the public. Third is "letting them in the gates" on a limited basis. Finally, the highest level is where the community and the company are partners in the communications process.

"So far, I'm encouraged by the changes I've seen in the industry," McDaniel observed. "There have been major improvements from 10 to 12 years ago; the industry realizes the value of active communications and active community outreach. This is the way of doing business in the future."

A TALE OF TWO REFINERIES

Recently, at the Spring National Meeting of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers in New Orleans, McDaniel lectured about two California refineries that had accidental chemical releases, with dramatically different results.

She told attendees, "A chemical release at the San Francisco refinery in 1994 had the greater magnitude, while a release at the Los Angeles refinery in 1995 had the potential for greater impact because of the large population living in the immediate vicinity. And yet, the Los Angeles release did little to raise the ire of local residents. In contrast, the release in San Francisco inspired nothing short of outrage, culminating last year in the \$80 million settlement of a civil suit brought against Unocal by 12,000 claimants."

THE SAN FRANCISCO REFINERY

On August 22, 1994, a hole was discovered in the upper portion of a hydroregeneration tower at Unocal's San Francisco refinery; the tower was emitting a light mist of carbon dioxide, steam and trace amounts of an alkaline solution, Catacarb, the chemical solution used to purify hydrogen that removes sulfur from gasoline. (Catacarb includes toxic diethanolamine, potassium borate, potassium metavanadate and other chemicals.) After notifying the local Health Services Department, the facility declared an emergency to determine the situation's seriousness. The unit was evaluated and found structurally

sound, with no risk of explosion or fire. Based on that information, the unit continued operations.

"This refinery had the best safety record of all the refineries along the coast of the East Bay," McDaniel stated. "During the summer of 1994, the refinery was on a record production run and facing an imminent turnaround. If the refinery could finish out its production cycle, the leak could be fixed in early October as part of the refinery's scheduled maintenance."

However, the leak continued for 16 days, until the unit was shut down on September 6. Residents in neighboring towns became angered after prevailing winds carried the alkaline mist into their communities. After the shutdown, local residents made numerous calls to the facility complaining of health symptoms like skin, eye and respiratory irritation; fatigue, headaches and nausea.

(The efforts of angered residents led to official investigations, which, in turn, were covered by the national media. The Los Angeles Times reported a criminal investigation into the release was conducted by the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office, along with the Health Department and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. Typical of comments made by residents was Rodeo, California's Jody Mechling's interview with Karyn Hunt of the Associated Press: "We're worried," said Mechling, who said she suffers from migraine headaches and vomiting. "We want to know, when are we going to start feeling better? What will happen in the future? I worry about my two kids. Who's to say they're not going to be sterile because of this? Who's to know?")

The consultant observed, "Over time the company strove to make reparations to the community, most crucially by signing a Good Neighbor Agreement in December 1994." Unocal funded a Good Neighbor Clinic, under the agreement's terms, and operated and staffed it with community-selected physicians. During its first seven months of operation, the clinic treated more than 1,400 patients who reported health problems from the leak. Additionally, the company funded five health studies related to the chemical release. The situation's magnitude led Unocal to establish a corporate risk communication policy: company facilities now must provide information to the public about health, environmental, safety and operational issues.

(Reflecting on the incident, Unocal spokeswoman Karen Rogers told the West County Times in Rodeo, California: "We can look back and say that if we had a presence out in the community before, the Catacarb incident would have played out differently. We were trying to work and build relationships and that's tough to do in time of crisis. We've certainly learned from that. And the goal is to make sure we have the relationships in place in the future.")

McDaniel summed, "The San Francisco refinery learned the hard way community outreach doesn't mix easily with community outrage." Since minimal dialogue existed between the plant and the public during its normal operations, the local community was unwilling to trust communications from the plant during the crisis.

THE LOS ANGELES REFINERY

On April 28, 1995, a power outage at the refinery caused a higher than normal amount of gas vapors to be sent to flare during the standard refinery process to burn small amounts of excess materials. Increased flaring occurred for about 45 minutes, but for approximately five minutes, the flare could not burn the entire quantity of excess gas vapors (including the toxin diethanolamine, which was released). While smaller than the release in San Francisco, this one had a greater danger potential since the plant is located in a large residential neighborhood with several elementary schools.

Yet this refinery, unlike the San Francisco refinery, had a long history of providing health, environmental and safety information to the community. After the incident, a letter and fact sheet were developed immediately and distributed door-to-door with information provided in both English and the primary language for many residents, Spanish. In the letter, the plant manager personally apologized to the community for the release and reaffirmed the refinery's safety commitment.

The Los Angeles refinery's response efforts were well received: there was no outrage in the surrounding community and there were no major lawsuits. The plant's long community involvement history in non-crisis situations, McDaniel stated, caused the refinery's crisis response success. Beginning in 1990, this refinery began extensive community outreach efforts. In addition to regularly distributing a community newsletter that provides operations and regulations information, the plant offers refinery tours, tracks news coverage, maintains a community hotline database and holds regular meetings with residents and community leaders.

AVOID A COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS

"Start developing a relationship with the community now - if not sooner," advises McDaniel. Open lines of communication, advance planning and an established community outreach history made the difference between the two refineries. This is an important lesson for those in the industry currently developing a Risk Management Plan and communicating that plan to the public.

"The San Francisco refinery incident clearly shows the dangers of holding back on community outreach, of assuming that disaster cannot happen here," McDaniel stressed. "The Los Angeles refinery release shows the powerful effect - and the bottom-line benefits - of building relationships with the community. Any facility preparing to discuss worst-case scenarios, as required by the Risk Management Plan, needs to get that outreach process started."

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