

IN FLAT REMEDIATION MARKET, WEISS ASSOCIATES LOOKS TO LEVERAGE ITS STRENGTHS

To Richard Weiss, founder of environmental consulting and engineering firm **Weiss Associates** (Emeryville, CA), the most critical piece of any remediation project is a thorough understanding of subsurface conditions and the dynamics of fluid flow in the saturated and unsaturated zones. Without that understanding, a cleanup project faces a substantial risk of re-opening or not achieving the original goal if the remedy was not based on a proper characterization of those dynamics and conditions—at substantial long-term cost to the property owner or responsible party.

Site re-openings and re-assessments are not uncommon, and in fact, Weiss Associates is leveraging its extensive expertise in subsurface science to help its clients better achieve previously intended remediation goals. “We have several sites we’ve taken over from other consultants, or reviewed for litigation support, because of inadequate characterization,” Weiss tells EBJ. “This is one of the many ways we help our clients meet their goals while reducing life-cycle costs.

“We’re basically talking about short-term versus long-term costs,” he continues. Responsible parties can be eager to move forward to closure, and sometimes a little too eager. “Customers want to see boots on the ground, shovels digging, and pumps pumping. We try to explain that if you spend a little more up front, you can spend less money in the long term.”

Quite a bit less, potentially. At one site, Weiss Associates took over where extensive groundwater pumping and treating, soil vapor extraction, and other remedial measures had been in place for upwards of 15 years to treat volatile organic compounds

(VOCs) in groundwater. After conducting a vapor intrusion investigation in a building at the site, “we discovered three previously unidentified sources that prior investigations hadn’t detected,” Weiss reports. “The client is now dealing with a much larger plume at a cost of millions of dollars, a problem it wouldn’t be facing if it invested a bit more for proper characterization in the early stages of the project,” he notes.

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As unfortunate as it is for responsible parties, “site re-assessment is sometimes necessary to achieve faster closure or accelerate cleanup for our clients.” Specializing in offering that service is what Weiss otherwise sees as a flat remediation market, “re-assessment can offer clients a way to potentially reduce their long-term remediation and monitoring costs, share of a cost-allocation, or liability in legal proceedings or negotiations,” he says.

DIVERSIFICATION MOVES

Although the firm has diversified into other areas such as stormwater permitting, regulatory compliance, engineering, and radiological characterization and disposal, remediation and subsurface characterization have formed the core of Weiss Associates’ business since it was founded in 1980. Today, the company employs about 50 people at three San Francisco Bay area

offices and generates annual revenue approaching \$10 million.

Weiss divides the revenue into four approximately equal buckets. About one quarter comes from the federal sector, consisting primarily of work at two Superfund sites at the U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL). Another quarter comes from cleanup work funded by the state of California; a large portion of this work has consisted of work in connection with the management of radiological and mixed waste generated at the former Laboratory for Energy-related Health Research (LEHR) at the University of California-Davis campus (Weiss conducted previous work there for DOE).

Another quarter of the work is for the private sector, largely at Superfund sites in Silicon Valley, including operation, maintenance, and monitoring at sites with up to 70 extraction wells and several hundred monitoring wells. And the last quarter, representing an area of diversification, is a broad range of as-needed environmental services, including planning and permitting work, for municipal and county agencies and ports, such as the Port of Oakland, City and County of San Francisco and the Port of San Francisco. The firm sees this last quadrant as a growth sector, primed in part by the need for cities, towns, and other entities to comply with new California stormwater regulations. Recent contracts have come from the Port of Oakland the cities of Oakland and Emeryville.”

“Most of our projects are long-term alliances,” says Weiss. Because the remediation market isn’t growing much, “we want to get into areas that are growing rather than take work from competitors.”

Weiss reports that his firm held its own during the recession, in part because some of the projects it was working on received some funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Since the recession, “we haven’t seen the growth

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we'd like to see. We're having a little trouble getting traction," but with the diversification into new areas and the new municipal contracts, "we're optimistic."

"The remediation business is steady-state for us and for the industry in general right now," he continues. "The opportunities in cleanup include the aforementioned site re-assessments, where Weiss is aiming to "identify clients that aren't making the progress towards closure or 'no further action,' they want to make or should be making."

There's nothing easy about building up that type of business, he observes. "We talk to as many people as we can and hopefully find some receptive ears." The company presents papers and has joined professional organizations to share what it knows and what it has learned, while remaining focused on doing high-quality work for existing clients.

"We haven't found any magic bullet for winning work," says Weiss. "It's hard, and it's a continuing challenge. We're making more contacts and getting out a lot more to address this challenge."

The issue of vapor intrusion is also a driver. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has directed greater attention to vapor intrusion, and in assessing the extent of such problems in the neighborhoods surrounding Superfund and state-lead sites, Weiss reports. On some jobs, the company is incorporating vapor intrusion systems into new buildings at

sites—low-tech solutions involving vents and sometimes fans, are much less expensive than retrofitting existing buildings.

Weiss Associates is also looking to leverage its small business status and DOE experience and reputation to team with other companies, either as the prime or as a subcontractor, on some of the larger contracts with small-business requirements that are on the horizon. "This would be a situation where we are not just a small business on the team but could also add substantial capabilities to help win bids," says Weiss.

"Of course, remediation is a pretty mature market, so most of the work is very competitive," he concludes. "Some clients only want to work with national or multinational firms, so we can't compete there. But there are many other clients that prefer to work with local companies that provide personal, quality service, and value." ■

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