

# Interviews with Three SRP Grantees on Site Access

- Raina Maier, Ph.D., University of Arizona
- Mark Brusseau, Ph.D., University of Arizona
- Kathleen Gray, UNC-Chapel Hill

## Phone Interview with Raina Maier



**Professor  
Department of Soil Water and Environmental Science  
University of Arizona**

Raina Maier, Ph.D., investigates the ability of bacteria to survive in extremely oligotrophic environments, including mine tailings from sites in southern Arizona. The information gained from this research is used in the development of innovative remediation approaches which can be tested at a range of scales, from the pore-scale to the field-scale. She also studies microbial surfactants (biosurfactants) and the development of their potential biomedical and environmental applications. Maier has worked with the State of Arizona, EPA and ATSDR at multiple sites in Arizona.

### **How do you determine whom to contact at each site?**

It's easier to identify sites in Arizona because they have fewer hazardous waste sites than bigger states like California. We can easily screen all newly identified sites and look for sites where our research is most relevant. These include sites with halogenated solvent drinking water plumes and mining sites. We often start by reaching out to the EPA Remedial Project Manager (RPM) and the state equivalents to see if we can be of help. We also attend relevant community meetings. Community groups will ask us to discuss our pertinent research and informational materials with them.

### **How frequently do you communicate with EPA or the state?**

The frequency of communication varies with each site, depending on the site conditions. For example, at the solvent-contaminated sites, we often are communicating quarterly, participating in community meetings on the site conditions. For our mining sites some of the exchanges have been more frequent, even weekly, to plan joint community presentations or to discuss site research needs or results as new questions arise. Our communication can consist of emails, conference calls, and attending community meetings on technical issues.

### **Do you have agreed upon procedures for your interaction with EPA and the state?**

We don't have written procedures but we have weekly SRP management meetings where we discuss our approach and progress on these interactions. An informal SRP guide for academic and government participants would be useful to SRP grantees.

**How do you share your data/information with EPA and the state?**

We have had some of our research data incorporated into the site remedial investigation-feasibility study (RI/FS) documents. We've discovered that the EPA's QA/QC requirements can present difficulties for a university. Peer reviewed/published data does allow EPA to use the research results in their site assessments. Although we share data openly with EPA when requested, we do not routinely share draft reports with EPA if they're not the research-funding agency. We have had an occasion to shield sensitive site-specific data where it was not critical to the publication.

**How have you dealt with EPA or state staff changes?**

EPA staff/RPM changes at a site can present challenges. We have to establish a working relationship with the RPM, and when an RPM changes, we have to work to form another working relationship. This takes patience, time, and understanding. RPMs have a huge workload and there are site- and individual-specific sensitivities that we have to understand. We have found that working with ATSDR at a site can be very beneficial. We realize that there is a team of federal and state staff working at a site and we need to work to fit in and establish our meaningful role in that team.

**Have you had any complications working with PRPs or EPA contractors at sites?**

We have really not had any significant issues with either PRPs or EPA contractors.

**Were you ever refused site access?**

We have occasionally been refused site access at industry sites.

**Have you asked for/received letters of support from EPA or the state?**

Yes, we have received letters of support from state and federal agencies. Federal agencies are not allowed to write a letter of support but can write a factual letter stating what our activities have been at the site and how these activities align with agency goals. Additionally, in some instances, a federal agent can write a personal letter of support that is not on agency letterhead.

**Do you have any other tips for researchers seeking site access or for maintaining good relationships once they have gotten access?**

Be aware that there are many different stakeholders at each site including state and federal regulatory agencies, contractors, the local community, the site owner. It is essential that a university remains a neutral party that provides factual research-based information in the same way to all stakeholders. It is also important that the university opens multi-directional lines of communication with stakeholders to see how our research (on-going or planned) fits into their needs. If university research does not meet stakeholder needs an interaction is unlikely to be successful.

## Phone Interview with Mark Brusseau



**Professor of Subsurface Hydrology/Environmental Chemistry  
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences  
University of Arizona**

Mark Brusseau, Ph.D., has worked with EPA and the State of Arizona to conduct research at several sites during his 25 years at the University of Arizona. He's worked at some of the sites for many years.

### **How did you determine whom to contact at the site?**

This depends on the type of site. If it is an EPA-led site, I contact someone I know at EPA, usually an RPM (Remedial Project Manager). I then ask the RPM whom I should contact. I always contact the relevant EPA RPM at a site first. I have usually already identified the particular site I'm interested in for research. To do that, I usually look for local sites in Southwestern Arizona for ease of access and travel. Since I've been at the U of A for 20+ years, I'm familiar with people at EPA and vice versa. The same goes for the State (Arizona Department of Environmental Quality). The director of the State Superfund Program office in Tucson is a former student.

### **How frequently do you communicate with EPA or the State?**

The frequency depends on the activities at the site. If I'm just gathering samples at a site, it may be just once per year, but you don't want to spring any surprises on the RPM. The EPA RPM often forwards me to the EPA contractor, or sometimes the PRP (Potential Responsible Party) contractor, with whom I then also communicate.

### **Do you have agreed upon procedures for your interaction with EPA?**

The agreement is informal, nothing really formal. Since many sites are visited only once or twice, a formal agreement isn't needed anyway. If I'm conducting experiments at a site, that gets more involved. Some sites do require formal paperwork. For example, at DOD (Department of Defense) sites, researchers have to present identification to get on the facility. Also, typically it is required that personnel have received the 40-hour HAZWOPER (Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response) safety training to conduct activities at hazardous waste sites. I also have a Health and Safety Plan (around 30 pp), which is often required for more involved activities at the sites. I have also found that taking such HAZWOPER/refresher training courses can help graduating students get jobs.

**How do you share your data/information with EPA, etc.?**

I offer to present research results to EPA and other interested parties once we have QA/QCed for public release. For example, I present available data for the Tucson International Airport Area Site at the annual technical information meeting with about 40 representatives from all the involved parties at the site. Procedures at other sites vary. EPA often is not interested in the specific results, but wants to hear my summary of the results. However, it boosts your chances for more site involvement and successful collaboration if you can explain to the EPA and PRPs the meaning and benefits of your research results for helping them to meet their objectives at the site (such as ground water source zone analysis). This is a key point for establishing successful collaborations. It's also beneficial if you're working with EPA at crucial stages of the site cleanup when data are needed, such as at the beginning of a key site planning stage (the remedial investigation/feasibility study - RI/FS).

**How have you dealt with EPA or state staff changes?**

I have experienced EPA staff changes. It's best to get introduced to the new RPM by EPA staff you already know (such as the RPM who is leaving) to ease the transition to the new people.

**Have you had any complications working with PRPs or EPA contractors?**

Changes in PRP contractors can also be a real issue. I've had the experience of a long-time PRP contractor losing the contract to a new contractor, and then being out of communication with the new contractor.

**Would it help if an informal written agreement were in place?**

PRPs may be hesitant about signing what would be viewed as more formal documents, so I haven't done that.

**Have you ever been refused site access? If so, why?**

I haven't been refused site access yet, and I have been very fortunate that the PRPs and regulators have been very supportive of our projects to date. But I am about to start negotiating with PRPs for a particular site and issues may arise. For example, PRPs may not want to enter into relationships that may cost them more money at a site.

**Have you asked for/received letters of support from EPA?**

In some cases, I have asked for letters of support from PRPs to use for grant submissions. They have generally been happy to provide them; in some cases drafting them themselves and in other cases working from an initial draft I provided. I have heard from colleagues that EPA staff, when asked for such a letter, have in some cases stated that such letters could present them with a conflict of interest issue.

**Do you have any other tips for researchers seeking site access or in maintaining good relationships once haven gotten access?**

Establishing and maintaining positive, transparent relationships with the various stakeholders (regulators, PRPs, site contractors, public) is essential for long-term success of field projects conducted at contaminated sites. In addition, it is important to recognize that field studies at regulated contaminated sites (such as Superfund sites) have an additional layer of complexity compared to standard field sites. Specifically, a local community will typically exist for which some members have experienced or have the potential to be impacted by health risks associated with the site. Thus, proposed studies should incorporate consideration of these issues.

Another issue is publication of study results. It is important to explicitly state at the early stage of discussion that publication of the study results in a peer-reviewed journal article (or whichever publication form anticipated) is a planned, critical outcome of the project.

## Phone interview with Kathleen Gray



***Director, Environmental Resource Program  
Associate Director for Outreach and Public Service and  
Lecturer, Institute for the Environment  
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill***

Kathleen Gray has worked with the State of North Carolina environmental and health agencies, as well as EPA Region 4, at multiple sites in North Carolina.

### **How do you determine which sites to access?**

I start by reviewing EPA online descriptions of the North Carolina sites, reviewing the types of contaminants and site characteristics that would be relevant to UNC SRP researchers.

### **How do you determine whom to contact at each site?**

I have found the EPA Region 4 Superfund Technical Liaison (STL) Felicia Barnett to be helpful in referring me to the appropriate site Remedial Project Manager (RPM) or the Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC). She also can help in noting which sites are at stages that best support collaboration. I used to start with the CIC, but based on input from Felicia, recently have found it more useful to start with the relevant RPM for the site. I also believe the best approach in dealing with the RPM is to describe the resources that UNC SRP can offer at a particular site. The Research Translation staff usually makes the initial calls to EPA or the state, and then brings in the principal investigators when a good contact has been established.

Sometimes community groups approach UNC SRP for their assistance. Even then, I consult contacts at the state and EPA to understand their current activity at a site. I usually start with NC DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources) but also contact EPA. It's important to try to reach out to all the relevant parties to inform them and get them involved if they're interested.

### **How frequently to you communicate with the EPA or the state?**

It really depends on what work is going on at a site. It may be intermittent. But if there's been no recent communication, then it's good to check in at least every 6 months with EPA or the state to see what activities are going on at a site. For example, once when checking in we found that the RPM for a site was about to leave, and we got the departing RPM to introduce us to the incoming one so that our work

could continue uninterrupted. UNC SRP has also had a historically good working relationship with NC DENR, providing seminars for their staff on key scientific work that UNC was doing.

**Do you have agreed upon procedures for your interaction with EPA or the state?**

We have found that our trips to Atlanta to meet with EPA Region 4 and ATSDR have been effective. However, these two agencies are different audiences. ATSDR primarily has been interested in UNC's biomedical research, whereas EPA almost exclusively has been interested in remediation research. UNC SRP has drafted memoranda of agreement in working with communities, but it can be more challenging to get agency signatures on such agreements. It may require many levels of agency review, and there can be uncertainty about who in the agency has authority to sign such agreements.

**How do you share your information/data with EPA or the state?**

UNC shares the data when it's published. We have also prepared data sharing agreements with the state and EPA. These can be difficult to negotiate, but we do engage the state/EPA in discussing issues that may arise. A key issue is data ownership.

**How have you dealt with EPA or state staff changes?**

We have experienced entire EPA staff change at sites. These changes require rebuilding relationships with EPA and, sometimes, re-convincing them of the merits of the collaboration. There can be suspicion or reluctance to engage outsiders and even resistance to engaging people who are not part of the regulatory process.

**Have you had any complications working with PRPs or EPA contractors at sites?**

I have not had interactions with PRPs (Potentially Responsible Parties). EPA has introduced UNC SRP to their site contractors, and when given EPA's "blessing", these relationships have worked well.

**Have you been refused site access?**

None come to mind, probably because when early site discussions weren't productive, we moved on to other sites with more positive interactions.

**Have you asked for/received letters of support from EPA /the state, etc.?**

We have received letters of support from North Carolina state agencies, but none from EPA.

**Do you have any other tips for researchers seeking site access or for maintaining good relationships once they have gotten access?**

It's useful to develop relationships at the regional level and also with USEPA offices in DC. There are differences among regional offices in how collaborative they are at sites, and STLs and contacts at USEPA Headquarters often can provide insight into the best opportunities for collaboration.