CONCURRENT SESSION 2 – INSIGHTS AND APPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE TO DECONTAMINATION

Getting to Know Communities and Cultures for Remediation and Removal Actions

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Remediation and removal actions at contaminated sites, including decontamination after an emergency, take place in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Cleanup practitioners work in communities with different ethnic identities, languages, histories, values, and ideologies. Understanding these contexts and incorporating cultural knowledge into cleanup approaches can improve cleanup processes and outcomes. However, it can be a challenge for On-Scene Coordinators and other practitioners to quickly identify and assess these contexts. For example, how might local language proficiencies affect communication plans? How might historical land use affect redevelopment priorities? How might past experiences with racism and trauma impact the ability to build trust in communities with environmental justice concerns? To address these challenges, we developed a methodology for getting to know communities, cultures, and affected populations at contaminated sites. The methodology derives from a scientific literature review and from interview and survey data collected from cleanup practitioners at the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This presentation summarizes the methodology and gives an overview of its five steps: 1) familiarize with relevant community characteristics, 2) prioritize learning needs, 3) learn about the community, 4) analyze for cross-cultural understanding, and 5) plan for ongoing learning. These components are customizable to different contamination scenarios and community types. Going through these steps provides a foundation for bridging cultural differences in community engagement, participation, and risk communication. It will help project managers for remediation and removal work carry out culturally informed cleanups, fostering increased community buy-in, trust building, conflict resolution, and positive social outcomes.

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