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PARRIS ISLAND CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM 17  
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MCRD PARRIS ISLAND

PARRIS ISLAND CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE FOCUS GROUP

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Parris Island, South Carolina  
January 17, 1996  
11:00 AM

About This Summary:

The following is a summary of findings from one in a series of four focus groups (one with civilian employees, two with residents of communities nearby and one with residents of Hilton Head communities) conducted for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island in January 1996. A summary of findings and trends from the series will be available separately. Conclusions and recommendations for the community relations plan should be made on the findings from the full series, not on the basis of this one group.

For additional information on the focus group methodology, protocols for conducting this series, the discussion guide used to facilitate the focus groups, copies of the materials reviewed in the groups, transcripts, or other information, please contact: SUSAN SANTOS at (617) 483-3054 (Massachusetts).

Background:

FOCUS GROUP provided guidance to MCRD for developing a random list of civilian employees who live in communities near Parris Island. FOCUS GROUP selected prospective participants from the list, seeking a group that would represent diversity in age, race, occupation, gender, and length of residency in the area. Supervisors of these employees were then contacted for permission to invite the employees. Employees received a letter of invitation to participate. Both letters identified the focus of the discussion: awareness, impressions, questions, and concerns employees might have about the MCRD Superfund listing. Lunch was provided.

During the focus group, in addition to discussing a variety of questions posed by the moderator, participants also read and discussed three handouts: (1) "Environmental Cleanup" a two page handout about the MCRD Superfund listing and schedule of related activities; (2) "Causeway Landfill Fact Sheet" describing one waste management site; and (3) "Restoration Advisory Boards" describing the RAB process. These handouts were written and designed only to stimulate discussion in the focus groups about the type and depth of information people were interested in rather than to provide detailed information.

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Participants:

13 participants, including 7 men and 6 women in diverse occupations. All residents of communities around Parris Island. 5 whites, 4 African Americans, and 4 Native Americans. Length of residency in area ranging from lifelong to 25 years or more to as little as two years. Occupations represented included:

Reception clerk, facilities maintenance  
Grounds maintenance  
Plumber  
Property clerk for MWR, MCRD  
MWR clerk  
Social worker at Family Service Center  
Accounting  
Child Development Center  
Audiovisual training  
Firefighter and communication specialist  
Warranty officer for maintenance division  
Architect for public works  
Management specialist in supply/services

Observer: Susan Santos, FOCUS GROUP

Moderator: Wendy Child for FOCUS GROUP

Findings:

. Though participants were aware that the discussion would focus on the MCRD Superfund listing, no one mentioned this during an informal discussion about what people associate with the word "environment". Several people could not think of anything they associate with "environment. Others talked about water quality, recycling, and hazardous waste in general.

. Only five people had heard of Superfund and no one had heard about the listing before receiving the letter about participating in the focus group. For example, people said:

"I've heard of Superfund, but I never thought that Parris Island would get funds or be funded by this organization...[About six months ago] We removed some contaminated waste from the fuel back in the 40s. I'm not sure if it was funded by Superfund or not...Is there an actual agency that's heading up the Superfund or is it just something, a pot of money someplace that is set aside for clean-up or exploratory site investigation or sampling?"

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"My boss and I were talking about this before I came over [for this group]. He actually questioned whether Parris Island was on the list or not...I think you'd be real surprised to find out that anybody knows that Parris Island is on the Superfund. I work in a department where I'm supposed to know that."

. Reactions to news about the Superfund listing were mixed, though the very first comments were positive ones about how good it is that Parris Island will receive some money for clean-up. Two people said:

"They're setting aside the money to get the problem cleared up on this base with an outside agency supporting us with funds...It's a good deal. We could really make this a better place."

"We'll receive the funds, equipment, whatever is needed to make things better...that's great."

. Most participants seemed to feel that the handouts they read, answered at least some questions they had after first learning about the Superfund listing. The participants who knew the least about Superfund in general and who had little or no contact with hazardous waste issues in their occupations found the basic handout more helpful than other participants with more general knowledge. One participant, a social worker, said:

"It answers every question that I had. That's why I asked if I could keep this. It told me what I need to know about the Superfund and the targeted areas and what the problem is here...I think people should know it."

. Both handouts, but the second one in particular ("Causeway Landfill Fact Sheet") generated some concerns about health implications and the possibility that community residents would become alarmed. While the handout indicated nothing at the site was found to exceed U.S. Food and Drug Administration action levels, participants questioned the meaning and credibility of this. People said:

"...I'm wondering whether there's a problem not only on the base but in our communities...It could be bigger than you know what is placed before us. It is good to put everything on the table. You don't want to create any type of panic or anything like that with the community or whatever, but with the water that we're getting from the Savannah River Plant and with all the cancer and different things in the land...a

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light bulb goes off in the head. What are we up against here?"

"I want to know what the spill sites are...Where are they and what are they? What is it going to do to me as a civilian employee on the base. Is it ever going to affect my health?"

"I think I'd be kind of worried about what's in there now...food, seafood, the oysters and things like that. It kind of makes me wonder because I know a lot of people [who] depend on seafood...How do they base their percentages as to whether it's good or bad or what for consumption?"

"...If a civilian on the outside -- someone from the community sees that Parris Island has 14 waste management sites that have to be cleaned up...Most of the time when you see anywhere in the newspapers and stuff, already it's assumed there's all kinds of junk leaking into the water supply...We don't have city water so we're real conscious of what we put in the water. It's always a concern. You've got to assume something's getting in the water and we're a fishing community...[this] would set off a normal person on the outside that didn't know that we're making [clean-up] attempts. Sometimes it seems feeble, but we're trying the best we can..."

"I don't have a clue what a waste management unit is. I think that needs a better description."

. After looking at the map of one site on a handout, some people started mentioning specific sites at Parris Island that were not listed but that they thought could be contaminated. This included the rifle range where lead could get in an adjacent pond and sludge next to MWR by the gun and riding club.

. It seemed difficult for most participants to guess who would be or should be responsible for clean-up activities. People said:

"I would imagine someone in maintenance and they would be a certified waste management personnel of some kind. By the state of federal government."

"Or someone who works out of the environmental office here."

. Several people expressed concern about whether the Marines alone would really make this a priority given the short time that

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senior officers spend at Parris Island. They were also worried about whether there would be enough money. Sample comments included:

"Where is the priority for the General here or the Chief of Staff or the Director of Environmental Affairs or Facility Maintenance if they're going to be gone...When we talk about priorities...they're going to leave these issues behind for us, the civilians who live here."

"[Marines compared with civilians] don't care because they're not going to be here any time. They're going to cover up as much as possible and do it as cheap as possible...the Marine Corps has no money, because they've never spent money. It's bad budgeting."

"Now if the Marine Corps is going to pay, you can bet your bottom dollar it's going to be the cheapest way out and the easiest way out."

"...I go to headquarters on a daily basis asking for money and they say that's not a priority...I've got one in right now that we need to completely restore the Depot fuel station. Now I will be in serious problems if they came and did a study..."

"The only magic wand is green...money."

"...To rid this island of what EPA considers contamination would put the deficit back...There would be no possible way..."

. As in the groups with community residents, some participants thought that the process is taking too long and MCRD should get the clean-up going instead of doing more studies. Only a small minority of participants noticed in the handout information that what is being studied now is options for clean-up, not further study of what the problems are. People said:

"...They've been conducting studies forever...[and now] The Marine Corps is electing to do their own study again. They spend thousands of dollars, millions of dollars through D.C. studying the habitation of a cockroach...Let's do an update. Set it up real quick. Do a test well sampling, identify the site, clean the site. A process that takes less than a year to do...You can study yourself to death and that's what they're doing."

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"The study has been done. What are we waiting for now? Are we going to do two to three more studies before we actually do something or something is done?"

. There was some awareness among a few employees whose occupations have acquainted them with hazardous waste issues that one of the options may be to leave some sites undisturbed. These participants made comments such as:

"Sometimes I really wonder if some of the stuff left alone is better than messing with it. I've been involved in a couple of site clean-ups in Orlando where the worst thing we did was mess with it..."

"Some of those landfills have nothing but trees."

. Near the end of the group, employees summarized what they felt are the most important questions to answer in communication materials and activities:

How bad is the problem?

What can we do at our level not to contribute to it?

How can we learn about it? Where can we get answers?

Where are the funds coming from?

When will they start and finish?

What testing will they do afterward to make sure they didn't miss anything?

What is my risk if I work here?

Who's accountable?

How are they going to prevent it from happening again?

What are the priorities? What will be addressed first?

. Several people seemed to think they would try to get information they might want about this from somewhere on base -- from the environmental office perhaps. If they could not get satisfactory answers at Parris Island, they might try their Congressperson or Senator or "a state agency". People wanted to be able to get information locally. Most participants nodded in agreement with this comment:

"It would be nice if it was locally or Parris Island...It's horrible if you have to go long distance. Talk to them face to face."

. Employees liked the idea of having a Restoration Advisory Board. In fact, someone suggested this concept before the moderator introduced it. He said:

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"Have a committee within the local area, local people you've grown up with that you know and sort of trust. They're not getting paid off by Marines Corps. That would be better than the culprit who did it. With the great Marine Corps two-year philosophy on Parris Island. I'm here two years. I don't care."

. Employees emphasized the importance of informing and educating them before information is widely disseminated to the community. They said:

"Let us know what's going on first so we can help generate people's opinions...[community people] would think we have the inside story versus someone telling them in a newsletter or something like this...So they'll come to us with questions."

"If we were informed, we could answer whatever questions they would probably shoot out at us. The employee would have to be informed."

. Employees offered a wide variety of suggestions for disseminating information to them. They also suggested that a mailing list be started so that people who wanted more information could obtain it, but money would not have to be spent sending material to people who aren't interested.

WJWJ

Local radio

Guard mail

Posted in buildings at Parris Island like clubs and exchanges

Tri-Command newspaper

Notices in leave and earning statements

Public meeting at boys and girls club

PARRIS ISLAND COMMUNITY RESIDENTS, BEAUFORT, 6:00 PM, 1-18-96

Department of Defense  
Commander from Parris Island  
General public

One person also suggested:

"Incorporate the Technical College of the Low Country and the University of South Carolina -- Beaufort and Columbia campuses and marine science departments to not necessarily oversee, because we're talking about very technical things here, but I would feel more comfortable if I knew [if they were involved]."

. Participants recommended getting information out whenever there is something "meaningful" which they seemed to hope would be about once a month. They said, "Don't waste paper" but perhaps send postcards to people periodically when there is no news, just to say what is being worked on at that time.

PARRIS ISLAND COMMUNITY RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Hilton Head, South Carolina

January 17, 1996

4:00 PM

About This Summary:

The following is a summary of findings from one in a series of four focus groups (one with civilian employees, two with residents of communities nearby and one with residents of Hilton Head communities) conducted for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island in January 1996. A summary of findings and trends from the series will be available separately. Conclusions and decisions for the community relations should be made on the findings from the full series, not on the basis of this one group.

For additional information on the focus group methodology, protocols for conducting this series, the discussion guide used to facilitate the focus groups, copies of the materials reviewed in the groups, transcripts, or other information, please contact: SUSAN SANTOS at (617) 483-3054 (Massachusetts).

Background:

Community resident participants were recruited by telephone using a random dialing strategy to reach households initially on the east end of Hilton Head Island across from Parris Island. A specific set of questions was asked to help assure that the group would reflect some of the same diversity as the local population of Hilton Head in general. A mix of both men and women, a variety of ages, both whites and African Americans, and various occupations was sought. People were not told that the discussion would focus on the Parris Island Superfund listing, only that it would be about local environmental issues.

The high proportion of part-time residents in this part of Hilton Head made recruiting difficult. Many people could not be reached and many who were said they were not interested in participating. Recruiting was eventually expanded to all of Hilton Head, but at least half of the participants were from communities at the eastern end of the island. People were not told that the discussion would focus on the Parris Island Superfund listing, only that it would be about local environmental issues.

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During the focus group, in addition to discussing a variety of questions posed by the moderator, participants also read and discussed three handouts: (1) "Environmental Cleanup" a two page handout about the MCRD Superfund listing and schedule of related activities; (2) "Causeway Landfill Fact Sheet" describing one waste management site; and (3) "Restoration Advisory Boards" describing the RAB process. These handouts were written and designed only to stimulate discussion in the focus groups about the type and depth of information people were interested in rather than to provide detailed information.

Participants:

10 participants: 6 women and 4 men representing several communities on Hilton Head. Two participants were over age 65; most between 55 - 65 years in age; one was between 34 - 44 and two participants were between 24 and 34. A variety of occupations were represented among those working: two chefs, a claims adjuster, IBM personnel director, freelance writer, and an owner of a rental business. Household incomes were also diverse.

Observers:

Major Carol McBride, MCRD  
Steve Sorgen, NEHC  
Carl Davis, NEHC  
Rick Bowlus, ACHPPM  
Derrick Reynolds, ACHPPM  
Susan Santos, FOCUS GROUP  
Terry McGurn, FOCUS GROUP

Moderator: Wendy Child for FOCUS GROUP

Findings:

No one mentioned any association between Parris Island and local concerns until after participants were made aware of the MCRD Superfund listing. Instead, local concerns generally focused on consequences of development (e.g., overpopulation, traffic, real estate that locals cannot afford and fresh water supply. About water, people said:

"We on Hilton Head have our heads in the sand when we're dealing with problems we'll have shortly with a water shortage."

"They're going to be getting it from Savannah."

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"The Savannah River flows past the atomic energy plant and some people have some concern about that."

Even when the moderator asked whether there were any other local environmental concerns, participants mentioned things, generally associated with development. These included:

- Cross-island roads
- Golf course chemicals
- Traffic
- Too many shopping centers
- No recreation except golf, tennis
- Pollution affecting shrimp
- Salt intrusion in water

. When the topic of Parris Island was first introduced, most everyone agreed that they think of it as "far away" and not something that affects them. Mention of "Parris Island" also generated some confusion about what is encompassed by "Parris Island" with some people thinking of the air station as more prominent than MCRD. When the moderator asked about the proximity of military installations, people were initially in agreement with one response indicating they are "Far. Very far." Another person explained:

"There are three [military facilities] in Beaufort: the Naval Hospital, Marine Air Base and Parris Island. There's an air base in Savannah and just south of Savannah, there's an Army base so we're surrounded, but it doesn't affect anybody on the Island."

. No one felt they could complete a "report card" for Parris Island rating commitment to health and safety or other issues on the basis of their present knowledge. They said:

"How would most of us know anything about the environment and health or anything on Parris Island?"

"Beaufort people would know this. Most of us have no contact with it at all..."

"I couldn't answer a single one of these."

Some people wondered if there was a concern about the air station, asking for example:

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"...If you can hear helicopters and if you're concerned about engine exhaust and noise and those things, you may feel a little bit intensely [about the air station]."

"I feel very intensely about those planes going over and that sonic boom that knocked my house off its foundations."

. No one had heard about Parris Island being listed as a Superfund site before it was announced in this group. Only about half of the participants had heard of Superfund at all. One said:

"What's a Superfund?"

Another explained it as follows:

"It's a bankrupt account which we are to draw on the next 200 years to clean up messes that should not have been made and for which there is not enough money..."

. News of the listing evoked some concern among these Hilton Head residents. One person recalled Love Canal being a Superfund site and assumed that there must be dangerous pollution in or around Parris Island. Other "guesses" about the meaning of the Superfund listing included:

Ground water contamination  
Noise pollution  
Toxic materials  
Unspent shells  
Problems with Marine resources [to clean up]

One woman who arrived late asked if she was understanding correctly that:

"Parris Island has set up a special fund of money for people they've already recruited to go and clean up whatever mess they have made because the President thinks it should be done now?"

. After reading the first factsheet called "Environmental Clean-Up", participants were mainly concerned about whether there would be money for cleanup activities and why it had taken so long after problems were discovered for cleanup to begin. No one seemed to understand the timetable information on the second side of the factsheet. People said:

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"After nine years, they still haven'd done anything. It's sad if it truly takes that long."

"Superfund is already bankrupt. This is beautifully written, well organized. But it means zip. We don't funding to implement any of this."

"When will it start? When they balance the budget?"

"It doesn't tell us the money will be available."

The second side with the flowchart should be ditched."

. After reading the "Causeway Landfill Fact Sheet", participants did not understand that the factsheet was addressing just one of several MCRD sites involved in the Superfund listing, but otherwise were able to describe the main ideas from the factsheet fairly accurately. People were concerned about:

Impact on fish and people who eat them;  
too little information about specific clean-up actions;  
contradiction between need to clean up and claim that things are "safe"; and  
why everything is taking so long.

People said:

"It's 10 years ago with no action taken...That's one reason there is lack of confidence in the...effort to find out more..."

"I think there's one piece missing. What about the funding. Is that what's holding everything up?"

"I didn't get out of it what they really plan to do or what can be done or who's going to pay for it."

"Should we be eating oysters and shrimp and all that?"

"It's very interesting that they now say everything is not as bad, so how does it get to be a Superfund clean-up site [if] it's below Food and Drug Administration action levels, blah, blah, blah?"

"To me the most important thing is that nothing has yet been done...It's now into the 10th year from when they started."

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. Participants' recommendations about how to keep them informed about this issue reflected some concerns about whether the Marines would be truthful. For example, participants wanted to hear about this from:

TV news  
60 Minutes, Dateline  
State legislators  
Governor  
Department of Health

People said:

"If the Department of Health came out with something that said there was real problem over there, I would believe it. This sounds strange, but if they went in there and said, well, no, it looks like they've cleaned it up, I wouldn't be as sure."

"I would like to believe that if they did deal with South Carolina Health Department and there was a pollution problem, that word would somehow get out either into the newspaper or local television news or what have you."

"The Marine Corps is not going to come out and advertise the fact they've got pollution problems without having either a solution or at least a date for the solution...Somebody's going to have to come in and find out about this..."

"Give me somebody who's just like me [for me to trust the information]."

"Obviously, you wouldn't use a military man."

"...So we are totally in the dark about what is good or bad that exists there. Now you're asking us how do we want to learn about what is bad there. They're not going to tell us..."

. Note, however, that one participant wanted to hear from Parris Island employees. She said:

"...I want to hear it from someone who's on Parris Island, who's in there, just like me...I can't trust the newspapers...You call up Parris Island and you're going to get a public relations person and they're going to tell you

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what they're supposed to tell you. Give me someone who works there, who walks the streets...who's just sitting down talking. But you're not going to find nobody like that unless they're your friend..."

. Participants were not confident that traditional public meetings offering no opportunities for dialogue would be beneficial. Comments included:

"The public meeting they had on the Savannah River Plant was very, very bad. That's generally the case...No one was allowed to speak except through someone who was organizing how it was to be presented. No one was allowed to stand up and speak at all."

"[Public meetings mean..] a lot of bureaucrats coming there with a bunch of paperwork."

. Participants thought the concept of the Restoration Advisory Boards was better than public meetings. However, they were concerned that the RAB process would slow clean-up action and that citizens should be informed more than involved. Pro and con comments included:

"I think it's a good concept because it puts responsibility back on citizens to participate in these community affairs. If you are really interested...There should be some leads at some of these meetings so you can do your own research..."

"...If I read about a situation like this at home, I would go to the meeting. I still think there has to be some way you can reach people like us who are interested...I do want to be informed about it. But I'm not involved in it."

"Once you have defined the problem, why do you need a group of people to redefine the problem?"

"...more red tape. More people involved. Just do it..."

"We're paying the environmentalists to look into these situations [so the RAB isn't needed]."

"The average citizen doesn't have the training or expertise..."