

UTILIZING PRIVATE PASSWORD PROTECTED AND LINKED PUBLIC WEB SITES TO ACCOMPLISH PLANNING GOALS¹

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ABSTRACT

In the Northwestern United States, spill contingency planning occurs through a very collaborative process. Shortly after the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 was passed, the Region 10 Regional Response Team and three Area Committees (Environmental Protection Agency Inland Area Committee and US Coast Guard Coastal Portland and Puget Sound Area Committees) decided to combine contingency planning documents. The result was the publishing of the Northwest Area Contingency Plan (NWACP) which has also been signed by the states of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. In the late 1990's, these organizations were further combined to form a single planning and preparedness body, the Regional Response Team (RRT) 10/Northwest Area Committee (RRT10/NWAC).

In 2003, the RRT10/NWAC launched a new web site to provide all planning and preparedness information in the northwest (www.rrt10nwac.com). The web site includes the Northwest Area Contingency Plan, 29 Geographic Response Plans, fact sheets, the RRT10/NWAC Strategic Plan, jurisdictional boundary maps, an Area exercise schedule, equipment availability lists, workgroup charters and action plans, meeting minutes, and the ability to submit comments and join a list serv.

As a companion to the public web site, a private password-protected extranet portal web site has also been established. This private web site has become an invaluable planning tool to bring the large number of organizations involved in the planning and preparedness process across three states together. It facilitates the rapid and efficient review and comment on documents and the tracking and responding to comments from stakeholders. It also provides a centralized location to post documents to be shared and allows members given access to the private site to interface directly with the public web site by "publishing" certain items from the private to the public web site without going through a Webmaster. The private site also provides a secure location to make sensitive information such as contact names and phone numbers and specific activation and communications plans available to responders but not the general public.

DISCUSSION

Somewhat unique to the Northwest, the Regional Response Team, three Area Committees (EPA Region 10 Inland Area Committee and US Coast Guard Coastal Portland and Puget Sound Area Committees), and the oil and hazardous substances planning and preparedness activities in the three states of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington have been combined into one organization. The Regional Response Team (RRT) 10/Northwest Area Committee (RRT 10/NWAC) is responsible for publishing our combined Regional and Area Contingency Plan (Northwest Area Contingency Plan, NWACP) and for coordinating all policy development, lessons learned activity, training, exercises, and strategic planning for oil and hazardous substance response. While combining these organizations and functions has had many benefits, it has proven challenging to keep large amounts of information organized and to ensure all voices are being heard and all needs are being met.

Traditionally, face-to-face meetings, email exchange of information, and/or one-on-one discussions, have been used to accomplish many of these goals. However, this can leave important members out of the process and also prove to be very cumbersome and time consuming, especially with respect to review of large amounts of information. The RRT 10/NWAC felt the need to develop a more systematic approach to ensuring information was not lost and all needs were being met. In addition, in the era of heightened information security concerns, it has become essential to have a secure location where emergency planners and responders may share information without fear of the information falling into the wrong hands. The RRT/NWAC wanted a simple system to manage and maintain this information so it would be easily accessible to those that needed it. To help meet these and other needs, the RRT10/NWAC developed a private password-protected web site and companion public web site. The private web site allows a select group of key stakeholders extraordinary access to collaboration tools and also provides a secure location to post sensitive information related to emergency planning, preparedness, and response. Connections between the private and public sites provide unique opportunities to create a sense of ownership

¹ The private and public web sites discussed in this paper were developed for EPA by Ecology & Environment, Inc. under the Superfund Technical Assessment and Response Team (START) contract using Dreamweaver software developed by MacroMedia, Inc..

of the public web site and ensure information remains as current as possible.

Perhaps one of the strongest tools the private web site provides is a system to manage draft documents. Draft documents posted on the private web site may be reviewed and easily worked on collaboratively by use of a document checkout and check-in feature. One user at a time may check out a document or portion of a document and work on it independently to incorporate comments, changes, or additions. Established conventions ensure changes are made consistently by using common editing and notation features available in software programs. After a revised document is re-posted to the private web site, other users can then checkout the modified version of the document and make further changes. This system prevents multiple versions of the same document that must be reconciled and ensures all key stakeholders have the opportunity to view and provide input on different versions of a document. It also eliminates the need to email large documents among stakeholders. (See Figure 1.0 – Document Review Feature of Private Web Site) When all key stakeholders are satisfied with the content of a document, it may be finalized and posted to the public web site or managed in some other way.

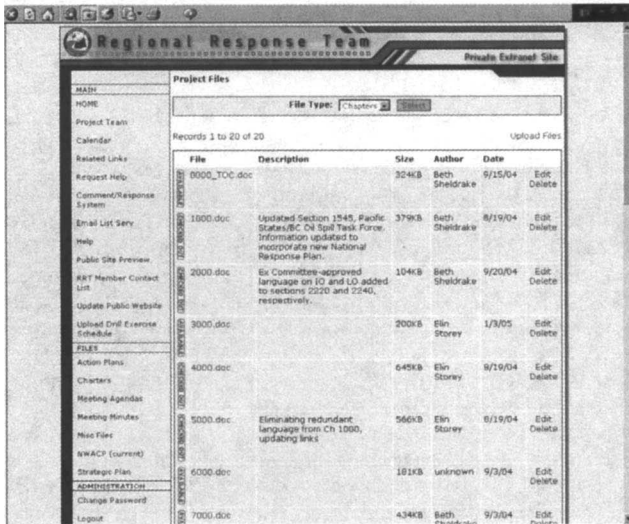


FIGURE 1.0 DOCUMENT REVIEW FEATURE OF PRIVATE WEB SITE

Common to most public web sites, the RRT10/NWAC web site accepts comments on a wide variety of subjects. The interface with the private web site, however, allows the group of key stakeholders granted access to the private site to aid in the management of these comments and to ensure all comments are addressed in a timely fashion. Comments received on the public site may be sorted by subject, assigned to a specific person for action, responded to, and archived all via the private web site. (See Figures 2.0 – Comments Received Awaiting Assignment and 3.0 – Report of Comments Received and Responses) This allows the workload associated with ensuring comments are reviewed and addressed in a timely manner to be shared among a wider group, including users from different agencies. It also provides a system to document and archive all comments received and notations on how they were addressed.

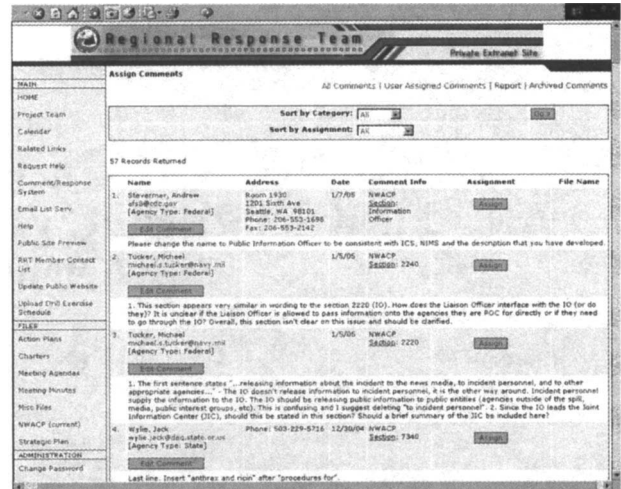


FIGURE 2.0 COMMENTS RECEIVED AWAITING ASSIGNMENT

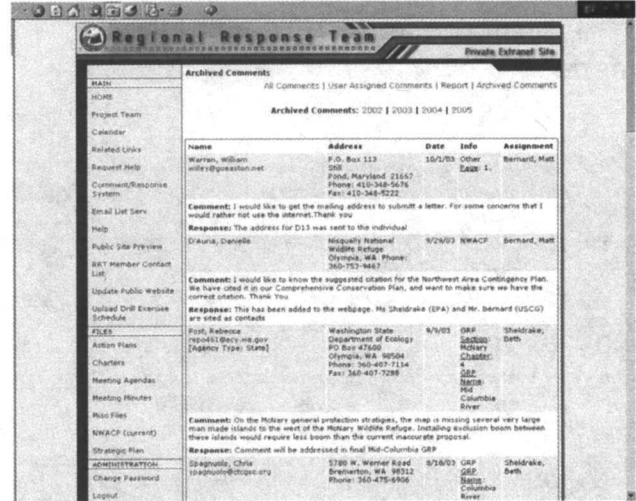


FIGURE 3.0 REPORT OF COMMENTS RECEIVED AND RESPONSES

Another primary feature of the private web site is that it provides a secure, yet accessible location for the posting sensitive information. Examples of sensitive information posted on the private web site include contact numbers for Regional Response Team members, activation procedures, worst-case discharge and maximum most probably discharge scenarios, and draft documents. Documents containing information such as RRT member contact names and phone numbers can be easily maintained and updated by users of the private web site. All key stakeholders granted access to the private web site can then easily access the most current information from any computer with Internet access. Information such as worst case discharge scenarios and activation procedures can also be placed in a location accessible to planners and responders, but one that is not available to the general public.

Maintenance of a common distribution list for planning and preparedness information in the northwest has always been a challenge. Previously, each state and federal agency maintained separate lists for individual purposes. When information was to be distributed to all parties interested in spill planning, preparedness or response; names were often duplicated among lists. In addition, since different lists were used for different types of communications, names were often inadvertently left off. This led to the wasting of precious resources and the undermining of outreach efforts designed to expand the base of interested parties. The new public RRT 10/NWAC web site allows any interested party to join our List Serv. Further, the private web site allows users with access to add to or modify the List Serv. This large universe of names can then be sorted using a number of different criteria. For example, the list can be sorted by "RRT/NWAC members only" for distribution of information specifically directed to them, but also allows other information to be sent to members of industry, spill response contractors, non-governmental organizations, and tribal, state, or local government. (See Figure 4.0 – List Serv Sorted by Non-Governmental Organization)

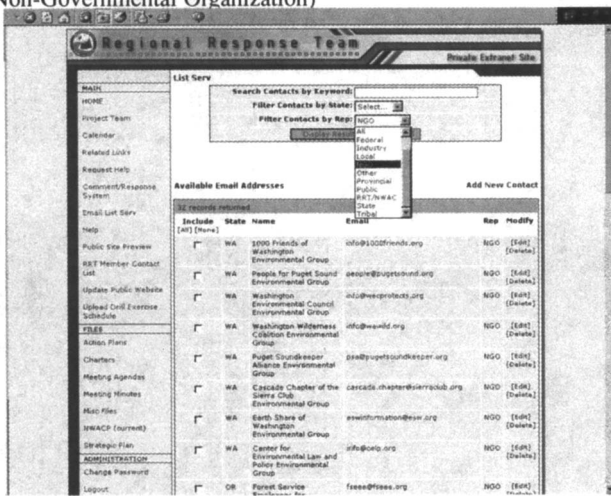


FIGURE 4.0 LIST SERV SORTED BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

Finally, one key feature that allows the RRT10/NWAC web sites to be so useful is the connection between the public and private web sites. As previously mentioned, comments received from the public site may be sorted, responded to, and archived, all using the private web site. This prevents comments from being misplaced and greatly enhances the collaborative nature of these tasks. Documents and/or announcements may be posted directly from the private site to the public site without going through a Webmaster. These features allow for a greater sense of ownership by key stakeholders because each user is partly responsible and able to influence the content of the public site. It also helps ensure critical information is kept up to date by sharing the workload and not depending on a single Webmaster to maintain the site.



FIGURE 5.0 UPDATING PUBLIC WEB SITE VIA PRIVATE WEB SITE

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, utilization of private password-protected web site and companion public web site have significantly enhanced the ability of the RRT10/NWAC to facilitate timely and accurate response to comments/concerns, review and update important documents, conduct outreach to interested parties, and protect sensitive information. The links between our private and public web sites have allowed us to take a more active role in managing our web site to ensure information is current and accurate. The collaboration tools provided on the private web site enhance the ability of key stakeholders to provide input. Finally, the security of the private web site has provided an easily accessible location for the posting of sensitive information on a platform familiar to users.

BIOGRAPHY

Beth Sheldrake joined EPA’s Emergency Response Program in 1994 and her main duties include emergency response to oil and chemical spills, spill contingency planning and policy development, and various preparedness activities. Ms. Sheldrake leads EPA’s involvement in the development of the Northwest Area Contingency Plan (NWACP), is EPA’s representative in emergency response planning and preparedness along the northwestern US/Canadian border, and actively works with Native American tribes and local jurisdictions to improve spill planning and preparedness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Region 10 Regional Response Team/Northwest Area Committee public web site <http://www.rrt10nwac.com/>

