EPA
United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

The following agencies signed an agreement in August 2000 to assist Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages with the cleanup or closing of dangerous open solid waste dumps on their land:

Environmental Protection Agency

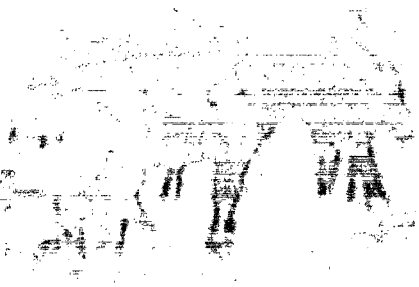
Bureau of Indian Affairs

Indian Health Service

USDA's Rural Utilities Service

Department of Defense

Housing and Urban Development



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Solid Waste and Emergency
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Open Dump Cleanup Project Helps Tribes Fight Waste

What is the Open Dump Cleanup Project?

The Open Dump Cleanup Project is a multi-agency commitment to help tribes throughout Indian Country close open dumps, clean up waste on tribal land, and develop safe solid waste management practices. Federal agency cooperative efforts initially have focused on helping tribes close or upgrade high-threat waste disposal sites. Assistance, however, goes beyond the simple closure or upgrading of the waste sites. The federal partners will make resources available to help tribes develop and implement comprehensive programs for managing solid waste and developing alternatives to disposal. Assistance may include funding for training, technical assistance, planning, implementation, closure, and post-closure activities.

Officials from EPA, the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service, the Department of Health and Human Service's Indian Health Service (IHS), and the Department of Defense are the primary agencies involved.

What Are Open Dumps?

Open dumps are areas where waste is disposed of without proper controls, including regular application of cover, controlled access to the site, and other environmental controls.

How big is the open dump problem on Indian lands?

Nationwide, about 1,100 open dumps scar Indian lands, with 142 dumps considered "high-threat" sites, according to a 1998 report to Congress by the IHS. There still are more open dumps in Indian Country that have not yet officially been counted. If left unchecked, the sites could cause health problems for Native Americans living near these pollution sources. They also pose risks to the environment itself. To clean up or upgrade all the sites, IHS estimates it could cost $126 million.

What has the multi-agency, Tribal Open Dump Cleanup Project accomplished?

Tribes have used multi-agency funding to: close open dumps; develop integrated solid waste management plans; establish alternative solid waste management options, including waste reduction and recycling programs and financing transfer stations; improve enforcement of illegal dumping regulations and ordinances; and provide public education, especially to children. As illustrated in the success stories below, building partnerships with local, regional, and national organizations and federal agencies proved a key component of program success.

Who is eligible to participate in the program?

The Open Dump Cleanup Project is open to applicants from all federally recognized tribes and Alaskan Native villages. For more information or to obtain a grant solicitation package, visit EPA's Web site at <www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/tribal/finance.htm>, or contact Tonya Hawkins at 703 308-8278 or Chris Dege at 703 308-2392.

Open Dump Cleanup Success Stories

Pueblo of Taos
Taos, New Mexico

The Pueblo of Taos used federal grants to close its 5.4-acre open dump, identified by IHS as a high-threat site. For years, the tribe used the dump to deposit household solid waste. The dump existed near the tribal population, the Rio Pueblo River, and a bison herd. The grant funding enabled the Pueblo of Taos to cap its open dump, provide post-closure maintenance and monitoring, establish a transfer station and curbside collection service, and provide community outreach. The tribe implemented a solid waste management plan in conjunction with the open dump closure activities in order to prevent the degradation of wetlands and to protect the Pueblos' bison herd.

To cap the open dump, the tribe used a clay liner, a 18-inch infiltration layer, and a 6-inch soil erosion layer. The cover soil was hauled to the site because onsite soils were not adequate to meet permeability requirements. The final cover was seeded with native dryland grass. With surface slopes less than 5 percent and surface vegetation growth, the potential for soil erosion is minimal. For post-closure maintenance and monitoring, sampling wells were drilled and drive points set to trap water flows down gradient from the dump. Currently, the tribe is monitoring groundwater for contaminants.

To assess the effects of a transfer station or curbside collection service, the tribe is monitoring illegal dumping activity. The Taos Pueblo Utility Service Board held public meetings, gave presentations at schools, and conducted community surveys. A waste drop-off point was designated and an attendant hired to assist the public during waste drop-offs. The waste is transported by Waste Management to a nearby disposal facility. Presently, a solid waste transfer station is being constructed, which will provide an alternative to tribal solid waste open dumping in the future.

The tribe worked as a team, with several federal agencies and the All-Indian Pueblo Council, a consortium of 19 federally recognized tribes, to successfully close the 5.4-acre dump. IHS provided technical assistance and prepared plans and specifications for the dump closure. EPA developed a solid waste open dump closure/post-closure guidance document, provided technical assistance, and reviewed all documents regarding the cover and post-closure final plan. By working together to close the open dump and develop alternative solid waste management options, the team helped protect the health of the community and prevent environmental damage to wetlands, the aquifer, and the Pueblos' bison herd.

For further information contact Anan Tanbouz, P.E. at EPA Region VI at 214 665-8195.

White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians
Mahnomen, Minnesota

The White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians used a Tribal Open Dump Cleanup Project grant to clean up the Cherry Lake Road dump site on its reservation. This highly visible and well known illegal dump site spanned a 4.5-mile stretch of Cherry Lake Road. According to Monica Hedstrom, the general assistance program coordinator for the White Earth Natural Resources Department, the tribe put the Cherry Lake Road cleanup out for bid. The tribe was pleased when a contractor submitted a bid that was significantly lower than what it had anticipated.

All types of waste were removed from the site, ranging from common household trash to large items such as furniture, appliances, and tires. The contractor used heavy equipment to remove the large items, and the tribe hired local residents to pick up the remaining items by hand. One consequence of using heavy equipment in the cleanup was the destruction of vegetation along the roadside. At this point the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) stepped up, donating 1,000 trees to beautify the area and prevent erosion.

Building upon the success of this effort, the tribe began working with MDNR, the three surrounding counties, and private groups to organize three demonstration cleanup projects (one in each county). The partners selected high-profile sites, such as one site located next to a church, and worked together to clean them up. These projects demonstrated the commitment of the tribe and its neighbors to solving the reservation's illegal dumping problem.

The council also used the grant funds to improve service at its five solid waste satellite transfer stations. In the past, many residents felt the user fees were too high and the stations were not staffed reliably. With the grant money, the tribal council evaluated the fee schedule for the stations and established prices more conducive to residents. The council also developed and advertised a fixed schedule where each of the five satellite stations is open one day a week. Water lines, wells, and septic tanks also were installed at each site to allow the stations to be staffed continually.

Since the cleanups and the improvements to the transfer station, most of the illegal dump sites have remained clean, and residents are much more aware of the illegal dumping problem. According to Monica Hedstrom there has been a noticeable increase in the use of the waste pickup service and satellite transfer stations by reservation residents.

For further information contact Dolly Tong at EPA Region V at 312 886-1019.