

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

# ROBERT FEILD

EPA Remedial Project Manager—  
Times Beach/Omaha Lead Superfund Sites

**Interview Date: April 19, 2006**

**Location: Washington, DC**

EPA Interviewer: Today is April 19, 2006. We're interviewing Mr. Bob Feild from the EPA Region 7 office. He was an RPM [remedial project manager] at a number of high-profile sites, including Times Beach, and now he is at Omaha Lead. We are in Washington, DC. Thanks for being with us.

Feild: You're welcome. Thanks.

EPA Interviewer: To start off, I was wondering if you could give some of your background. How did you come to EPA into the Superfund program?

Feild: I graduated from the University of Kansas with a Bachelor's degree in civil engineering and a Master's in environmental health engineering. I had several jobs working for consulting firms until I went to work for an EPA contractor that was involved in the investigation of dioxin sites in eastern Missouri. I hired on with the EPA contractor and worked directly for a year with the EPA team that was investigating places in eastern Missouri where dioxin-contaminated waste oil had been sprayed. Eventually, after a year, I hired on with EPA and have been working in the Superfund program ever since.

EPA Interviewer: What was your first exposure to Superfund? Was it when the dioxin spread? When was the first time you heard about it?

Feild: The dioxin contamination was actually spread in the early 1970s, even before Superfund was created. My first exposure to Superfund was through the job that I initially took with Roy F. Weston, the EPA Technical Assistance Team contractor working with the Superfund program, investigating unpaved parking lots, gravel roads, and horse arenas in eastern Missouri where dioxin contaminated waste oil had been sprayed.

EPA Interviewer: What were some of the most significant issues you dealt with?

Feild: The most significant issue back then was just the awareness and involvement that the communities were having in terms of having the Environmental Protection Agency, a federal agency, descending on their property and collecting samples in Tyvek® suits. Then all the apprehension and anxiety waiting for the results to come back, and then, if in fact they were among the 30 or so sites where we did find contamination, just the really devastating impact that would have on their personal lives and on their property as well.

EPA Interviewer: When was the first time you got involved with Times Beach?

Feild: Times Beach itself was identified as a confirmed dioxin site in December 1982, just prior to my involvement, but I did participate in the investigation and discovery of many other eastern Missouri dioxin sites. When we talk about Times Beach, we are really talking about a group of about 30 eastern Missouri dioxin sites, which were all discovered in the early 1980s, and ultimately were all remediated together in 1996 and 1997. I began working for the EPA contractor in the spring of 1983 at the time when EPA was discovering the dioxin contamination at Times Beach and the other eastern Missouri dioxin sites.

EPA Interviewer: Did you work with Roy F. Weston the entire time you worked at Times Beach? When did you come to EPA?

Feild: I actually worked for Roy F. Weston for one week.

EPA Interviewer: Oh. [Laughing]

Feild: I was hired by Roy F. Weston to be on TAT 7, the technical assistance team. Now we call it START [Superfund Technical Assessment and Response Team]. I hired on with the TAT sampling team primarily because I needed a job. The consulting office I had been working for closed. The TAT 7 office, which was staffed by Roy F. Weston, was going to involve a lot of field work and primarily travel. I actually took the job with TAT 7 knowing that a new office, TAT 17, was opening in Kansas City that would provide technical support to the regional office for the eastern Missouri dioxin investigations. Going to work for TAT 17 allowed me to avoid the travel and stay in Kansas City. I quickly changed jobs after one week from TAT 7 to TAT 17, going to work for Jacobs Engineering. I worked for them for a year before joining EPA.

EPA Interviewer: You have a lot of stories about Times Beach. What would you like to start off with and talk about?

Feild: I think what people find most interesting is the history of Times Beach, because they have heard of it, and they sometimes put it in the same category as Love Canal. Some believe it was one of the sites that prompted the creation of the Superfund program. Actually, Superfund was created in 1980, and Times Beach wasn't discovered until 1982. It was one of the early sites that we dealt with, and it certainly was one of the sites that brought a lot of attention to the Superfund program and put it in the vernacular of the ordinary people.

One of the most interesting stories probably is just the creation of Times Beach. Back in the 1920s, there was a newspaper in St. Louis called the *St. Louis Star-Times*. In 1925, they ran a promotion in their paper. They had purchased some land on the bank of the Meramec River. Back in the '20s, when people were vacationing, they didn't have access to airports, and they generally vacationed just in the countryside. Times Beach is located about 26 miles southwest of downtown St. Louis. As a promotion for the newspaper, the *St. Louis Star-Times* sold lots at this newly developed resort community on the bank of the Meramec River for \$67 with a subscription to the newspaper. These lots were only 20 feet wide, but if you'd get two or three of them, you'd have enough land to build on. Because it was organized by the *St. Louis Star-Times*, and it was on the beach of the Meramec River, it was named Times Beach. Eventually, it became an incorporated city.

The peak population was only about 2,000 people when EPA discovered the site back in 1982. Initially, it developed as a vacation community. It was in the floodplain of the Meramec River, and the homes were mostly built up on stilts. All of Times Beach was located within the 25-year floodplain; some of it was even in the five-year floodplain. For whatever reason—probably even hydrologists can't explain—the town rarely flooded. Gradually, many of these homes that had been constructed as a summer resort community were converted over to year-round residences. Many new homes were also constructed at Times Beach. It's a very discrete and isolated area. It's bounded by railroad tracks on one side, the Meramec River on the other side, and an interstate highway on the third side. It's essentially a triangle that's isolated from the outside world in many ways. Many of these homes—some of which were not flood-protected—gradually turned into year-round residences. There were a few floods that forced the evacuation of Times Beach, but the people were very tenacious. They managed to struggle through the floods and come back and rebuild their homes and go on with life.

Times Beach was a very close-knit community when we discovered it in the early 1980s. In October of 1982, EPA learned that Times Beach might be one of the locations where dioxin-contaminated waste oil had been sprayed more than 10 years previous. In October of 1982, EPA descended upon the town in our Tyvek® protective equipment....

EPA Interviewer: And it was sprayed as a dust....

Feild: The dioxin contamination was contained in waste oil that was sprayed as a dust suppressant on the unpaved gravel roads throughout the town in the early 1970s. EPA contractors collected samples from the roadways. It would take a couple of months for those results to become available. Then in December of 1982, while waiting for results of the sampling, the flood of record hit Times Beach, which forced the evacuation of the entire community and destroyed many of the properties. Unfortunately, within the week or two prior to the flood of record, the residents of Times Beach had actually gotten together and voted to cancel their FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] flood insurance. So there was an entire community whose homes were devastated, and now they were without federal flood insurance. Just at the time the waters were receding, just before Christmas, EPA got the initial results that the streets were contaminated with dioxin. The Centers for Disease Control issued a health advisory advising those residents that had returned to their homes to flee and those that had not returned to stay away. It really put those people in limbo for a couple of months. Ultimately, in February of 1983, EPA made the decision to provide permanent relocation to the residents, and that process took years. It was four or five years later that the last family accepted their settlement and moved from the community.

The people that I've known from Times Beach really lost something when they left Times Beach. They didn't want to leave. They lost their sense of community. I have dealt with other EPA project managers and discussed similar situations, and now as an agency, we are more reluctant to offer permanent relocation to a community. In the case of one site in Florida, I believe EPA actually attempted to relocate an entire community to another location, keeping it intact. The impact that relocation has on the individuals in a community is sometimes something that they can never recover from. It was a lesson that we learned early in the Superfund program, and it was in many ways a real tough lesson to learn.

EPA Interviewer: You talked a little bit before we started about what it was like for people to suddenly see EPA with the Tyvek® suits and not understanding what's going on. Can you talk about that a little bit and the expectations people had of you? How did you try to approach them to explain what was going on?

Feild: I don't think that has changed much since then. I think that many people now have a general awareness of the environment, but when it actually comes to seeing someone in a Tyvek® suit in your front yard collecting soil samples, it's a shock. It was then, and it remains now at the sites I'm working at. It scares people. Another thing that is sometimes an obstacle is the involvement of the Federal Government in people's lives. Often times, these areas that we are investigating have other impacts, such as EJ [environmental justice] communities, where people may not typically have a lot of involvement with the Federal Government, and they may not be comfortable dealing with the Federal Government. When someone from the United States Government shows up at your door and asks you to sign a piece of paper to allow them onto your property, you're taken aback. It's a real scary time for these folks.

EPA Interviewer: How did you address those fears?

Feild: Through communication. After you're aware of the reaction that you can expect, you learn to have sensitivity to the concerns and to get help from community members and from others that can talk the right language and be viewed as someone within the community as opposed to just the Federal Government coming in. We have at times hired contracting help from within the local community to assist us in obtaining our access agreements. We would set up portable or temporary public information centers near these sites that we were investigating. We would staff these during the day, and we would go out into the community and beat the bushes to try to talk to people to help them understand that we are actually there to help.

EPA Interviewer: There was eventually a decision made to incinerate some of the dioxin in the soils. How did you come to that decision? What was the public reaction to it?

Feild: That was the Record of Decision that EPA issued in September 1990. The remedy selection authority was not delegated to the region, but was retained by OSWER [Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response]. I was spending a lot of time on a plane going back and forth between Kansas City and Washington to keep people briefed. J. Winston Porter was the Assistant Administrator who signed the Record of Decision for the Times Beach site, which did involve a temporary incinerator—the “temporary” was important to stress. As you can imagine, people came out of the woodwork—not only locally, but nationally—to oppose that remedy, because incineration had been such a troublesome technology historically. Tremendous problems had occurred in the past, primarily with municipal waste incinerators, which were very under-regulated. Many individuals and different environmental groups had an agenda to try to prevent incineration in any form. We were dealing with groups like Greenpeace and Earth First! The involvement of the environmental groups probably did succeed in helping assure that the project was performed safely. Actually, the incinerator that was operated at Times Beach for 16 months was probably one of the cleanest incinerators ever operated. The emissions were checked and rechecked through stack testing. In fact, the emissions were so clean that they weren't believed, because some groups weren't willing to

accept that an incinerator could be operated at the kind of efficiency that we were seeing with the Times Beach unit.

EPA Interviewer: Do you remember what the final reason was to relocate everybody? Was it because so much was in the homes?

Feild: The dioxin was discovered in December of '82, and at that time, not much was known about the toxicity or the risk posed by dioxin contamination in soil. When the Centers for Disease Control saw that concentrations exceeded 100 ppb [parts per billion], they knew that there was enough cause for concern to have people evacuate the town. We really didn't know how we were going to approach the cleanup. It turned out we worked closely with the Centers for Disease Control to establish a cleanup level for Times Beach which is still applied in many cases today for residential cleanups. Given that we really didn't know at the time how long it was going to take for us to arrive at a remedy, we felt it was in the community's best interest to provide permanent relocation. The fact that they had lost their FEMA flood insurance may have been considered at the time, but, technically, it did not factor into the decision-making.

One interesting point is that the decision to relocate Times Beach was actually issued in an Action Memorandum. Technically, the permanent relocation of Times Beach residents was a removal action, which would have been inconsistent with CERCLA. When the law was reauthorized in 1986, Congress inserted a provision in the back of SARA, which states that it was really okay to perform the permanent relocation as a removal action after all.

EPA Interviewer: *[Laughing]* Well that was good of them.

Feild: It allowed us to justify our cost recovery efforts later on.

EPA Interviewer: *[Laughing]* What do you think is your most memorable story from working at Times Beach?

Feild: I remember going to a public meeting one time, which was held at the Castlewood site—and I don't know why this just popped into my head—but we were to be at a local gathering spot in the community, which was called the Lone Wolf Inn in the Castlewood, Missouri, community at 7:00. Myself and two others took a flight out of Kansas City that evening, and there was bad weather. Our flight was delayed and delayed. We finally arrived at the meeting about two or three hours late. What we didn't know was that the Lone Wolf Inn was really the local tavern.

EPA Interviewer: *[Laughing]*

Feild: When we showed up, this community had commenced imbibing promptly at seven when the meeting was supposed to start, and that included the Missouri State DNR [Department of Natural Resources] staff. When we rolled in, people were rolling themselves, and that was one of the most difficult meetings that we've ever had in terms of crowd control. There were people that were way over the top. Later on in the project, we would have the rooms lined with St. Louis County policemen whenever we thought meetings could get out of

hand. It was in the early years that we had some of the most exciting evenings with the communities.

EPA Interviewer: Is there a moment while working with Times Beach that you are most proud of?

Feild: I think that after Times Beach was cleaned up and after all the dust had settled, so to speak, the State of Missouri went in and redeveloped Times Beach as a state park that opened in 1999. Now it is one of the most popular parks in eastern Missouri. There are horse trails. There are picnic areas, biking, hiking. It's called Route 66 State Park now, and it's located just off Interstate 44 at the Louis Street exit. I encourage everyone to take a detour off I-44 through Route 66 State Park. There's even a museum and a gift shop there now.

EPA Interviewer: All right. *[Laughing]*

Feild: They've taken all the artifacts from the Times Beach days out of it. Now it is just a...

EPA Interviewer: Oh. So you are not there anywhere on a big poster?

Feild: Actually, they still do have some literature in their visitor center about the history of Times Beach—far less now than they used to when it first opened. Now the real focus is on Route 66, which was, of course, the highway that opened up the development of the Southwest.

EPA Interviewer: Is there something you would have done differently?

Feild: At this point, I think that the relocation probably could have been rethought. Obviously, if we had the knowledge and experience of how to deal with the dioxin contamination, we could have made better decisions up front. Instead of spending the money to relocate the community, perhaps we could have provided some sort of flood protection and cleaned up the contaminated soil in their streets. Hindsight is 20/20, and we just didn't have the information to make better decisions at the time.

EPA Interviewer: You said you were back and forth to DC a lot. Do you remember what it was like in those early days from a regional perspective coming to Headquarters and to see how Superfund was being implemented?

Feild: To be honest, I had so much interaction with the staff here in Washington that I felt like I was part of the Headquarters staff. When I was back in Kansas City, I was dealing with our senior management. I was also dealing with senior management in Washington. I didn't draw too much of a distinction between the two locations.

EPA Interviewer: What was it like in general trying to implement Superfund in those early days, and as you were trying to figure out what you were going to do and how you were going to do it?

Feild: Obviously, a site like Times Beach was highly politically charged. It had the attention of a lot of people. We just needed to be careful as we proceeded and make sure that all of the

lines of communication remained open, particularly with Congressionals and other agencies and organizations that had an interest in Times Beach. The main challenge was just to keep our message out there and keep it consistent.

EPA Interviewer: After you worked on Times Beach, what did you do next?

Feild: Times Beach lasted for a long time. After that, we had to formally close out all the sites that had been cleaned up. Eventually, I became the regional Superfund Reuse Coordinator for a number of years. The Times Beach site is probably our best example of successful reuse in the region, and one of the best examples nationwide of putting a site back into productive use after it is cleaned up. I was still involved in the Superfund program when the Superfund Reuse Initiative began. I just kind of fell into that role. For years, I was the Superfund Reuse Coordinator until another site—the Omaha Lead site—had my name on it. My other responsibilities suddenly went away, and now I am the project manager for the Omaha Lead site.

EPA Interviewer: We can talk about that in a minute. Can you go back and remember how the reuse program started? What was the impetus for it?

Feild: I think that reuse is our ultimate goal in the Superfund program. That's really what we are trying to accomplish. The statute says that we are trying to protect public health and the environment, and we are. But we can protect public health and the environment by concreting over contaminated soil and putting a fence around it and calling it good. That doesn't solve the problem. The ultimate goal is to put land back into reuse so that people can get beneficial use out of the land again. It can bring revenue, jobs, and quality of life back to an area that has been impacted by contamination.

EPA Interviewer: You are now working on Omaha Lead, another really large site. Is there something you'd like to talk about with the Omaha Lead site?

Feild: Omaha Lead is similar to Times Beach in that it is politically charged. There are a lot of people that have this site on their radar screen. It's one of the mega-sites that we're working on as an agency that receives a significant portion of our annual funding in the Superfund program to keep it going. What makes it of such interest is that there is probably more exposure potential at the Omaha Lead Site than at any other site in the country—at least for sites with contaminated soils.

There was a lead refinery/smelter that operated very near downtown Omaha for over 125 years. For the first period of its operation, there were no air pollution controls in place. It discharged a significant amount of lead-contaminated particulates into the surrounding areas. We have detected lead contamination that traveled several miles or more away from the former facility.

At the Omaha Lead Site, there are more than 40,000 individual residences where we have to gain permission to sample their yard to characterize lead levels. Of those, EPA may ultimately end up cleaning up more than 15,000 residential properties. Each one of those residential properties is really a site unto itself. There is a need to gain access for the sampling, perform the sampling, and then if a cleanup is necessary, gain access for the



cleanup. When a cleanup is performed, the soils in the yard are removed to a depth of about six or 12 inches, and then backfilled with clean soil. New sod is installed, and then you try to restore the lawn to the homeowner's satisfaction. It is very difficult to keep the homeowners satisfied, because everyone has very high expectations.

There is considerable scrutiny of our work. It's very difficult to keep the lid on the whole thing, dealing with the thousands and thousands of people that we're dealing with, to maintain public support, and to prevent small problems from turning into large problems, which then can attract media attention, Congressional attention, regional management attention, and EPA Headquarters attention. Keeping all the plates spinning is a real challenge at a site with this number of individual properties, and the vast space that's involved—more than 20 square miles in a residential area.

EPA Interviewer: What's the biggest difference you've seen in the past 20 years now that you are working on this site, for example, with the Superfund program or the technology used, and how it's being addressed?

Feild: The technologies are changing. But like I mentioned, I think that redevelopment is a big part of it. Our emphasis on redevelopment helps us to sell our program better. It helps us to better communicate what our goals are and to gain support and cooperation in the community, because without that local support it's very difficult to successfully clean up any site.

EPA Interviewer: I was going to move on to some larger questions about Superfund in general, if that's okay.

Feild: That's fine.

EPA Interviewer: In the mid-'90s or so, Superfund went through a number of administrative reforms. Were you involved with that at all?

Feild: Not so much. Back in the mid-1990s, Times Beach was at its peak. We were operating the incinerator in '96 and '97, and there was a great deal of activity.

EPA Interviewer: We talked about how Times Beach was a removal. These days the Superfund removal program is pretty high profile. Are you involved with that at all in the emergency response angle, or simply just the remedial angle of things?

Feild: I work with the removal program. Actually, the Omaha Lead site began as a removal action. We didn't sign a Record of Decision—actually an Interim Record of Decision—until December 2004. Up until that point, we were operating strictly under removal authority since 1999. Now that we've entered the remedial phase of the project though, we are in a position to award very large site-specific contracts. We're now cleaning up yards in Omaha at the pace of more than 1,000 per year, which is more than any other site at any time since the beginning of the Superfund program. We're really having great success with the Omaha Lead site cleanup.

EPA Interviewer: In Superfund, we often have to deal with both federal and private funding. Do you think the dual funding mechanism has been successful?

Feild: All indications are that it has been. I believe that 70 percent of the cleanups performed have been through enforcement or voluntary efforts. I think that's a remarkable figure.

There's public debate about how much money should go toward the environment. There's a pendulum that swings back and forth. Sometimes there's more support, and sometimes there's less. It never completely goes away. The Superfund program will continue to exist. I can't believe that it will ultimately just be eliminated, but I think that the one thing that does change from year to year—and perhaps from Administration to Administration—is public sentiment and how much public support there is for assigning funding to cleanup of the environment. I believe that currently there is still a great deal of importance attached to keeping the land, the water, and the air safe by the American public. I look for that to continue, but that's not to say that other priorities won't arise in the future that also warrant strong consideration for a limited amount of funding that might be available.

EPA Interviewer: What do you think Superfund's greatest success has been over the past 25 years?

Feild: Public education, I think, is a great success—making people aware of environmental risks. The ultimate goal is reuse and revitalization—the number of acres that we've put back into reuse, and the number of jobs that have been created at facilities that have been cleaned up and re-commissioned. Those are the real tangible results that we're able to advertise and promote ourselves with. I'd say those are the two areas of greatest success.

EPA Interviewer: What do you think the greatest challenges were?

Feild: Probably public education. The most difficult part of any site cleanup is to actually get in and to open up the lines of communication with the impacted communities so that they understand what you are doing, and to get them to a point where they not only accept it, but support it. That's vital to the success of any cleanup. It's a real challenge. It takes place every time we discover a new site.

EPA Interviewer: Where do you think Superfund will be going in the next 25 years?

Feild: I think the emergency response program will continue to be very important. Now we have such large involvement with homeland security issues, that's certainly not going to go away.

As far as the remedial program goes, it may slow down in years or decades to come. There's still a lot of work to do, and it's going to take many, many years. It may depend on just what funding is available in future years—what other programs and priorities that the Superfund program has to compete with. I don't know that I can ever see the day where we will completely eliminate all the threats at Superfund sites. It may get to the point where we're dealing with the very low-risk sites, and then it may be hard to justify spending large amounts

of money on those relatively low risks when other types of priorities might exist, whether related or unrelated to the environment.

EPA Interviewer: We've been talking for 40 minutes or so. Were there other things you wanted to mention about Superfund and your experiences working with Superfund?

Feild: Superfund has been a great career so far for me. I have been fortunate to have worked on very interesting sites, and I look forward to continuing.

EPA Interviewer: I thank you for taking the time to stop in. I know you've had a lot of different meetings. Thanks for participating in our project.

Feild: Okay. Thanks for having me.