

The Good Old Days

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Years ago (decades really), when I started working in the Bureau of Waste Site Cleanup (BWSC) /Northeast Regional Office (NERO), we had a task we used to refer to as “General Calls.” It was probably everyone’s least favorite task as people would never *volunteer* for the task. More often, the more senior staff were looking to avoid it or to get off the general call “list” whenever a new person was hired.

General Calls were assigned in four-hour blocks and there was a log book where the calls (and the follow-ups/answers) were recorded. I had Friday afternoons. During one’s designated General Call time, you weren’t supposed to schedule site visits or meetings and you couldn’t leave work early before the close of business hours. If it was your turn on the phone, you were supposed to stay at your desk. If you had to be absent from the calls for any portion of that four hours, even for a few minutes, you had to arrange with someone else to cover the phone or switch times.

Occasionally a caller would be trying to report a release or possible release: an oily sheen in a stream or odors in a basement. Other times it was a call more appropriate to send to another program. Less often, it was someone calling to ask about a local situation of possible concern: soil stockpiles at an adjacent property, smoke from a factory or work going on at a gas station.

The staff person would write down the date and time of the question and how they responded to the question. Often a new person would have to try to find the appropriate person to whom to transfer the call (e.g., Emergency Response or a particular project manager). Or the staff person would go talk to someone who had information about a situation, or would have to go look up information in our file room and get back to the caller. Sometimes, the caller really just wanted to talk to someone, even if there was nothing the person could really “help” them with, they just wanted to talk – about family issues after someone passed on a piece of contaminated property.

Then there were the “answer shoppers” – people looking for someone (anyone!) in BWSC to tell them it was acceptable to do something they already decided they

wanted to do. Of course, the staff person didn't have site plans, maps, contaminant information or any other pertinent information to look at, just a limited summary over the phone. The caller may even have talked to other DEP staff already, but perhaps they didn't like the answer so they called again. The worst thing would be if your name later showed up in a document, claiming that you "approved" something over the phone when that was never the case. The other worst thing is to get a reputation as an "answer shopper"!

General Calls usually felt like an interruption of the normal flow of work and sometimes a burden over and above normal workloads, a necessary evil. But other times, General Calls were interesting, even fun. The calls might be the start of something big, a spill, an emergency situation, a heads up about a particular property. They were also an opportunity to build good public relations, to educate lay people about what we do and encourage environmental awareness.

Trying to explain groundwater pump and treat systems with carbon filtration was generally easier if I explained that it was kind of like a goldfish filter with the carbon in it. Lay people "got" that explanation quite readily. Groundwater flows were trickier. Trying to explain how a bedrock depression trapped contamination in a person's backyard by comparing it to a bathtub was probably not the best description, especially when someone else fed it back to me a couple years later.

Then there was the caller with the "little round holes" that showed up in the backyard one morning after it rained... little round holes in a "pattern"... holes? Little round holes? In patterns? I confess I wasn't quite sure where that one was going. It was hard to know what questions to ask or where to refer the call. Did the caller see lights in the sky the night before? Or want to talk about dehydrated, glowing soil or patterns in grass? If there was any grass... Were we talking aliens? UFOs and landing gear? I took notes diligently and tried not to giggle. I was intrigued by the caller's take in a strange way. I didn't have the heart to say it was probably earthworms!