

## **Key Components of Waste Control Specialists LLC Public Outreach Program - 9028**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Waste Control Specialists LLC operates in an environment with extremely supportive host communities in Andrews County, Texas and Lea County, New Mexico. Since 2004, when Waste Control Specialists applied for licenses for the near-surface disposal of radioactive byproduct material and low level radioactive waste, the Company has nurtured and expanded this support by engaging in an interactive dialogue regarding the positive impact the licenses would have on the local community, the Permian Basin and the state of Texas. This paper describes the public outreach campaign Waste Control Specialists employed to maintain and expand its public support during the last twelve months of the licensing process.

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Business**

Waste Control Specialists LLC (“WCS”) is a Texas-based waste management firm that offers innovative and cost effective solutions for the safe management of hazardous and radioactive materials. WCS has safely operated a 1,338-acre site in Andrews County, Texas since February 1997 and is currently authorized to treat, store and dispose of hazardous and toxic waste, and treat and store low-level radioactive waste (“LLW”).

In June and August 2004, WCS submitted license applications seeking authorizations to expand its on-site capabilities to safely dispose of byproduct material and LLW, respectively. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (“TCEQ”) issued a final byproduct material disposal license and a final LLW disposal license in May 2008 and January 2009, respectively. The LLW disposal license is the first commercial LLW disposal license to be issued in the U.S since the compact system was established by the LLRW Act of 1980.

Since 1980, more than \$1 billion has been spent by states in unsuccessful attempts to site a LLW disposal facility. Most of the attempts failed because of lack of local and regional support. WCS selected its Andrews County location as a base for its operations because of the region’s geologic conditions and support from the local community. WCS has nurtured this support through open and transparent communications.

#### **Community**

The WCS site is located in the far western part of Andrews County, Texas, right on the eastern border of Lea County, New Mexico. The closest community, Eunice, New Mexico, is six miles from the site while the closest Texas community, Andrews, is 30 miles from WCS. Since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economies of both Andrews and Lea Counties have been heavily dependent on the oil and gas industry---oil field services companies dominate the landscape. Individuals working for these companies understand hazardous work. The wildcatter mentality is alive and well in west Texas and eastern New Mexico. These communities understand the important role they play in the American way of life. Against this

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backdrop, the local citizens have embraced WCS and the need to provide a local, state and national solution to a pressing problem---the disposal of radioactive byproduct material and LLW.

### **INITIAL LACK OF PUBLIC OUTREACH**

WCS did very little public outreach outside of Andrews County prior to applying for the radioactive disposal licenses. Like most companies operating in small communities, WCS employees are responsible for most of the public outreach on a one-on-one basis through volunteering in hospitals, churches, schools and other civic organizations. WCS' and its employees' support of local events has included everything from youth sports teams to art sales to scholarships for local high school students. WCS and its employees have strived to become part of the fabric of the Andrews and Lea county communities.

When encountered with news stories that were viewed by WCS as being negative, incorrect or incomplete, WCS reacted on a case-by-case basis. Correct or additional information was provided to news agencies when requested. However, with the issuance of the draft byproduct license late in 2007, WCS became inundated with requests for information following the publication of several inaccurate and incomplete articles in Texas newspapers far away from the Andrews area which questioned the site's geology and its appropriateness for the disposal of radioactive byproduct material and LLW. The need to respond and provide additional information to the various news outlets consumed the time of WCS' senior management and operating staff---WCS does not have on-staff media relations personnel. As a result, WCS engaged an Austin-based public relations firm to assist the Company in developing a cohesive, cost effective public outreach campaign to react to future news releases, but, more importantly, to help WCS inform the media and the public of our plans. The public outreach campaign developed was proactive and involved both free and paid media.

### **INITIAL PUBLIC OUTREACH PROGRAM – FREE MEDIA FOR BYPRODUCT LICENSE**

To make the public outreach campaign cost effective, WCS first availed itself of free media to help kick start its public outreach program for the byproduct disposal license. WCS took a systematic approach in pursuing free media.

#### **Website Upgrade**

The first thing WCS had to do to pursue free media was to update and upgrade its website. The website had been historically used for business development---tailored to the needs of current and future customers. As part of the public relations campaign, the website became the focal point for the dissemination of all relevant information to the public and press regarding WCS and the licensing process. All future advertising, both free and paid, were intended to drive the media and public to the WCS website ([www.wcstexas.com](http://www.wcstexas.com)) where the Company could tell its story.

#### **White Papers**

The initial news releases regarding the byproduct disposal license questioned the appropriateness of the WCS site to dispose of radioactive byproduct material and LLW in terms of its geology and the licensing process. WCS' staff and advisers drafted technical "white papers" to respond to these issues as well as other frequently asked questions; including, employee safety, environmental compliance and other issues. These white papers were distributed to various news outlets to provide additional support for incomplete or incorrect reporting. The white papers were also posted to the WCS website for easy reference and eventually were developed into brochures and handouts for wider distribution.

#### **Video**

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WCS filmed tens of hours of video to visually show the site's characteristics and interviews with leading experts who discussed the merits of the Andrews County site---the isolation and aridness of the site is visually compelling. The many hours of video were condensed into a ten minute story that became WCS' core message. The video was produced in both English and Spanish and was posted and organized on the website in two to three minute segments.

### **Community Meetings**

Having gathered and produced the necessary information, WCS held a BBQ lunch at the senior center in Andrews to kick-off the public relations campaign for the byproduct disposal license. WCS advertised the event in the local newspaper and on radio and more than 300 people attended on a Saturday afternoon (Andrews is a town of slightly less than 10,000). The purpose of the luncheon was to update the Andrews community on the status of the licensing process and to preview the public relations campaign with a goal of demonstrating open and transparent communications with its main supporters. Local and regional dignitaries were invited and attended including the Chancellor of Texas Tech University and the state congressman and senator from the area. The ten minute video was previewed for the audience.

WCS employees were also engaged to meet with and play the ten minute video for any local and regional organization that desired information about WCS and the licensing process. These presentations have been given to dozens of organizations in the Permian Basin ranging from Chambers of Commerce to Lyons Clubs to churches. WCS estimates that more 1,000 people have heard WCS' message through this form of direct communication.

WCS has also been invited by regional leaders to tell its story. A meeting was hosted by U.S. Representative Michael Conaway in Midland with more than 100 people attending and media coverage from four local TV stations. These public meetings and the attendant media coverage ensures that all relevant information relating to WCS and the licensing process is distributed to the widest audience possible which is the key to WCS maintaining its local and regional support.

### **Interviews, Editorials and Meeting with Editorial Boards**

WCS invited employees, civic and city leaders in WCS' host communities to submit opinion articles and letters to the editor. In addition, our public relations firm arranged for senior executives of WCS to meet with editorial boards of the largest newspapers in Texas and several local papers in the Permian Basin. The WCS executive provided a 45 minute overview of WCS, which was posted on the WCS website, and answered any questions. Each editorial board was left with a press package consisting of the white papers, the ten minute video and any recent press releases.

### **Press Releases**

WCS used every opportunity possible to get its story out to the public. Press releases were issued to announce a major construction contract, the beginning of the public outreach program, safety certifications and thanking Andrews County for ten years of a wonderful business relationship. All of these press releases took the opportunity to give an update on the status of the license applications and to promote the site.

### **PUBLIC OUTREACH PROGRAM – PAID MEDIA**

#### **Byproduct License**

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Unfortunately, WCS discovered early on that it was relatively easy for individuals and organizations with negative or inaccurate views of WCS to get free media coverage while it was very difficult for WCS to receive the same type of free media coverage. To accurately tell its story, WCS had to avail itself of paid media. TV and radio time was purchased in the Permian Basin in two to three week cycles. The commercials had a rotation of two to three messages consisting of 30 and 60 second snippets from the ten minute video. The ads were produced in English and Spanish and appeared on like-kind stations. The primary message for the byproduct license was to demonstrate the quality of the WCS site. The commercials focused on the site's geology and the quality of the WCS people. The ads were produced by our public relations firm which has an in-house production company. Since footage was already shot for the ten minute video, the incremental cost to produce the commercials was minimal. However, the television costs to run the commercials were not. WCS primarily selected news oriented cable stations to air the commercials. The goal of the commercials was to educate Permian Basin decision makers.

In May 2008, the TCEQ Commissioners voted to issue WCS the byproduct material disposal license. 80 supporters from across the Permian Basin packed the TCEQ offices in Austin at 9:00 a.m. on a Wednesday morning work day wearing green shirts and buttons that said "We Support WCS". The Commissioners were able to see first hand the unwavering local support WCS enjoys and the license was granted.

### **LLW License**

There was significant benefit in having the two licenses being considered back-to-back---the public outreach program for the byproduct disposal license carried over to the LLW disposal license. WCS believed that it had successfully educated the local community and press outlets about WCS in general and it was determined that there was little need to pursue free media coverage because the quality and accuracy of the media coverage had improved dramatically due to the public outreach program for the byproduct license.

WCS determined that paid media would be the best way to educate the press and public about LLW. LLW disposal is an emotional issue and WCS was interested in controlling the manner in which the discussion was aired. WCS determined that the primary message which had to be conveyed was the need for such a site on a local, state and national basis---with Barnwell closing, there was no commercial facility to permanently dispose of Class B and C LLW. In its initial advertising, WCS used a map which showed hundreds of locations around Texas, primarily in large metropolitan areas, where LLW was being stored in closets, under stairwells and in empty offices. A centralized, permanent disposal facility was needed.

To effectively tell the story, WCS produced six different commercials; four of which dealt with the 'need' for a LLW disposal site, while the other two discussed why WCS was the right site in terms of geology, location and community support. Our public relations firm produced the commercials at a greatly reduced cost using footage filmed during the byproduct license campaign. Of the four 'need' commercials, three dealt with radioactive medical waste. It was determined that everyone could understand the need to dispose of radioactive medical waste which resulted from life-saving research and health care procedures at universities and hospitals. Actors and staged settings were used in some of the spots to show how radiological based experiments and tests saved people's lives. The spots also put a face on LLW by showing the benign of such waste; including, rags, clothing, lab utensils, etc.

WCS also engaged in a dialogue with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. The message WCS heard loud and clear from this prestigious medical school and teaching university was that a site was needed to permanently dispose of their LLW so scientists and doctors could continue to perform life saving radiological experiments, diagnosis and treatments. University personnel, including a Nobel Prize

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winner, agreed to appear on camera to discuss the need for such a disposal site, without actually endorsing the WCS site specifically.

The rotation of six commercials was shown in the Permian Basin over a six week period.

On January 14, 2009, more than 150 supporters from across the Permian Basin, including Andrews' state senator and congressman and more than a dozen local officials, showed up at the TCEQ offices in Austin at 9:30 a.m. on a Wednesday morning wearing their same green shirts and buttons. The Commissioners were again able to see first hand the support WCS enjoys and the LLW disposal license was granted. The press coverage across Texas following the issuance of the license has been very favorable.