

Conducting a site evaluation to determine the suitability of a site for new containment facility construction is important. If there is contamination from previous site activities it is cheaper and easier to clean up before construction begins on a new facility. Information from the evaluation may help businesses with issues involving insurability, real estate transactions, bank loans, and other concerns.

The purpose of this document is to provide information on some of the basics of a site evaluation. However, this information should not be used to replace the advice or technical assistance of legal or technical specialists who have reliable experience with site evaluations.

What is a Site Evaluation?

A site evaluation is a preliminary assessment of conditions and construction suitability at a particular site. The objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Confirm or rule out contamination, identify hazardous substances found, and determine level and extent of the contamination.
- Identify environmental characteristics of the site, such as slope of the property, depth to groundwater, nearby waterways, or open drains.
- Evaluate the potential threat to human health and the environment from existing contamination and from future use of the site.

What Makes Up a Site Evaluation?

1. A Comprehensive Review of Historical Records

Regulatory agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology), county health departments, and local planning offices may have useful information about a site. These types of information are often available for review at federal, state, and local regulatory agencies:

- Environmental permits (air, water, discharge, septic, etc.).
- Hazardous waste manifests, storage notices, and waste generator reports.
- Inspection and spill reports.
- Violation notices, administrative orders, compliance schedules, or other enforcement actions regarding the site.
- Zoning, comprehensive plans, and business licenses.

Copies can be obtained, sometimes for a fee, by contacting the appropriate agency.

WHY IT MATTERS

In 1988, the Model Toxics Control Act was passed by voters in Washington State. It requires the identification, investigation, and cleanup of sites contaminated with hazardous substances. Liability under this law is far-reaching and can be costly. You do not have to be responsible for all the contamination on your property to be required to pay the cost of cleaning it up.

Building a new secondary containment facility on a previously contaminated site could result in significant costs, if removal of the facility is necessary to conduct a cleanup. Reconstruction of the facility at the existing site, or relocation to a new site would involve additional costs as well.

These costs could be avoided if proper steps are taken, before construction, to determine whether contamination exists.

Special accommodations:

To ask about the availability of this document in a version for the visually impaired call the Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction Program at 360-407-6700. Persons with hearing loss, call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability, call 877-833-6341.

Other valuable sources of public records include local newspapers, the county auditor's office, and district and superior courts. The following types of information may help determine the nature of prior site activities and possible contamination problems:

- Title records.
- Existing environmental liens.
- Surrounding property owners.
- Aerial photographs.
- Litigation regarding property or owners.

2. Interviews with people familiar with the property.

Interviews or questionnaires can often provide useful information about a site. The following individuals could be interviewed depending on the circumstances:

- Present and former owners, operators, and employees of a facility.
- Regulatory agency personnel who may have worked with the property.
- Neighboring residences or businesses.

Here are some examples of questions you could ask during this process:

- What were past uses of the property?
- What chemicals were used, manufactured, treated, stored, disposed of, or released on the site?
- Has any dangerous waste or other waste material been treated, stored, or disposed of at the site?
- Are there underground storage tanks, dry wells, drain fields, or other buried structures where chemicals have been stored or disposed of?
- What is the compliance record with environmental laws for past facilities at the site?

3. A site inspection

All site evaluations should include an on-site inspection of the property. Many indications of environmental problems can be identified easily by walking around and visually inspecting the property. Consider the physical characteristics of the site. This can provide clues to the possible existence of contamination as well as indicate the suitability for continued use. Proper inspection before construction begins can reduce potential liability in the future.

Warning signs often include:

- Stained soil, lack of vegetation, or sick or dead vegetation.
- Unusual or noxious odors.
- Settling ponds or unnaturally colored surface water.
- The presence of fill consisting of waste materials.
- Containers or drums with unknown contents.
- Proximity of property to known or suspected dangerous waste sites.
- Condition of existing pollution control equipment.

Make a sketch of the site. The sketch should include an appropriate scale and show:

- Location and description of the facilities.
- Existing drainage patterns and topography.

- Depth to groundwater and groundwater flow.
- Proximity to wells or water supply.
- Soil type and prevailing winds.
- Particularly sensitive areas of the property needing special consideration.

4. Possible Sampling to Test for Contamination

If contamination is found or suspected, then samples of the soil at and around the site should be taken. Surface and groundwater samples should also be taken both at and downstream from the site. This will help determine the extent, level, and movement of contamination.

What to Do if Contamination is Discovered

As a provision of the Model Toxics Control Act Cleanup Rules (Chapter 173-340-300 WAC), Ecology requires owners and operators to provide information on sites where a release of a hazardous substance has been discovered. If a site evaluation indicates that contamination may be present that could threaten human health or the environment, this must be reported to Ecology. Contact your nearest Ecology regional office at the number(s) provided below.

Why Conduct a Site Evaluation?

You can benefit in many ways from conducting a site evaluation on your property. Information acquired during the site evaluation can document the condition of the land during your ownership and be of value to you in the future. Insurance may be easier to obtain. Banks may be more willing to loan money when documentation is available about the condition of the land. Good documentation can help expedite the loan process. Finally, when you can establish that the property is not contaminated during the period of your ownership, you can limit any potential future liability that could emerge if someone else contaminates the property later.

Related Information

Several publications are available about environmental property assessments, contaminated site reporting, and cleanup. You can download these at www.ecy.wa.gov/publications or contact an Ecology regional office.

- *Hazardous Waste Considerations in Real Estate Transactions*, #R-TC-92-115
- *Reporting Releases of Hazardous Substances*, #R-TC-94-133
- *Hazardous Waste Cleanups: Selecting an Environmental Consulting Firm*, #R-TC-92-116
- *Site Discovery and Release Reporting*, #TCP Policy 300

Department of Ecology Regions

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/hwtr>

