



Terrorist attacks stall environmental progress

By Richard MacLean

The horrific terrorist attacks on the United States will have a global impact on environmental progress. The indirect consequences will affect us in ways we do not yet understand. If there was ever a time to start thinking and acting "outside the box," this is it. Dust off that strategic plan.

An incurable optimist might assert that multinational corporations are recognizing, in the wake of the September terrorist attacks, that they must institute aggressive environmental programs to demonstrate their commitment to the global communities in which they operate or sell products or services. Yes, maybe a few — a very few — will take this enlightened approach for long term competitive gain. But, let us now return to the world of reality.

In times of war, the environment is often sacrificed for the sake of national security. I do not have the statistics, but it would not be surprising to learn that the U.S. Department of Defense cleanup bill for fighting the Cold War may eventually rival the cleanup bill for American industry during the 20th century. When human lives are at stake, expediency always wins. A personal example: when I first moved to Arizona, the locals warned me, "Never, ever four-

wheel-drive off of established paths because it will take the desert a hundred years to recover ... Oh, and if your life is at stake, forget this rule." It is hard to argue with this logic, especially if it is your safekeeping that is on the line.

I am not suggesting that basic compliance with existing regulations will suffer dramatically. Moreover, direct and immediate impacts to the environment for the "new war" on terrorism will be insignificant (although widespread biological, chemical and nuclear deployments would be obvious exceptions).

The most visible outcome will be DOA (dead on arrival) "anti-environment" initiatives, such as the Bush administration's plan to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, suddenly coming back to life. Just follow the political-speak: Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) on June 5, 2001 stated, "A key part of the Bush administration's new national energy plan, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, has already been declared dead." Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) on October 1, 2001 pushed that plan forward with, "We're highly dependent on foreign oil and any glitch in that system would find us in a desperate situation with our economy and our people."¹

It's About the Indirect Impacts

There is little doubt that the combination of the current economic downturn and the world's fixation on the war against terrorism will draw corporate, government and public attention away from environmental issues. This is not a value judgment; it is a statement of fact.

The diminished prominence of environmental issues was driven home to me in the contrast between two stories: the heroic efforts of the New York Fire Department to find survivors and a report about the loss of an injured whale off the coast of New England. Last spring, the *Boston Globe* ran front-page articles when this whale was found with a rope caught in and infecting its mouth. Imagine the importance of cell phone calls from the World Trade Center victims versus radio beacons transmitted from an injured whale. The whale story seems so trivial now.

Over the past thirty years there have been other significant economic downturns, but this is the first major slump in which the public, government and industry feels comfortable about the current status of environmental progress. I can vividly recall massive business cutbacks in the 1980s in which environmental staffs were expanding. Not this time.

So How Might This Play Out?

Discretionary spending will get even tighter, and it will become exceedingly difficult to justify long-term activities that go beyond basic compliance and the maintenance of a company's public image. For example, the annual publication of an environmental report may continue, but more companies will move to Web-only or hybrid publishing methods to cut costs. The pressure on environmental departments to "do more with less" will dramatically increase. Staff cuts and consolidations could expand, or as Joel Makower states, "For environmental health and safety (EHS) managers still with a job, it's show time: Prove your worth or risk hitting the streets."²

Risk taking and tradeoffs will increase. Companies will reassess many basic functions; for example, "Do we really need to conduct audits this frequently?" If compliance suffers, it will be due to harried staffs trying to keep up and prioritizing the "must do's" against the "should do's." Staff turnover and training gaps will also negatively impact compliance. Business management will demand, "We cannot let compliance slip!" while simultaneously reducing EHS budgets

and personnel. Major compliance problems will be aggressively followed up with reorganizations. More EHS personnel will read Dilbert cartoons.

Between the economy and the "new war," we will have daily reminders that things will not turnaround within a few months. EHS staffs will hunker down for the long haul. The best and the brightest may decide to move on to other opportunities. Senior staff member may seek out (or be forced into) retirement packages.

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Corporations and governments had already become increasingly sensitive to environmental protests during recent global trade meetings. CEOs may openly discount such activities as lunacy, but privately they recognize that negative publicity does not help profits and boycotts can be the kiss of death. We may hate admitting it to our-

selves, but some of these antics may have provided the impetus for funding new EHS initiatives.

Greenpeace, among others, has staged very effective public relations stunts in the past. There is a very fine line, however, between PR aerobatics and property destruction. These distinctions may start to blur, sending a chilling effect over all forms of demonstrations. The media may be all the more ready to film these protests, but will the public reaction be all the more negative? The public and politicians may consider nonviolent environmental protests to be unpatriotic and see violent protesters as terrorists — to be dealt with harshly. One wonders if the police may overreact to any form of protest.

The energy that was devoted to environmental protests will shift to peace protests as the cause du jour, as if this new war were some re-play of the glory days of the Vietnam anti-war demonstrations. Business managers that may have previously felt morally uncomfortable saying no to EHS efforts, may now justify cutbacks and risk taking as the moral highroad to achieve more vital national objectives.

ADVERTISING SPACE

Enough!

By now I suspect that my readers are either tossing this magazine across the room or running for the Prozac. Please, hold on for a few more paragraphs.

There are also ways to aggressively move forward in this new war for the environment and not just continue operating in a holding/reactive mode. Start lining up alternate career options now, even if you are in a secure job you enjoy.

Dickens said it best in *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us." And so we find ourselves today.

While these may be grim times, they also represent a phenomenal opportunity to operate outside the box that EHS professionals have been stuck in for the past decade. In the past two issues of *Environmental Protection*, the "Manager's Notebook" has described a profession in transition that needs to move on to meet future challenges. Maybe what happened in September was the triggering event that will start us thinking differently about how we go about our business.

Old thought patterns linger, however. A survey of senior EHS managers taken a few days after the terrorist attack yielded a string of comments that sounded more like platitudes and wishful thinking.³ "Our approach is not to let the terrible events in the United States deflect us from the underlying principles of sustainable development and environmental responsibility," and "Eventually we will be right back at all of the same environmental issues we have been grappling with for years."

Yet, the survey also reveals the beginnings of an understanding of the emerging dynamics, "companies originating in an Islamic culture might well feel the need to ask whose values are we talking about?" While this may be an obvious conclusion, it demonstrates recognition that things will be different. Let's face it; we are in the values and social responsibility business.

I am telling my clients to dust off their strategic plan and study why it may be pitifully inadequate. EHS strategic plans are rarely little more than tactical plans (i.e., projects lists) that gather dust on the shelf. Yes, these plans need updating, but definitely not by the techniques that were originally used to generate them. There are much better techniques available — techniques that will grab management's attention. Past "Manager's Notebook" columns have described some of these techniques, but these brief summaries contain just an outline of what can be done.⁴ There are also ways to aggressively move forward in this new war for the environment and not just continue operating in a holding/reactive mode.


Some Closing Suggestions

This column ends with a few closing suggestions. First, stop doing what you have been doing. If you continue on your existing path, you may watch your best people leave, your budget cut, and your career (assuming you still have your job) parked on the sidelines for the duration. The ultimate objective is to move from a tactical maintainer of compliance to a strategist/coach/change agent/expert bringing value to the business.⁵

Second, do not fall into the trap of using resource limitations as an excuse to hold onto the status quo. What truly amazes me is the: (1) amount of time wasted in meetings that go on and on; (2) energy expended on decisions that should take seconds but drag on for weeks; (3) resources wasted on pet programs that continue to add little; and (4) accommodations taken to hold onto pleasant, likable staff who do not deliver results. It's time to clean house and work efficiently!

Third, start lining up alternate career options now, even if you are in a secure job you enjoy. There is no such thing as a "secure job" and even great jobs can become a nightmare overnight with a change of management or major shift in policy or direction. The perfect job is always one in which you can at any time say (and mean it), "You can take this job and shove it!" I've

had several perfect jobs over my career, and I am in one now. If you feel trapped, the resentment will show, you will not function at maximum level and you will not take the necessary personal risks required to get management's attention and respect.

The preceding comments are sweeping statements, indeed. No doubt, most readers are shaking their head, "Yeah right, big talk, but where is the substance?" Some of this substance will be provided in upcoming "Manager's Notebooks." Yes, the column this month is grim in both its tone and subject matter. But read between the lines: this is the best of times for EHS managers who have the courage to forge a new path. 



Richard MacLean is president of Competitive Environment Inc., a management consulting firm established in 1995 in Scottsdale, Ariz., and

the director of the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI), a university-based nonprofit research organization. He can be reached via e-mail at maclean@competitive-e.com. For Adobe Acrobat® electronic files of this and his other writings, visit his Web site at www.Competitive-E.com.

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- ¹ Tom Doggett, Reuters News Service, June 5, 2001; Christopher Doering, Reuters News Service, October 1, 2001.
- ² Joel Makower, "The Weakest Link? - How EH&S Professionals Keep Their Jobs During Tough Times," *The Green Business Letter*, Tildon Press, Inc., Oakland CA, October 2001, Page 1.
- ³ W. Dalessandro, "After Attack, Corporate Strategists are Resolute Yet Realistic," *Business and the Environment*, October 2001, Page 16.
- ⁴ See for example Manager's Notebook columns appearing in the February, April, May, June, August 2001 issues of *Environmental Protection*.
- ⁵ J. Makower, Op. cit., Page 6.