

Introducing EPA's Public Involvement Policy

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Involvement brings
the pieces together





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Basic Steps for Staff and Managers

Do you know how to effectively involve the public and use their input to improve EPA's environmental decisions? This brochure is the first in a series developed to help you design and carry out productive public involvement practices.

Introduction

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued its revised Public Involvement Policy (www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement) in June 2003. The Policy's overall goal is for excellent public involvement to become an integral part of EPA's culture, thus supporting more effective Agency actions.

The Policy provides guidance to EPA managers and staff on how you can better involve the public in the Agency's decision-making processes.

This brochure, the first in a series for EPA staff, describes specific steps for effective public involvement and explains other resources you can use.

As you assemble the pieces of the decision-making puzzle, it's smart to consult with potentially affected groups and individuals, the stakeholders.

Why? Such consultation will help you:

- Reach effective environmental solutions by inviting and considering a wide variety of viewpoints.

- Gain access to useful scientific or historic information the Agency may not have.
- Develop a wider range of choices.
- Gather and consider more clues, different solutions and the important values of stakeholders.
- Encourage people to speak up and share their ideas so they can influence the overall quality of their own health and natural environment.

EPA Public Involvement Policy Today

The Policy urges all EPA programs to invite public involvement, listen and consider all points of view. Using the revised Policy, the Agency intends to:

- Increase the effectiveness of EPA's public involvement activities.
- Conduct public involvement activities more consistently.
- Increase public understanding of EPA's mission and public involvement methods.
- Build more public trust.
- Improve Agency decisions.

Seven Steps to Effective Public Involvement

The Policy's seven steps for meaningful public involvement apply to most Agency decisions from national rule making to local decisions on permits or cleanup plans.

How your program or region involves its affected groups and individuals will vary depending on the specific circumstances.

Applying these seven steps will improve any public involvement effort and increase its effectiveness.

1. Plan and budget for public involvement activities

Goal:

To ensure an effective public involvement process through research, planning, early notice to the public and enough time and resources for effective consultation

Recommended actions:

- Think through the issues, people, goals, processes (as much as you can), apply reality and then outline a budget.
- Include resources to conduct and evaluate public involvement activities in budget documents for programs affecting the public.
- Include these resources as part of regulatory development plans, analytic blueprints, program plans or EPA's plans to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act.
- Know what's required by law, what that will cost and what else is required to do a good job.
- Understand how other federal rules about interagency coordination, fairness and unfunded mandates affect your program. (For more details see "Appendix 1: Guidance for Implementing Public Involvement at EPA" in the Public Involvement Policy and the "How to Plan and Budget" brochure.)

2. Identify the interested and affected publics

Goal:

To identify groups or individuals who may have an interest in, or who may, because of their location, purposes or activities, be affected by an upcoming EPA activity or action

Recommended actions:

- Develop a contact list for each program, activity or project, add to the list those people who ask to be added, and act to protect individuals' privacy.
- Update each list often. It will be most useful if you subdivide by category of interest or geographic area.
- Use these contact lists to send out information about public involvement opportunities (such as notices of meetings, hearings, field trips and other events and notices of available information, reports and documents) and to identify people you may consider for advisory group membership and other activities. (For more details see Step 2 of the Policy and the "Identify People to Involve" brochure.)

3. Consider providing technical/financial assistance to support public involvement

Goal:

To improve involvement opportunities, build community capacity and help the affected groups and individuals who may not have adequate resources to take part in an effective and timely way.



Recommended actions:

- Whenever resources allow, provide technical or financial assistance to help people who otherwise could not contribute to, understand technical issues about and be involved in environmental decision-making processes. This will likely enrich the range of views you hear and improve the quality of public involvement.
- Experiment with various methods to help people who lack the resources or expertise.
- Ask EPA colleagues for creative and practical ideas. Communications and outreach specialists often have worked directly with affected groups and individuals and are a valuable resource. (For more details see section 3 of the Policy and the "Technical/Financial Assistance" brochure.)

4. Provide information and conduct outreach

Goals:

To offer the public accurate, understandable, relevant and timely information in accessible ways so groups and individuals can contribute effectively to Agency program decision-making processes

To help the public understand the reasons or legal requirements for Agency action and the importance of related technical data so they can give meaningful comments that help the Agency make its decisions

Recommended actions:

- Provide enough timely information about a forthcoming action or decision.

- Make easily accessible information available as early as possible. This enables people to make informed and productive contributions to EPA decision making. (For more details see Step 4 of the Policy and the "How to Do Outreach for Public Involvement" brochure.)

5. Conduct public consultation and involvement

Goals:

To understand the interests and needs of the affected public

To provide for the exchange of information and views and open exploration of issues, alternatives and consequences between the public and officials responsible for the forthcoming action or decision

Recommended actions:

- Conduct public involvement activities only following timely outreach.
- Notify the public of activities early to ensure they have time to get and evaluate information; consult experts, and work out and express their opinions, choices, and suggestions before an Agency event.
- Conduct public involvement activities at times and places that enable affected and interested people to participate.
- Hold events focusing on local sites during non-work hours, such as evenings or weekends, close to public transit and with access for disabled people. (For more details see Step 5 of the Policy and the "How to Consult with and Involve the Public" brochure.)

6. Review and use input and provide feedback

Goal:

To consistently earn and keep the public's trust and credibility for EPA public involvement processes by:

- Evaluating and assimilating public viewpoints and preferences into final decisions where suitable and possible, and
- Telling the public the decisions EPA made and how their participation affected those decisions

Recommended actions:

■ Review and use the input:

- Analyze public information and opinions
- Consider if and how to incorporate public viewpoints during EPA deliberations
- Make or adjust decisions considering public views

■ Provide feedback to the public:

- Document that you understand and consider public concerns in various forms and make the information easily accessible
- Tell participants and interested parties how you used public input in the Agency's deliberations or if you did not use it, explain why not
- Document EPA's decision or action

(For more details see Step 6 of the Policy and the "Review and Use Public Input and Provide Feedback" brochure.)

7. Evaluate public involvement activities

Goal:

To evaluate the effectiveness of EPA's Policy and of public involvement activities

Recommended actions:

Continually evaluate and measure how well EPA is using the Public Involvement Policy in both regulatory and non-regulatory processes, and determine the effectiveness of public involvement activities.

Ask participants what they think and use their ideas to improve involvement practices. Keep asking formally and informally.

Use surveys, questionnaires and other tools to help you evaluate whether public involvement activities are done properly and have the intended effects (subject to approval by the Office of Management and Budget under the Paperwork Reduction Act).


The Agency will conduct periodic, broad-based, agency-wide surveys to determine how EPA is using the Policy's seven steps to improve public involvement. (For more details see Step 7 of the Policy and the "Evaluate Public Involvement Activities" brochure.)

Getting the job done

Many offices within EPA have already built strong public involvement programs. For others, meeting the standard these leaders set should be the goal.

To support and encourage public involvement excellence, EPA can:

- Publicize public involvement training opportunities for everyone from new employees to senior managers

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- Expand EPA public involvement networks and tools for sharing information and experiences
 - Provide public involvement evaluation tools

Information Sharing

This searchable database of resource materials, case studies, training opportunities and “lessons learned” is temporarily posted at <http://basin.rtpnc.epa.gov/opei/opeipub.nsf/PIRTHome?openForm>

It also includes materials which highlight public involvement practices used to develop rules, permits and policies and to meet administrative requirements to consult with tribal governments, environmental justice communities, small businesses, etc.

The Agency is also fostering an informal “community of practice” for EPA managers and staff who interact with and involve the public.

Through this informal learning community, you will be able to get effective techniques and tools, and share creative ways to involve the public in EPA’s decision-making processes.

This community will also serve as a communications network to help you identify the constituencies and circumstances where each public involvement method may be more effective.

Through this network, you will also be able to get advice about handling specific public involvement issues, training and job opportunities.

Training

Everyone at EPA needs to understand how public involvement and collaboration contribute to achieving the Agency’s mission.

Those whose job it is to gather public input should have the knowledge, skills and tools to design and conduct suitable public involvement processes.

EPA will provide a sustained agency-wide effort to help you access training in the elements and skills of public involvement processes.

For current information on a wide range of training available on EPA’s Intranet site, visit <http://basin.rtpnc.epa.gov/opei/opeipub.nsf/SearchAll?openForm>

Evaluation and Accountability

EPA staff who do public involvement work want their activities to produce useful public input. They also want those who participate to believe it was worth their effort.

Staff and managers need tools to evaluate their public involvement processes and activities so they can further improve them. Survey tools will be available at <http://basin.rtpnc.epa.gov/opei/opeipub.nsf/PIRTHome?openForm>

They will include approved surveys on activities such as hearings, meetings, group discussions, advisory committees, etc. (For more information on evaluation and accountability see section 3c of the Framework for Implementing EPA’s Public Involvement Policy at <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/framework.pdf>)

Other EPA Public Involvement Brochures

How to Plan and Budget for Public Involvement

How to Identify People to Involve

How to Provide Technical and Financial Assistance for Public Involvement

How to Do Outreach for Public Involvement

How to Consult with and Involve the Public

How to Review and Use Public Input and Provide Feedback

How to Evaluate Public Involvement

How to Improve Public Meetings and Hearings

How to Improve Working with Tribes

How to Involve Environmental Justice Communities

How to Overcome Barriers to Public Involvement



"Involvement brings the pieces together" artwork is the creation of Erica Ann Turner, who contributed the work to EPA through an agreement between the Art Institute of Washington and the Agency.

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