

# Starting at the Top



By Gary Tiller

## A top-down approach to erosion control

Attendees of the “Chuck and Mike’s Excellent Adventure” class at the International Erosion Control Assn.’s 2013 Environmental Connection Conference in San Diego were introduced to the Hawaiian saying, “Ahupua’a.” This term translates to “from the mountain to the sea.” Mike Harding and Chuck Austin used it as an introduction to the concept of handling erosion control from the top down. The adage, “If we take care of our mountains, our streams and waterways will take care of themselves,” was a clear reminder of the erosive power of water if not dealt with prior to gaining momentum as it travels down a slope.

Working from the top down can be a foreign concept for heavy/civil contractors. We typically are involved with the activities at the onset of a project; clearing along the limits of disturbance and the installation of perimeter sediment controls is always the initial focus and first order in the sequence of construction. This is accompanied by a concentration on and handling of the project discharge points. All of this occurs in an effort to protect down-slope properties and downstream waterways. Sediment traps and basins typically follow suit but are usually in the low areas of the site and not at the “top of the mountain.” When conducting earthwork activities, placing excavated material to build up low areas while leaving a positive drainage escape for rainwater is the standard practice. When installing utilities, the attempt is always made to work from the low end toward the high end so that, once again, the work proceeds away from any water that might enter the work zone. In almost every operation, starting from the bottom and working toward the top gives crews the best chance of being able to productively work through weather events. The need

to attack projects in this fashion puts a heightened focus on good planning in order to minimize or eliminate the project’s exposure to erosion.

However, this “bottom up” method is the complete opposite of what we have learned is needed for successful program implementation from a leadership perspective. Having experienced the development of our organization’s safety culture from almost nonexistent to world class, we have learned that there is no substitute for strong, consistent leadership at all levels. Leadership that is intolerant of people getting hurt also must be intolerant of muddy water leaving project sites. Leadership that sets a caring example with safety also must “walk the talk” regarding necessary erosion and sediment control practices. The leadership tools that got a workforce to see and believe that personal protective equipment was a stepping stone to keeping workers safe need to be used again to inform today’s workforce of the need for proper installation and maintenance of BMPs.

Harold Gineen, chairman of ITT Corp., said, “Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and action.” Whether we are in a position at the top or somewhere below that, we all have the opportunity and the responsibility to become a leader. Our attitudes and positive actions around the following daily questions will help lead our teams to safe, successful and compliant projects:

- What will I do today to keep our people safe?
- What will I do today to be sure no muddy water leaves my site? **SWS**

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