

# A New View

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As many people know, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts offered an Early Retirement Incentive in 2015 (was it *really* less than a year ago?) and MassDEP lost a lot of experienced staff. Prior to the exodus, MassDEP and BWSC had not hired many new staff in a long time, but we did have opportunities to engage Interns in recent years – young, eager college students who wanted to get a taste of what we do during their summer vacations, wondering if they might want to do this kind of work someday. And, at long last, in late 2015, we posted some new positions and in 2016, we finally have new hires starting.

In 2014 and 2015, I personally had three interns with assignments to review different submittals, analyze their findings and produce reports. Each one had their own background and skills that they brought to the job. To add interest, for the first Intern, we added a Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping and analysis project. Later, two of the Interns looked at sites where Immediate Response Actions (IRA) had taken place and had them track some related information. To try to make it more interesting, they personally selected sites that appealed to them and followed them through the process – whether to Response Action Outcome or to a Tier Classification.

The Intern working on the extra GIS project was (with a nod to *Casablanca*) shocked, *shocked*, to discover that there were “so many” sites in Massachusetts right in places near where people live, and even in his *own* town.

In retrospect, I guess I was once pretty shocked to learn that my own little hometown had such a long industrial history and dozens of sites (gas stations, dry cleaners, industrial sites, an old manufactured gas facility, an old rubber factory and at least one high profile former military use site). None of them fit any pre-formed image of what a hazardous waste site might look like, and almost all of them are, and have long been, in an appropriate productive use for some other purpose. It’s kind of like coyotes, unless you happen to run across one, or it gets your pet, they live among us in urban spaces and we have no idea they are there. It is interesting to realize how comfortable we are living near old sites in part because we have had a program in place for almost thirty years that gets them to No Significant Risk. And we also have coyotes in my town, well within ten miles of Boston.

I have often thought it would be a good project for young students to look up the sites that might be present in their own towns or neighborhoods, how they got there, what they were, who or what might be affected, how they were cleaned up (or not) and how they can figure those things out. I like to imagine that it might inspire some students to pay more attention in science classes. Coincidentally, just this past weekend we got an email with such questions on a public park in a town in eastern Massachusetts reported to have lead on site – as part of a school project.

With the two Interns working on conditionally approved IRAs, one was more interested in legal issues and the other in public health issues.

The Intern who was interested in legal issues selected a residential site with an underground fuel oil storage tank where there had been a sudden release. During the assessment, it was discovered that there were also chlorinated solvents on the property, migrating from an upgradient site. In this case, a site that started out as something relatively simple, became a site with multiple Potentially Responsible Parties, multiple contaminants and different relevant deadlines and legal issues.

The other Intern, who was more interested in public health issues, found an old plating site with heavy metals disposed in waste lagoons along with various phthalates. The site was in a geographic area where the Intern understood (from his course work) that there was an ALS (“Lou Gherig’s disease”) cluster (a disease that is rather mysterious in origin and nature). He was looking into the location, buried waste lagoons, groundwater flows and whether any of the local public water supply wells might have been impacted at some time by the contaminants or *combinations* of contaminants. It raised a number of questions about contaminant interactions, something that is generally beyond the scope of most regulatory programs but it raises intriguing questions. Do the health effects change in the presence of endocrine disruptors? The Intern was not able to finish an analysis before the end of the summer but it will likely inform his later research. `

Now, with a new staff on board, we have a long training period where we get them up to speed on such exciting administrative topics as how to fill out an electronic timesheet, Conflict of Interest and Ethics training and the Occupational Health and Safety refresher. We have them familiarize themselves with our policies, regulations and Audit screening forms and review some of our own Notices of Audit Findings (NOAFs) to get a flavor of what things MassDEP looks for during audits. Soon, they will be starting to audit some sites and then sit down with more senior staff to review their findings. It’s not so much passing the torch (some of us are not leaving after all) as tending a new crop.

And so Waste Site Cleanup continues.