



REPORT OF THE NICOLE Workshop: From Site Closure to Disengagement



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www.nicole.org

Compiled by Paul Bardos



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NICOLE

NICOLE (Network for Contaminated Land in Europe) was set up in 1995 as a result of the CEFIC “SUSTECH” programme which promotes co-operation between industry and academia on the development of sustainable technologies. NICOLE is the principal forum that European business uses to develop and influence the state of the art in contaminated land management in Europe. NICOLE was created to bring together problem holders and researchers throughout Europe who are interested in all aspects of contaminated land. It is open to public and private sector organisations. NICOLE was initiated as a Concerted Action within the European Commission’s Environment and Climate RTD Programme in 1996. It has been self-funding since February 1999.

NICOLE’s overall objectives are to:

- Provide a European forum for the dissemination and exchange of knowledge and ideas about contaminated land arising from industrial and commercial activities;
- Identify research needs and promote collaborative research that will enable European industry to identify, assess and manage contaminated sites more efficiently and cost-effectively; and
- Collaborate with other international networks inside and outside Europe and encompass the views of a wide a range of interest groups and stakeholders (for example, land developers, local/regional authorities and the insurance/financial investment community).

NICOLE currently has 112 members. Membership fees are used to support and further the aims of the network, including: technical exchanges, network conferences, special interest meetings, brokerage of research and research contacts and information dissemination via a web site, newsletter and journal publications. NICOLE includes an Industry Subgroup (ISG) – with 25 members; a Service Providers Subgroup (SPG) with 41 members; 31 individual members from the academic sector/research community; and 15 members from other organisations, including research planners, non profit making organisations, other networks, funding organisations. Some members are involved in both the ISG and the SPG. For further general information, further meeting reports, network information and links to contaminated land related web sites, please visit NICOLE's web site: www.nicole.org.

Membership fees are currently 3,500 EURO per year for companies (1,750 EURO for smes), and 150 EURO per year for academic institutions. For membership requests please contact:

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Executive Summary

Historic land contamination has arisen through a variety of past practices that did not take account of the environment, including processes of industrial change as businesses changed on a site. These changes may have been triggered by a forced closure (for example as a result of an industry going out of business), a planned sale or a planned relocation. These processes of change continue today. It is important that these changes do not give rise to land contamination of the future. Consequently disengagement from a site needs to be handled as an environmental management process.

The objective of this workshop was to understand how site closure can be conducted in a smooth and effective manner. Its topics included:

- Examples of remediation cases under complex site closure conditions
- Cases of site closure that either went as planned or cases where there were lessons to be learned.
- Social, environmental, legal/contractual or financial aspects

Closure of a site or sites is a uniquely painful form of organisational change. It is frequently a decision of last resort, precipitated by some form of organisational or economic crisis. All the same it is essential that those responsible for the closure of a site recognise that they have a social obligation, to the former workers in the closed facility and to their communities, to effect a rapid, efficient and effective disengagement from the site, so that it can be redeveloped by others and returned to a beneficial use in as short a time as possible. It is also vital that professionals engaged in facilitating the technical aspects of site closure recognise, and take responsibility, for this mission.

Having a “clear end vision” for the closure process and a dedicated project team are essential to be able to plan and execute a closure of a site. In this context, it is perhaps better to perceive this as a process of transition rather than closure. Where neither a vision (goal) nor a clear plan is in place, the closure will not go smoothly. A number of closure options are usually available and time should be taken to assess the opportunities and risks associated with each one and to make a decision aligned with a desirable end-vision; rather than taking a rushed decision based on the most obvious and/or cheapest solution. Where the site closure is part of the restructuring of an ongoing company it may have a major impact on corporate reputation. It is therefore in the organisations best interest to manage the closure process in a way that as far as possible mitigates its external consequences.

Senior management buy-in and clear strategy was seen to be key to stop internal conflicts derailing the closure process. Having access to a team of specialists (e.g. legal, human resources, technical, financial, public relations etc) reduces the chance of an unexpected issue derailing the closure process. Clear lines of communication are needed with all of stakeholders identified as having a legitimate interest. Partnering with them in the development and implementation of the project plan was seen as an effective way of smoothing a closure process.

Not all regulatory contexts are predictable. In some countries experience implies that regulatory agencies cannot agree with one another, hence no clear end-vision on for a site is possible, hence remediation and redevelopment may be delayed or even prevented.

Conclusions

There are some very wide extremes in outcome from a site closure process. In some circumstances the site closure is part of a smooth transition in the use of a site that brings widely recognised benefits. In other circumstances the site closure may be unplanned and unanticipated and lead to a chaotic situation where a site remains unused and a blight for a long period of time. While economic circumstances are clearly a determining factor for where a site closure will fall across this spectrum, it also appears that poor anticipation and planning play a major role in poor outcomes.



The ideal approach is that the objectives and an end state vision for a site closure process should be carefully defined, with realistic targets. The closure process needs a single point of project management and rigorous programming of activities. The management of the closure process needs access both to the skills and experiences of site employees and or specialised service providers. Organisations undertaking site closure should recognise their social responsibility to facilitate re-use of site and avoid blighting communities. There was a clear mood in the meeting to move away from a perception that site closure was a negative process where site owners were trying to wash their hands of a site and disengage with it as expediently as possible, to a position of trying to find a shared vision for a positive outcome and a process of transition and re-use for a site.

The workshop set out to develop some kind of ‘road-map’ which can be used in site closure situations. Many of the delegates felt that this was a useful idea, and that a generic “project management” framework could be used (a stepwise process) with specifics relating to closure (checklists / tools in each stage). The overall consensus was that NICOLE should take a stepwise approach. As a first step NICOLE could produce a short leaflet on site closure providing some initial guidance. Given the wide range of regulatory jurisdictions and economic circumstances across Europe, providing a detailed piece of guidance for site closure does not seem very feasible. However, as a second step NICOLE could identify a set of common principles to guide decision making in site closure processes, which users could then fit to their local circumstances. Across its membership NICOLE has a large body of experience and expertise which could be applied to supporting these principles with checklists to support particular technical issues, in particular the “4-D’s”: Dismantling, Deconstruction, Demolition and “Depollution”. This activity was felt to fall into the remit of the NICOLE Brownfields Working Group, with linkages to other Working Groups (such as those for waste and sustainable remediation). *The full report provides summaries of the papers given, along with a discussion based on points raised during the meeting, and comments from a number of delegates after the meeting.*



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