

## **Measuring Success Beyond Cleanup Levels in Environmental Decontamination**

Keely Maxwell, Brittany Kiessling | *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*

The standard way of measuring the success of environmental remediation, removal, and decontamination work depends on achieving cleanup levels. Thinking about success beyond this is important for assessing societal benefits and articulating the value of cleanup work. However, it can be fraught with uncertainty due to the complexity of contamination situations. There are complications with unknown risks from emerging contaminants or combinations of contaminants and differences between how stakeholders conceptualize “clean” or “safe.” These differences go beyond discrepancies in exposure limits set by technical studies; they also include differences in acceptance of risk, public health priorities, and societal values. In other words, one person’s success story may be another person’s failure. But despite these challenges, measuring success is an important part of a project’s life-cycle because it provides an opportunity to analyze outcomes, share lessons learned, and establish best practices. It holds people accountable to the quality of their work and contributes to transparency throughout EPA’s programs.

Untangling the multi-faceted concept of remediation success and how different stakeholders define measure it, has been one focus of an ongoing research project conducted by social scientists in EPA’s Office Research and Development. The research team has been investigating how social processes impact environmental decontamination actions, and in turn, how cleanups affect everyday life within communities.

Building upon research presented at last year’s conference, we will share the findings from the latest phase of our project. The team conducted 25 interviews with EPA experts, such as OSCs, CICs, RPMs, and Brownfields managers. We asked a series of questions about working in the field, the types of obstacles they face, how they engage with stakeholders, and how they evaluate success. These insights developed our understanding of the role of trust building and communication in overall decontamination success. Ultimately, our interview findings revealed that decontamination professionals have many ways in which they measure the success of their projects, but there is a lack of formalized criteria. Many explained that they do not have a system to record success stories and lessons learned. Other key elements of success that participants identified, such as success in building relationships, are difficult to quantify. This presentation summarizes the findings of our interviews, with specific attention to ways of defining and measuring success in environmental cleanups. We suggest opportunities for improving measures of success so that EPA staff can preserve lessons learned and share their achievements with each other