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PARRIS ISLAND CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM 18
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MCRD PARRIS ISLAND

PARRIS ISLAND COMMUNITY RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Beaufort, South Carolina
January 18, 1996
6:00 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 in Beaufort and surrounding communities. A specific set of questions was asked to help assure that the group would reflect some of the same diversity as the local population 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.

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:

9 participants: 6 women and 3 from Beaufort or surrounding communities such as Port Royal, Ladies Island, and St. Helenas. Participants were diverse in age with one or two people each in the ranges of 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and over 65. A variety of occupations were represented among those working; e.g., aquarium curator, real estate agent, farmer, child development program leader, and nurse. Household incomes were also diverse but all under \$45K with several in the under \$15K or \$15-24K range.

Observers:

MCRD: Col. Dennis Hilton, Major Carol McBride, Gy.Sgt. Charles Demar, Johnsie Nabors, Tim Harrington, Dean Bradley

NEHC: Heidi Maupin, Steve Sorgen, Maryann Simmons, Wendy Bridges, Carl Davis

ACHPPM: Rick Bowlus

FOCUS GROUP: Terry McGurn, Wendy Child

Moderator: Susan Santos, FOCUS GROUP

Findings:

. Similar to participants in other groups, these participants associated the word "environment" mainly with development issues. They talked about water pollution from development and its effects on fish and wildlife. They also voiced a concern about the unfairness of heavily regulating the fishing industry to protect wildlife while half million dollar homes are being built right on the beaches. A few people also interpreted "environment" in a broader social sense, expressing concerns about the lack of jobs and community support for young people in the Beaufort area.

. Everyone was familiar with Parris Island, but also as in other groups, the air station was mentioned first and was assumed to have more pollution than the Recruit Depot. When asked about military facilities in the area, people first mentioned the Laurel Bay housing, and then Parris Island, "the biggest Marine Corps base in the world".

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. Only two participants were aware of Superfund in general and one of these was concerned about whether Superfund is broke. One person even interrupted the moderator as she began to explain MCRD's Superfund listing to ask, "What does that mean... Superfund?" One participant explained it as:

"[Superfund is] the government's high priority list for toxic materials being generated into the environment."

The other person aware of Superfund added:

"[It] has just been shut down...Superfund essentially has no funds now. They've been shut down by the budget impasse and failure of the Republicans to fund their activities."

Another participant questioned whether the moderator had mistakenly said the Recruit Depot instead of the air station as the Superfund site.

. Before participants read fact sheets distributed during the focus groups, news of the Superfund listing evoked only a few questions and assumptions. People said:

"What's it doing to the coastal waters of South Carolina?"

"To me it sounds like they're trying to clean up now because they messed up earlier. Trying to make things look better for themselves."

. After reading the first fact sheet, "Environmental Cleanup", there were more comments and questions, mainly about who is involved in the investigations and cleanup activities and why EPA has not taken care of this before now. For example, comments or questions included:

"Who goes out and investigates the sites that need to be cleaned? How do they determine what's there?"

"If the military did this, you should have an independent [agency]. [Someone] specialized in that field do the investigation."

"EPA...They're supposed to be the group that's head of the environment, right? Why haven't they checked the environment like Parris Island, the air station and all these other military facilities? Why hasn't someone from their office gone out and checked all this?"

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. After reading an additional fact sheet, "Causeway Landfill Fact Sheet", people had many questions, including:

Why were they allowed to do this?

Who allowed it to happen?

What is being done?

When are they going to start cleaning up?

Why haven't they told the community before?

What did they find out from the feasibility study?

What happens if they find it is not feasible (to clean up)?

Are they going to leave it alone?

When the FDA says action levels weren't exceeded, what are their levels? In language people can understand -- do you have to eat 30 pounds of shrimp a day before you get sick?

Over what period of time is there a risk? Would someone who has lived here and eaten fish for 60 years be at risk?

What are they going to do with the people who have been living around that area?

Why the Defense Department? ("It seems to me an independent agency such as EPA should have made this test and I'm not sure if they ever did. That's very important.")

When will they start? ("Not soon, if EPA is broke they can't do it.")

. Reactions also included some concerns about and cynicism toward the military's willingness to take care of this or tell people about it. For example, comments included:

"None of this surprises me. I know there are a lot of things that need to be cleaned up around [Parris Island]. I know for a fact that not too much is being done now. I guess each new commander comes in, there's a lot of hush-hush for a lot of things that are going on as far as this is concerned. I know they have good Depot inspectors, but their hands are always tied. You can't say this, you can't say that, you can't do this...Everything that's wrong can be corrected if they want it to be."

"For all this to come up finally and everything, why would they just up and now want to research after this has been going on for so long and the public hasn't heard anything about it. Why now, all of a sudden?"

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"The public is always the last to know."

"I think there is one thing for us as a group to understand. We're providing information that is going to be used by a public relations firm or the office of information of the Marine Corps to put the best light possible on what we're talking about."

"The whole thing is a matter of attitude and approach. I have seen too many community groups co-opted by those who they were worried about and brought in and made to feel all good and warm and cozy and the stuff rolled on...Let me tell you the attitude I'd like to see come out of the Marine Corps: 'Folks, we messed up. We did some bad stuff and we want you to help us and work with us while we try to make it right.' That's what would give me the idea that maybe they are serious."

Only one person was willing to claim she trusted the government. She said:

"I trust the government. I trust the people over there on Parris Island. I don't know why they were allowed to dump all this stuff over there and where they got permission to do it, but I still trust them and I feel they willingly will help us as a community now that we're aware of everything that's going on...They did not have to bring this to our attention..."

Even when the moderator informed participants that the law requires that "all the information must be available to the public", participants were skeptical, with one commenting, "That law's being broken all the time."

Concern about why it has taken so long for people to find out about this and why more time is being invested in studying instead of cleaning up was very strong. People said:

"How many studies should there be? If you're going to have a lot of studies, you're going to spend the rest of the 21st century going studies on what to do."

"...the more studying, the more money. Get on with the program and doing something about it. They know what the problem is."

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"They should have [cleaned up] 10 years ago when they found out about the mercury they were putting in the ground and things of that nature."

. However, people were generally impressed by the concept of a community relations plan. They interpreted the news that one would be developed to mean that people in the community would be able to participate in some way, "working together" to address the problem. As one woman put it:

"It's the only way anything will ever get done in any situation regardless of what it is...The only way is if we get not just the government involved...They knew then the chemicals were not good. Why they put it in the ground, I had no idea that did that and I've lived here and saw the thing built, but I didn't know they were dumping."...

. Similarly, most people liked the concept of the Restoration Advisory Board and saw it as a means of insuring that information they need would be forthcoming. However, one person was also very concerned about whether this would mean "more studying" and more delays. Comments included:

"It's got to come from the community and someone who is qualified. Not just me running off my mouth...someone who can come to us, the public, and tell us exactly what's being done."

"How can I become a member?"

"They should have done this ten years ago when they first found the mercury."

. Participants had a variety of suggestions about how to get information out to community residents. They recommended:

Churches

Schools

Newspaper

Educational television

Community groups

Documentary

Store displays

Hospitals

People to "expound" on it.

"People to go around to houses and talk to people."

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Comments included:

"The churches and school is the most powerful place now that you can get information out."

"Parents will jump on it because they have small kids and they would like to know what in the environment is going to affect their kids."

. Participants were skeptical about the value of what the moderator called "public meetings" but they liked the idea of something called "information sessions" where they could ask questions. Comments illustrating the difference in response to public meetings versus information sessions included:

"The thing that always bothers me about things like that is when they do have a meeting, nobody turns up. Including myself. We all sit home and watch the boob tube."

"[Meetings] are out of their way. It's a nuisance. They're in the evening. People want to go home and relax. You can't blame them. They're not that involved. Let someone else do it."

"[Information sessions] would be great. Because they can explain to use exactly what they have done and what they will be doing and let us know what's going on. Straight up."

. These participants were fairly adamant about wanting agencies other than the military involved in communication about the clean-up process because, as one person put it, "I'm afraid the Department of Defense always has and always will only look out for themselves." People said the following should be all be involved:

Someone from EPA
Local government officials
"Someone in charge of waterways (local and state)
CDC "because they test drinking water"

"DEHEC" (Department of Health and Environmental Controls of South Carolina) because "they're out there working in the marshes anyway checking on human waste that keeps the oyster beds closed."

PARRIS ISLAND COMMUNITY RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Beaufort, South Carolina

January 18, 1996

8:00 PM

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Participants:

7 participants: 4 women and 3 men from Beaufort or surrounding communities such as Shell Point and Burton. The group included two retired Marines; a retired school teacher; two lifelong residents of Beaufort: a barber and a school bus mechanic; a manager of a self-storage facility who said she had been coming to the area for 50 years; and a homemaker who moved to Beaufort from Kentucky with her husband about 10 years "because they had heard there was work".

Observers:

MCRD: Col. Dennis Hilton, Major Carol McBride, Gy.Sgt. Charles Demar, Johnsie Nabors, Tim Harrington, Dean Bradley

NEHC: Heidi Maupin, Steve Sorgen, Maryann Simmons, Wendy Bridges, Carl Davis

ACHPPM: Rick Bowlus

FOCUS GROUP: Susan Santos, Terry McGurn

Moderator: Wendy Child for FOCUS GROUP

Findings:

. Participants associated the word "environment" mainly with the impact of development. Discussion focused examples such as building "another" grocery store, cutting down trees or effects on water safety for fishing and swimming with so much building nearby. People said:

"Slice [trees] down and put up a building. Like we don't have 15 grocery stores. How much can you eat?"

"They say the water is safe [with the new sewage systems], but is it?"

"It's over over developed...it's getting bad. It's bad and it's getting worse."

. There were also some concerns about farmer and State Highway use of pesticides and herbicides getting into the water. One person talked about a known case of highway workers over spraying, killing trees, and getting little or no punishment.

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. Participants were all familiar with local military activities and most gave Parris Island and the Marines in general high marks for safeguarding health and the environment. There were also concerns that there too many requirements and regulations for them to comply with, especially from OSHA. (Most of these participants had some connection either as ex-Marines, spouses of ex-Marines, or business or employment with one or more of the hospital, air station or Parris Island.) About MCRD, people said:

"Beaufort would die if it weren't for the Marines, I hate to tell you. We got the Naval Hospital, Parris Island, the Recruit Depot. Everything east of the Mississippi and the Air Station. They fought like dogs to keep that air station open when they were closing everybody."

"Of course [the Marines safeguard health]. The Marines don't get sick. All they do is march. And environmental regulations, I think that's good. And keeping the public informed, that's excellent."

About regulations in general or OSHA specifically, people said:

"As far as compliance with regulations, probably not [because] OSHA could find 37 things wrong with this pencil. There are so many ridiculous things with OSHA, it's unbelievable..."

"We could do away with OSHA."

"They over-comply with things especially in the last 10 years."

"We probably waste half our money complying with things that aren't even necessary..."

"I think you have to have some type of control, but instead of writing stacks of regulations...there needs to be a little bit more common sense involved in decisions instead."

. One participant had heard that Parris Island had some problems with sewage disposal. No one else was familiar with this. The participant who brought it up said:

"There has been some spillage of sewage from Parris Island. It's happened more than once over the last several years and

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to me, that is going directly into our waters. They need better control. They've always informed the public, but by the same token, whenever that happens they close all the shellfishing."

. As a part of the discussion, people were asked to "grade" MCRD on how well it keeps the public informed. Some people were not confident that the public is kept very well informed, but they were also not sure that the public should be told more. They said:

"I haven't been able to find out what's really...I just may be slow, but it's not too much that I read about in the newspaper about what's going on. I find out about it later -- and I read the Beaufort Gazette everyday. I don't know if it's for our safety or what. I've never been in the military, but we always find out what's happening after it happens."

"Even though I was over there for 27 years, I don't think they let you know what's going on, even when you are there..."

"If something happens -- anything with the government, I'll guarantee you won't find it until after the fact. I don't care what branch of the government."

"I think they know when they think you should know. Then if they don't think you should know, they'll keep quiet...That's fine if you don't find out about it for awhile. Maybe I shouldn't know about it."

. No one had heard about the Superfund listing. Most people were not familiar with what Superfund is and were reluctant at first to answer the moderator's question about what went through their minds when she informed them about the listing. As people out it:

"I don't know what a Superfund list is...I think I'm going to change my grade for keeping the public informed [on a "report card" exercise conducted during the focus group] down to E...You really haven't told us enough."

"You've got to explain it to me. If you never heard of it, you never heard of it."

. Participants asked several questions in response to the information about the listing, including:

Why is Parris Island in the list?
What is Superfund for?
What type of "environment" are we talking about? Sewage?
What has to be cleaned up?
How would it benefit us?

. The moderator asked a few people to read one fact sheet called, " Environmental Cleanup" and for those readers to explain the main ideas to the other participants. Most of the discussion focused on three concerns:

What is at Parris Island that made it eligible for the list;
perceived likelihood of more serious problems at the air station or hospital than at a training facility like MCRD. It was surprising that a training facility would have hazardous waste; and
whether everything really needs to be cleaned up.

One man, an ex-Marine who read the fact sheet first explained the main idea as follows:

"It looks like in 1986, they started checking bases. They had disposal sites and landfills. I'm sure if they dug around the air station, they'd find the same thing, but evidently they must have found something exciting [at Parris Island] so they put it on this list to clean it up. I don't remember the stuff on the back [but] as usual, the government's got 99 procedures to get there. To get nowhere. Quite frankly, as long as I've been around Parris Island, probably 9,000 million farmers did the same thing over the years. I'm not so awfully concerned about what's buried from Parris Island. I'd be more concerned about the air station they don't even mention."

Others who read it added:

"When you deal with hazardous material, you can't just take it and dump it somewhere and just forget about it because they're not getting rid of it properly. Ny looking at this [fact sheet] here I think Superfund, if they say they'll clean it up, that's a good idea."

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"From the facts it says, 'waste management units' plus landfills. One landfill I recall was on Horse Island in the lat 40s -- that was nothing but old garbage...Probably a lot of this would be things that need to be...are old and need to be repaired, gotten rid of or cleaned up or something."

In response to these explanations, those who had not read it wanted to know:

"Does it go into any kind of specifics about what kind of mess it is? Would common sense tell you it was nothing but methane from pig manure or is it something more serious?"

"What kinds of things are we talking about? Chemicals? Oil? If it was at the air station, they're probably talking about diesel fuel and jet fuel and so forth...Out at Parris Island, all I can come up with is maybe, chemicals that were used in training, but they didn't use them too strongly there."

This was followed by further conjecture about the air station and the hospital:

"It's just people [at Parris Island] for 12 weeks and then gone...We don't know what all's over at the air station. I can imagine ten times worse something happening at the air station because of all the equipment, machinery, who knows what?"

"Now the Naval Hospital, [they have] dangerous things to dispose of, needles and this and that [even if] you're only talking about Parris Island."

"You read all this and you want to know about the hospital and the air station."

"I'm not saying I'm concerned, but I would like to know more about it."

On questioning whether what is there needs to be cleaned up, people said:

"Do we need to spend a billion dollars to dig up an old landfill that had garbage from 40 years ago? Not in my mind? I mean if it was some kind of dangerous chemicals, but if it's an old landfill or junkyard [with] old machinery...big deal."

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. After reading a second fact sheet about one of the sites, people had a variety of additional questions about the circumstances at the site. Participants also seemed concerned about whether information would unduly alarm people and whether it is in fact necessary to spend money on cleaning up these sites. They wanted to know:

The actual location of the causeway discussed in the factsheet;
whether there is danger that warrants spending money to clean up;
if there is danger, why visible warnings about it aren't posted;
why such technical terms used in the fact sheet.
whether levels would increase or decrease if left alone.
what the levels are outside the immediate pond in the tidal creeks and other creeks;
whether cleaning up could possibly create a bigger problem than leaving things alone, citing asbestos cleanup problems as an example; and
What is at the other sites and what are the risks.

People said:

"I didn't see anything in there that I thought would be detrimental to our health. Maybe there is. Somebody else saw it. For a long time, we haven't been able to gather oysters but I don't think Parris Island is the cause of it."

"...If it's so dangerous, why was I not seeing a sign when I was out there fishing the other day."

"I think the way it's written, they're kind of playing with your brain. They jump at you and tell you all this bad stuff. By that time you're either so excited you don't read the part that says it's alright, don't worry about it. You don't see that part of it, so then you jump in and want to spend the money. But you don't have to because they say there are no excess limits."

"...I just don't think if they've done their studies and there are no cases where the levels are exceeded...then why would they waste all this precious money that people go out and work really really hard for to clean up?"

"If [the stuff] ain't come out by now, it's probably not there anymore."

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"I think we need to go a little further as to what's outside the pond in the creeks and so forth. If the levels are not dangerous, spend the money someplace else like probably at the air station."

"Do we need to know...let people get panicky about something that doesn't amount to anything?...People get a little bit of information and all of a sudden you got a bunch of panic. To me, it's ludicrous to go out and spend a billion dollars to clean up a place where somebody dumped garbage 30 years ago. If we did that all over the country, we'd dig up the whole United States. I don't know where we'd put it all."

"Let's...not make a big deal out of an old garbage pit that's got old banana peels in it."

. Participants concurred that there should be some type of oversight for decisions the Marines make about the clean-up, but they could not agree on who should be involved. They were more interested in "independent" organizations than government agencies, although EPA and OSHA were both listed as potentially credible organizations.

. The idea of involving citizens in some way came up before the moderator asked the group for reactions to the concept of the Restoration Advisory Boards. Participants liked this idea. One person suggested that RAB members should be paid. The initial reference to involving local citizens was:

"Form a committee, say of citizens, that sort of oversaw whoever did it."

. Participants had difficulty making suggestions about the best ways to keep people informed about Parris Island clean-up. They were very concerned about how easily some people would miss information passed out through schools or churches; how easily many people would panic or over-react; and whether people should be told everything anyway. Several people agreed with the following comment:

"The news media complains they don't get enough information from the military like in the Gulf War. There are certain things the public doesn't need to know until...it's done. For their own safety...the general public has no business knowing until it is over..."

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. When pressed to make suggestions, participants seemed to like the idea of local television better than newspapers, especially a local talk program that features interviews with two guests representing sides of a local issue. Participants also thought they would personally be interested in public meetings where there are people from EPA, Parris Island, and private organizations "that do environmental studies" to answer questions. Comments included:

"[Have] a forum similar to this [focus group] where people could share their opinions. You would pray when you walked in the door that most people would be level-headed and open-minded enough to receive the information without getting hysterical."

. As in other groups on this and comparable topics, participants stressed the importance of informing people like them about what's going on because word-of-mouth can be an effective avenue of communication. The said:

"[People are going to listen to [someone like me] a lot more than they would if EPA printed this big thing and stuck it in the paper."

"If you ask the general, all he's going to is tell you what information they gave him and being in the military as long as I was, don't ask a general anything. Ask the private. He's the one that was out there digging that hole."

"My personal opinion is when you get a group, like an environmental group or something like that, they're usually a bunch of fanatics...They don't care if it costs a million dollars to restore it."