

An environmental manager asks a simple question

And that question was, “If this is a cleanup site, why are we generating a hundred thousand plastic bottles a year?”

When Deborah Singleton began working as environmental compliance director at the Hanford K Basin Operations and Plateau Remediation (KBO&PR) project, she was dismayed to discover water bottles everywhere...stacked in cases in the office, scattered around on the project site, and in practically every cubicle. From June to October 2016, the project team consumed approximately 38,000 bottles (80,275 cups) of water.

With the approval of her boss, vice-president of KBO&PR Ray Geimer, she gave a lighthearted presentation to the project team at the end of January, reminding them that Americans buy 29 billion bottles of water each year, and only one out of five water bottles are recycled. She pointed out that 1,500 plastic bottles end up as waste in landfills or the ocean every SECOND, and it takes 700 years for one plastic bottle to decompose. To illustrate the problem on the site, she shared photos she'd taken of water bottles in conference rooms and offices, and littered along the fence line on the site.

She also reminded team members of the project guidelines for bottled water. It's intended for facilities that do not have potable water that meets water quality standards and field crews who do not have access to potable water. However, some employees have been taking cases of bottled water into their offices. “People take for granted that bottled water is a given,” Deborah said, challenging people to begin bringing in their own water bottles. “I realized we can't change how people feel, but we can change some of their actions.”

Deborah knows how to effect change: she proposed a solution. She asked Ray if the project could begin purchasing additional water in three-gallon containers to reduce waste in the office. The 38,000 bottles of water consumed from June to October equates to 300 three-gallon containers, far less waste. Encouraging employees to bring in their own reusable water bottles, Ray provided the entire project team with reusable bottles. Deborah said she'd track the purchase of 16.9-ounce plastic bottles over the calendar year with targeted reduction goals. She wants to “encourage the folks here to pour it, not reach for it.”

Employees have been making a real effort to reduce the 16.9-ounce bottles, but Deborah's also gotten a lot of pushback. “We're not being good stewards by making our environment pay for us to drink water,” said Deborah, who has presented this as a target for all environmental managers on the Hanford site. “Now I'm challenging other units to do the same thing.” Beginning with the KBO&PR project, she plans to get the president of the program to sign off on her objectives and targets for the CH2M Plateau Remediation Contract.

Deborah's first goal was to reduce the number of bottles by 10 percent by April 30. Her long-term goal is to get the number of water bottles consumed in the office down to zero. “It comes down to this: what kind of footprint are we planning to leave behind?” asked Deborah. “We're working on a cleanup site. Do we want people to dig in 100 years and find a whole stash of plastic water bottles?”

Kudos to Deborah for being an environmental manager who walks her talk!

