

Landfill survey draws fire



Written by Henry Kingman

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WINNEMUCCA — A survey of registered voters in Humboldt County found 78 percent of respondents opposed to the proposed Jungo landfill. However, the survey's methodology has come under fire.

The survey was administered by Humboldt County Resident Richard Cook. In a phone conversation with *SPJ*, Cook said he has significant education and experience in statistical research. He studied the topic while pursuing a masters degree in clinical social work, he said. Later, he helped conduct a series of surveys aimed at gauging the psychological impact on residents of Valdez, Alaska and environs from the [1989 oil spill](#) there.

Cook administered the survey at the behest of [Nevadans Against Garbage](#) (NAG), a group of local activists fighting to block the landfill. NAG's bias on the issue was among the factors limiting acceptance of the results.

How it was done

Cook describes his methodology and results in a publication hosted on the NAG website, [here](#). In a nutshell, he purchased the registered voter's list from the County, selected 200 recipients at random, and mailed each the survey, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Mailed on Nov. 16th,, the survey read:

Jungo Land Use Survey
PO Box 2392
Winnemucca, NV 89446-2392

Dear Humboldt County Registered Voter:

You have been chosen from voter rolls at random to participate in a survey to end speculation and determine what Humboldt County residents actually want regarding the proposed Jungo landfill that would bring 4000 tons of garbage a day to a site west of Winnemucca.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary; however, your opinion is important and you are encouraged to participate. Confidentiality of your response is guaranteed. You are one of more than 100 registered voters who have been mailed this survey and there is no way to determine any individual's response.

To participate in this survey simply check the appropriate statement below and return in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope. Please mail your response no later than 10/30/09. Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

- I am in favor of the proposed landfill.*
 I am opposed to the proposed landfill.
 I am undecided about the proposed landfill.

Comments (optional) _____

The results

According to Cook, 127 valid responses arrived in time, with another eight missing the deadline (these remain unopened, according to Cook). Among respondents, 78 percent were opposed, 14 percent in favor, and eight percent undecided.

Cook suggested that the survey's sample size should ensure an error margin of plus or minus 8.5 percent. "So, we know at least 70 percent oppose the landfill, or 85 percent if the error [was not] in our favor," he said.

Cook added that he believes the survey effectively discredits characterizations of landfill opposers as a "vocal minority." Such characterizations have been made by Mayor Di Ann Putnam, among others, he said.

Controversy

Not everyone is so convinced, however. In a recent news story in the Humboldt Sun, Mayor Putnam expressed concern that the survey's wording may have influenced respondents. And, in a letter to the *Sun*, Century 21 owner J. Patrick Gray echoed that concern, along with others.

Gray claims to have a Ph.D in industrial/organizational psychology from Auburn University emphasizing survey research design and statistical analysis. [His letter](#) read in part, "The respondents were given only a negative stance on the issue. As the Mayor stated, no one really likes the idea of having garbage hauled into their community. As a result, the answers likely trended toward, 'I am opposed.' Similar to ballot issues, the survey mailer should have included unbiased summaries for both sides of the issue."

Gray also quibbled with the survey's small sample size, which led to an error margin greater than the "standard survey practice" of plus/minus 4.5 percent, he said. He also objected to the survey being done by postal mail, which he said favors disproportionately high response rates from those with strong feelings on an issue.

Mostly, though, Gray objected to the *Sun* covering any survey commissioned and paid for by an interested party. He wrote, "A publicly reported survey on such a controversial issue should have been conducted by a professional, independent organization."

Cook's response

For his part, Cook described Gray's response as "hilarious," noting, "He objected to our use of the word 'garbage.' What other word should we use?"

Cook also felt the survey's sample size and error margin were adequate, because the recipients were chosen at random from the entire voting population of the County. He said, "The true power of the survey was that the sampling frame and total population are the same. If you randomize that, every person you get is representative."

Furthermore, Cook noted, the response margins were much greater than the error margin. "Basically, we're fishing in a pond that has all the fish, and three species. And it's pretty clear that the trout outnumber the carp and suckers."

Asked whether he would favor further research on the topic, Cook replied, "Absolutely. Replication is the best thing you can do."

Of course, the only survey that really counts may be a democratic vote. And, it's unclear whether the landfill matter is ever likely to reach referendum status.

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