

Interoffice
Communication

TO: Distribution

FROM: T. G. Grumbles

DATE: November 2, 1990

SUBJ: ABERDEEN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

~~TGG~~ JGL: ~~ERT~~: ~~MMH~~: AJO: RF

XF: None ~~XXXXXX~~

XC - MMH
(TOOK IT)

VISTA

Attached is a copy of the article that appeared in October's Occupational Hazard's magazine. This is a national publication with a relatively large circulation.

Several people mentioned this article to me at a national industrial hygiene conference last week.


T. G. Grumbles

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Attachment

Distribution: Executive Management

R. J. Andersen, J. D. Burns, J. R. Ball, J. A. DeBernardi, G. G. Draper, R. T. Ferrell, H. R. Flammer, N. C. Frost, R. D. Gamblin, T. H. Huffman, B. E. A. Larsen, M. J. Schneider, W. J. B. Vogel, J. J. Weidner, D. L. Cohen, J. C. Ledvina-Houston

V. W. Weiss-Austin

PLANT MANAGERS

R. W. Seymour-Aber, L. R. Bauer-Balt, G. D. Williams-Blane, J. Pavao-Hmd, J. Friend-LCCP, J. W. Ware-LCLAB, R. A. Conrad-LCVCN, H. D. Garrison-Okc, P. L. Foote-Prem, V. W. Weiss-Austin

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VISTA CHEMICAL: TUNING IN TO THE COMMUNITY

Robert Seymour, manager of the Vista Chemical plant in the small town of Aberdeen, Miss., can't walk through a downtown store without having someone stop to tell him how much they appreciate the open approach Vista has taken with the community.

Comments like these are a reflection of Vista's efforts over the past two years at improving risk communication for its employees and its neighbors in the community.

Vista Chemical, a Fortune 500 company with facilities worldwide, manufactures chemicals used to make household detergents, cosmetics, and hygiene products. Vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) is manufactured at Vista's plant in Lake Charles, La., and shipped to the Aberdeen plant for use in the production of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) resins and compounds. These materials are sold to firms manufacturing a wide variety of products, including water and sewer pipe, cable coatings, auto trim, and food packaging.

The Aberdeen plant employs about 250 workers, 60 percent of whom are local residents. As one of the largest companies in the Aberdeen area, Vista's economic impact on the community is significant.

Seymour says the reporting requirements of SARA Title III, Section 313, were the driving force behind the company's efforts to improve communication channels with employees and the surrounding community. SARA requires facilities to provide officials and citizens with data on the types of hazardous materials used and manufactured on site, the amounts on hand, and their specific locations. Under Section 313, Vista is required to report emissions for approximately 60 chemicals at all plant locations.

Seymour says he and other Vista



Vista Chemical has organized employee and community groups to improve SARA Title III communication.

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officials wanted to be ready for the worst possible public response to data about Vista materials. The best strategy, they agreed, would be to provide as thorough an explanation of the data as possible.

"People weren't familiar with some of the things that we were doing or what kind of emission levels we had," Seymour says. "We expected that there might be an outcry from the public saying, 'Nobody ever told us any of this.' We knew that putting out those numbers without some explanation to go along with them might be upsetting."

In beefing up its risk communication policy, Vista added an additional member to its corporate

communications staff, and provided plant managers with increased media and communications training. In addition, the company developed a new environmental policy which allows for programs designed to protect environment, health, and safety throughout the life of its products.

The first of ten principles of the new policy is: "Vista will inform and educate its employees, surrounding communities, carriers, customers, contractors, and government agencies of the health and environmental hazards of the chemicals we make, use, and sell."

The first step, says Seymour, was the assembly of employee and community groups to help the

company tune in to public concerns.

"When we began back in April 1988 to talk about communicating SARA Section 313 information to our employees and to our neighbors in the community," remembers Seymour, "we said first off that we needed to know what their concerns were, and what questions or comments they had about the plant and its operations."

The result was two "focus groups," one for local community residents living near the plant and one for employees and their spouses. In an effort to promote more open discussion, representatives from the public relations and environmental industrial hygiene departments at corporate headquarters in Houston were called in to discuss issues with the employee group rather than plant officials. The strategy, says Seymour, was that people would speak more frankly with company representatives than with local management.

"We tried to select a good cross-section in the employee group," says Seymour. "We had some minorities, some women, hourly people, salary people, we tried to represent the whole workforce. We talked to them about what their concerns were about the plant, and got some feedback."

Included in the community focus group were residents who lived near the plant and local business representatives. The primary concern of many of the residents, says Seymour, was the white PVC resin dust that discharged from the plant and settled on property throughout the area. In response, the plant invested in engineering methods to control this release of dust.

Beyond the concerns over the dust, says Seymour, the community knew little about the company or its corporate restructuring. In 1981, Conoco Chemical Inc., located in Aberdeen, was acquired by Du Pont. Vista was formed in 1984 by a leveraged buyout from some of Conoco's remaining assets.

"People were not knowledgeable about us at all," he says. "They basically said that what Conoco

had done before, and what Vista was now doing, was not telling the community anything, and that we kept our cards pretty close to our vest," says Seymour. "They knew we had some chemicals over here, but they didn't know anything about them. They were glad to have us in the community, because we're a good employer, but they had some concerns."

Immediately following the discussions in the focus groups, Vista set up four SARA communications teams. The teams, each consisting



"(Residents and local merchants) were glad to have us in the community . . . but they had some concerns."

Robert Seymour
Plant Manager
Vista Chemical

of eight to 12 employees, included Seymour, the plant's employee relations director, superintendent, safety director, frontline supervisor, and several hourly employees.

"We had the folks who got the feedback from the focus groups come to meetings of the SARA communications team, and let us know what some of the concerns were that they heard about. We then set about putting together an action plan for how we'd work on them."

The team developed a communications plan and materials, including a videocassette film to be shown at several communications events. These events included meetings of all plant employees, and an open house for employees' families to visit the plant.

"The video talks about what our waste levels are and gives SARA emissions data," explains Seymour. During meetings in the first year, he adds, "we handed out a brochure that showed how our plant operates and included pictures of some of our plant employees that people would recognize as their neighbors." In the second year of the program, says Seymour, the brochures were distributed with the weekly plant newspaper.

"We've now had 17 presentations of our SARA communications program since May 1988," says Seymour. "Those include presentations for local government officials, state legislators, the local emergency planning committee (LEPC), the local rotary club, and the local trucking firm with which Vista works. The presentations usually include a group of plant people talking about our contribution to the community, how our plant operates, what things we're doing to improve the reliability of our plant, the quality of our product, and the environmental and safety performance of the plant."

Seymour's risk communication objectives for the coming year include the formation of a community advisory panel, which would monitor community feedback to Vista's risk information campaign.

"We've already had some volunteers who have expressed an interest in participating," says Seymour. "The strategy isn't completely mapped out yet, but there are some documents from the CMA that give some hints on how to make community advisory panels work. We belong to CMA, and we're involved in their Responsible Care program. That's one of the requirements of success in that program: letting your audience know what you're doing, and then understanding and addressing their concerns."

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