



Many Voices Working for the Community

Oak Ridge Site Specific Advisory Board

NEWS RELEASE

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What Is ORSSAB and Why Is It Important?

While ORSSAB may sound like some exotic creature that lives in the Australian Outback, it is actually an acronym for the Oak Ridge Site Specific Advisory Board, a group of dedicated citizen volunteers monitoring the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) environmental cleanup operations on the Oak Ridge Reservation (ORR). It provides advice and recommendations to DOE on a wide range of issues that includes cleanup and restoration of contaminated land and water, long-term stewardship of remediated areas, and commemoration of historically significant sites on the ORR.

To fully understand what ORSSAB is and why it exists, a bit of background is necessary. During World War II, the locale now known as Oak Ridge was chosen to be one part of the effort to build an atomic bomb. Three plants were built in the area. One, X-10, was a pilot plant to determine if plutonium could be produced on a large scale. The other two, Y-12 and K-25, were built to enrich uranium for an atomic weapon using two different methods – the electromagnetic process at Y-12 and the gaseous diffusion method at K-25.

After the war, all three plants continued to operate for defense purposes or nuclear energy research. However, because of the war and post-war efforts, portions of the ORR were contaminated with radioactive or hazardous waste. Some of the contamination was caused inadvertently and some of the waste was disposed intentionally. However, early disposal technology was not what it is today and those disposal sites later became problem areas for the environment. Something had to be done to prevent contamination from invading ground and surface water that could pose a threat to the environment and the public.

In 1989, DOE established the Office of Environmental Management (EM) to oversee the cleanup of DOE facilities throughout the United States. That same year the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) put the ORR on its National Priority List to be cleaned up under the provisions of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund.

With the establishment of DOE EM, it was clear communities affected by contamination, and its resultant cleanup, should be involved in the process. DOE began to explore ways to involve citizens to address cleanup, safety, and future use of remediated areas.

As a result, in 1994, the EM Site Specific Advisory Board was chartered under the Federal Advisory Committee Act, to provide direct input to DOE EM. While the charter establishes a

single advisory board, in actuality the board is composed of several local site-specific boards across the county. The local SSABs focus on the unique aspects of their respective DOE sites and communities. While each site has its own set of cleanup issues, there are common problems, and twice each year the leadership of the local boards meet with DOE EM officials to discuss common issues and make joint recommendations to DOE EM.

ORSSAB, established in 1995, is one of eight local boards that comprise the EM SSAB. It can have as many as 22 members who are selected by DOE to reflect the diversity of occupations, gender, and race of people living near the ORR. Members reside in Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Roane counties. Technical expertise is not necessary to be a member. Board leadership includes the chair, vice-chair, and secretary. ORSSAB has non-voting liaisons from the EPA, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, and DOE.

ORSSAB's primary responsibility is to provide advice and recommendations to the DOE Oak Ridge Office (ORO) regarding its cleanup operations on the ORR. It also provides input on cleanup prioritization as it relates to the DOE ORO budget requests to Congress for completion of work on the reservation. The board is also interested in long-term stewardship of areas that have been cleaned up to ensure that remediation efforts remain effective and protective for generations to come.

“It is imperative that we obtain input from the public on many of the operations we perform on the ORR,” said John Eschenberg, the DOE Oak Ridge Assistant Manager for EM and the Deputy Designated Federal Officer to ORSSAB. “We still have many years of cleanup before us on the reservation, but when DOE EM is finished with its work it will leave Oak Ridge and the community will remain. It is DOE's responsibility to ensure we complete our work and the community is safe from environmental hazards. The citizens need to have a say in what we do. ORSSAB is the best conduit we have for community participation, and they represent the community across a wide range of interests.”

“We take our mission very seriously. We discuss many of the issues in an open forum and encourage public comment,” said board chair Ron Murphree. “We also allow members of the public to participate and vote in our standing committees, especially EM and Stewardship. So we have community involvement beyond the membership of the board itself. When there is an issue that we feel needs input from the board we send recommendations either to the DOE Oak Ridge Office or sometimes directly to the Assistant Manager for EM in Washington.”

When ORSSAB or the EM SSAB makes a recommendation DOE is required to respond. DOE can accept a recommendation and implement its provisions or it can decline a recommendation, but if it declines a recommendation it must explain why.

ORSSAB has a number of committees that address particular issues. The current standing committees are EM, Stewardship, EM Budget & Prioritization, Public Outreach, Board Finance & Process, and the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee is composed of the elected board officers and committee chairs.

EM is the committee most focused on cleanup projects on the ORR. There are scores of individual projects across the reservation, too numerous to mention here, but the following are some of the larger projects on which the committee receives regular updates and often drafts recommendations to DOE for the full board to consider:

- Demolition of the K-25 and K-27 Buildings at East Tennessee Technology Park (formerly

the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant).

- The removal of Tank W-1A and cleanup of surrounding soils at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL, the X-10 Plant during World War II).
- Downblending and disposition of uranium-233 from Building 3019 at ORNL.
- Removal of radioactive salts from the former Molten Salt Reactor Experiment at ORNL.
- The Melton Valley Monitoring Wells at ORNL.
- Mercury contamination in East Fork Poplar Creek that leaves Y-12 and flows through populated areas of Oak Ridge.
- Removal of legacy waste from the Alpha 5 and Beta 4 Buildings at Y-12.
- Bear Creek Burial Grounds, where an estimated 40 million pounds of depleted uranium is buried under a concrete cap, and the nearby Environmental Management Waste Management Facility, which receives much of the demolition waste generated by cleanup projects across the reservation.
- The Transuranic Waste Processing Center, which collects and packages transuranic waste for disposal at a site in New Mexico.

Not long after ORSSAB was established in 1995, it formed a sub-group called the End Use Working Group (EUWG) to make recommendations to DOE regarding what the ORR should look like after cleanup is completed. The EUWG realized that it would not be possible to get rid of all the contamination on the reservation by simply shipping it offsite. In many cases, it would be exorbitantly expensive or politically difficult. Therefore, it recognized that some waste would have to be left in place with proper protections.

The practice of making sure protections are working is stewardship and the board's Stewardship Committee reviews the steps DOE takes to ensure waste left in place does not escape its disposal site and that it is not disturbed by humans.

Stewardship protections used include monitoring – the regular sampling of contaminated media to check for possible failure of remediation efforts. Maintenance of systems and controls, such as fences and gates, is also a part of stewardship, as is surveillance to make sure stewardship activities are operating. Stewardship also includes institutional controls like deed restrictions and laws controlling land uses.

One big report the Stewardship Committee reviews each year is the annual Remediation Effectiveness Report that documents if remediation techniques and stewardship controls are working, as planned, to protect the environment and the population.

The EM and Stewardship Committees develop the majority of recommendations presented to the board. When the committees hear presentations on topics at their monthly meetings, they may decide a recommendation is needed to clarify an issue. They will draft recommendation wording and forward it to the Executive Committee for review and approval to send before the full board. At the board level there can be significant discussion among members on the merits of the recommendation. The board can pass the recommendation, amend it, vote it down, or send it back to committee for additional work. Even after the DOE responds to the recommendation, the originating committee will review the response and determine if it is acceptable or if the response needs follow up.

The board's EM Budget & Prioritization Committee works with DOE to determine cleanup priorities on the ORR and the amount of funding needed to address those priorities.

The Public Outreach Committee is the public relations arm of the board, responsible for publication of the board's Advocate newsletter, the annual report, presentations to the public, exhibits and displays at the American Museum of Science and Energy and events like Earth Day and Oak Ridge's Secret City Festival.

The Board Finance & Process Committee is responsible for managing the board's finances and organizes the annual planning retreat.

Occasionally, DOE will ask the board for input on a topic not necessarily related to cleanup, such as historic preservation. In 2007, DOE asked the board for advice on preserving a portion of the K-25 Building. The board received comments from the public at board meetings and at a special public meeting, ultimately making recommendations about the issue.

"We really do value ORSSAB's input," says the board's DOE Federal Coordinator Pat Halsey. "The board doesn't make frivolous recommendations. When we get a recommendation, we know that a lot of thought and discussion has gone into its development. Because of that dedication, we owe the board our best effort to either implement the recommendation or provide a satisfactory explanation addressing why DOE declined it."

Complete cleanup of the ORR is not expected to be finished until sometime around 2040, so ORSSAB will be around for a long time. During that time, the names and faces of the members and liaisons will change, but the ultimate mission of the board will remain the same – to provide informed advice and recommendations to the DOE about cleanup and environmental restoration and long-term stewardship for the ORR.

ORSSAB meets the second Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at the DOE Information Center in Oak Ridge. Meetings of the board and its committees are open to the public, and notices are posted on the board's web site at www.oakridge.doe.gov/em/ssab.

Anyone interested in being a member can learn more about the application process at the board's website or by calling 241-4583 or 241-4584.

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