

What's going to be your legacy?

By Dean Spindler

Notes from the field

It doesn't matter if you are an inspector, technical staff, or administrator, each of us will leave a legacy behind when we retire or change employment.

A good inspector can make a significant difference by keeping a mine out of trouble through sharing state of the art reclamation information or offering advice to a cooperative operator on a better or possibly a more cost-effective way to achieve a higher quality of reclamation based on what they have learned at other operations, reclamation conferences or training classes. I have heard several good companies tell me they prefer to have a good and fair inspector or have an agency with good technical staff to help them keep in compliance or to offer them practical information regarding their operations than one who doesn't care about their job.

Similarly, a good technical staff person will make balanced decisions when approving proposed operations or reclamation options. It is not uncommon that a proposal will come in to vary or interpret a standard based on ill-conceived operations and very iffy outcomes. Approval of these type of proposals could end up in irreparable field situations with long term problems and no bond release ever possible, if not properly evaluated.

A good administrator will make fair decisions when considering the interpretation of the regulations and will pursue the best way to resolve problems when issues develop. With this it takes a good line of communication with the regulated community and their own staff. Without this, it is not possible to know when a problem has serious impacts to a mine, or if the timing of a permitting decision, particularly delays, will also have an impact. In the permitting world, everyone wants to be at the head of the line. In addition, the industry expects consistency of decisions between companies and equal fairness on processing times for permits. It is equally important when there are internal disagreements between staff as to the appropriate decision to make on a proposal. This way staff will have an explanation why decisions were made and respect for the administrator can be maintained.

A recent experience with an operator who was considering a new mining technique (of which he had little experience) was a good example to test the value of experienced agency staff. In this case, the operator asked to have meeting with the permitting and technical staff as part of their development evaluation. The purpose was not to avoid or minimize the application information, but to ensure adequate evaluations were being made by tapping into experienced professionals to learn about problems or issues where they had no experience and also to ensure that adequate information would be provided if an application were to be submitted. Having experienced agency staff participate involved in the conversation helped informed the operator's decision-making process on whether to move forward.

As we mature in our careers, our experiences will always play a part in molding our decisions. However, we need to periodically re-evaluate if those decisions are in the best interests of your agency in the long term for both the program and for the principles of the laws we enforce. The worst reason to approve something is if it is based solely on the fact you previously made multiple similar decisions. With the passage of time, changes in circumstance, and new information, a re-evaluation of your thought processes will help you make better decisions that will, ultimately, reflect on the legacy you leave behind.