

## A White Goods Transfer Station For The Seneca Nation

Bob Messinger  
Solid Waste Management Specialist



Part of the old Iroquois Thanksgiving Address reads, “Today we have gathered and we see cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things.” But modern life sometimes plays havoc with old traditions. For example, traditional methods of waste disposal among the Seneca Nation, located in the Western

part of the State, was based on a belief that everything must be reconnected to Mother Earth after serving their purpose. So much of their waste was buried in the soil, deposited directly on the ground or burned in backyard burn barrels. Back in the early 90's, that Nation's leaders recognized that to be true stewards of the land, some better methods of waste management would be necessary.

They began by establishing a curbside collection program of solid waste for residents of their reservations. Then in 1992, the Tribal Council established an Environmental Protection Department. That department then took a good look at their past environmental laws (including the Nation's Solid Waste Ordinance) and made appropriate changes. They then took an inventory of existing solid waste problem areas and prioritized their remediation. They concluded that a number of actions would alleviate the situation: open dump cleanups (especially a huge tire dump on the Allegany Territory), the construction and operation of a transfer station for “white goods” and construction and demolition debris, and the establishment of a community education and awareness program.

While they were able to remediate some of their 39 identified open dump sites using the Nation's own resources, outside sources would be needed to help fund some of the larger projects. There appeared to be funding from Federal Agencies, but unfortunately, no one agency could assist all of the different parts of the proposal. They could use monies from the Federal Tribal Open Dump Project to close some old dumpsites but that money could not be used for construction or education. The Environmental Protection Agency could supply some monies for education but could not help with any construction projects. The USDA-Rural Utilities Service could help with construction costs but could not provide assistance with clean up projects or education. It was time to get all the agencies together and plan a course of action.

In the late Summer and early Fall of 2002, meetings were held between Seneca Nation officials, USDA-Rural

Development staff, EPA staff, Indian Health Services people, a New York Rural Water Association technical assistant, and folks from RCAP Solutions. Various programs that the Federal Agencies could offer were reviewed and the agencies picked out the parts of the project that they could assist with. Indian Health Service offered their engineering expertise, and NYRWA and RCAP promised help with planning and paperwork. The project moved forward.

In the following months, applications were presented to both USDA and EPA. Environmental impact studies, engineering plans, and budget numbers preceded these applications. I'd like to report that all went smoothly. It didn't. There was confusion over the actual applications since each agency required different criteria. The fact that one could fund clean up and education while the other could fund construction simply meant that different data was necessary. The language needed to be different, even the titles of the requests. Add to that, a change of engineers at the Bureau of Indian Health and a political change of leadership at the Seneca Nation. But in the end, it appears that all the i's have been dotted and the t's crossed. It is now back on track and construction is planned to begin sometime this summer for a new transfer station for white goods and construction/demolition debris.

I think that everyone involved with this project learned something. In fact, it led to a couple of meetings between federal agencies that offer programs for Native Americans. NYRWA hosted one at our office in Claverack and the US Fish and Wildlife Service had us at their offices in Springfield, MA. Those sessions gave everyone the opportunity to review the various federal programs and appropriate application procedures. They gave us ideas as to how the various programs might work together to solve a specific problem located on Native American territories.

It is amazing what can be accomplished when USDA, EPA, Indian Health Service, US Fish and Wildlife and the various other agencies work together to solve a problem. ♠

## Fast Fact

*Adirondack Park is larger than  
Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon,  
Glacier, and Olympic Parks combined.*