

How to Review and Use Public Input, and Provide Feedback



Involvement brings
the pieces together





Step 6: Review and Use Public Input, and Provide Feedback

Goal:

To consistently earn and retain the public's trust and credibility for EPA's actions and consultation processes by:

- Evaluating and assimilating public views and preferences into final decisions, where appropriate and possible, and
- Telling the public about the decisions and how public input affected those decisions

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued its new Public Involvement Policy 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. The Policy outlines seven steps to effective involvement. This brochure (one in a series) offers suggestions to help EPA staff members "get started" reviewing and using public input and providing feedback to the public about their involvement in EPA activities and processes.

Why Review and Use Input and Provide Feedback to the Public?

Reviewing and using comments from the public and providing them feedback supports the process and those who contributed their ideas.

"People will only be willing to continue participating in Agency decisions if they believe that their ideas are seriously being considered and can have an effect on the outcome."

Carole Andress

Pollution Prevention Alliance - Environmental Defense
Public Comments on the 2000 Draft Public
Involvement Policy

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"Encouraging involvement depends on recognizing and valuing contributions. Explanations of impact are THE best way to show a contributor the importance of speaking out. It builds consensus, too."

Jeff Carter

Eastern Municipal Water District, Riverside County, CA
Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions

Telling people what EPA did with their comments helps to build a resilient relationship between EPA and stakeholders. When your responses show that EPA takes public ideas seriously and that participating really can influence environmental decisions, you help to build trust. This occurs only when people get honest, clear feedback about their comments.

When you provide feedback on comments of minority or traditionally under-represented groups, you can increase the likelihood that they will participate again. Participation by traditionally under-represented groups can also shed new light on the Agency's goals and outcomes.

When increasing numbers of well-informed stakeholders participate, the Agency has the advantage of a wider range of ideas on new ways to carry out our mission.

What to Consider When Providing Feedback to the Public

The public needs to know that you appreciated and used their comments, how you used them, and if you did not use them, why. Your responses should discuss what changed because of public comments or should explain why the Agency did not accept ideas proposed in the comments by the public. All of this should be done in plain language that your audience can understand.

Unless you tell them clearly and as quickly as possible, they may never know and, in frustration, fail to comment the next time.

It is best to provide the Agency's specific responses to each comment or group of comments. Otherwise, discuss specific responses to significant issues raised in the comments.

If there are opportunities to share responses to public comments in public forums, give respectful, direct feedback in plain English.

Plan Your Work

How to Organize, Review, and Use Public Comments

Because you listened to the public during the outreach preceding the request for comments, you may have ideas about the kinds of comments you will receive.

- Set up a few preliminary comment categories to help you organize the comments.
- Do not wait until the comment period closes to begin reading the comments.
- Read comments as they come in.
- Sort comments by key words and group the ideas. (This will help you to understand what people care about most. It will also help you to organize the comments so you can develop responses more efficiently.)
- Think about how to make use of the ideas contained in the comments to reach a fairer and more durable decision or take a more environmentally sound action.
- If possible, set up an automatic e-mail response or arrange for post cards to acknowledge receipt of the comments.

Whether you are preparing a document, reporting in a meeting, or posting your responses to public comments on a Web site, you will need to ensure that everyone has the same information base. You can prepare all this information while you are waiting for people to submit comments. Here's what to include or make accessible:

- Describe briefly the action that EPA initially proposed and how EPA determined the action was needed.
- Explain briefly the type of public involvement activity that EPA conducted.
- Include a statement of the action that EPA took.
- Identify those who participated and their affiliation (individually or as groups).
- Describe the matters on which EPA consulted the public.
- Explain the Agency's reason for the decision.

Work your Plan

How to Provide Feedback to the Public

Some statutes and regulations have minimum requirements for responding to public comments. Check with colleagues or Regional/General Counsel to make sure you comply.

- Acknowledge receipt of each comment, if possible.
- Summarize the public's views, important comments, criticisms, and suggestions.
- Analyze the grouped comments, and prepare draft responses.
- Explain how you used the public comments. Include the effect of the comments on EPA's action or decision, for example, selecting a different option, changing language, changing procedure, etc.
- Edit the responses a few days after you write them; aim for plain English.
- Ensure appropriate internal review.
- Post your responses to public comments on E-Docket and in EPA's paper docket (reading room).
- Publish responses on a Web site and publicize the URL and how to get the responses in widely read publications.
- Mail or e-mail copies of your response or information to those who commented and those who request to see how you used public comments.
- Document feedback on your responses to create a record of lessons learned for your next project.

"The public can become frustrated when agencies don't get back to them when they've participated in a specific project, study, or have provided comments to a document. Therefore, giving back to the community in terms of study results or results of comments they've provided is a way to keep the public involved in the future."

Lornie Swamp
St. Regis Mohawk Tribe - Environmental Division
Public Comments on the 2000 Draft Public
Involvement Policy

- If you need to reach out to people who did not comment, try to.
- Hold press briefings and prepare news releases about the responses.
- Communicate with the public in ways that ensure they will receive the information.
- Get information to minority or traditionally under-represented groups by using weekly newspapers, public access cable TV, or talk radio.
- For people whose first language is not English, provide information in their native language using the media outlets that community trusts.

Additional Resources:

U.S. EPA Office of Emergency and Remedial Response,
RCRA Public Participation Manual (Chapter 3), 1996.
http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/permit/pubpart/chp_3.pdf

U.S. EPA Office of Emergency and Remedial Response,
Public Involvement in Environmental Permits, pages 3-12 to
3-14, 2000. EPA-500-R-00-007, [http://www.epa.gov/permits/
publicguide.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/permits/publicguide.pdf)

Other EPA Public Involvement Brochures

Introducing EPA's Public Involvement Policy

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 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



More Information about the Policy

Copies of the Policy and the Framework for Implementing it are available at <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/policy2003.pdf> and <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/framework.pdf>

The Web site for the "Internet Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions" is <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip>

EPA's Response to Comments on the Draft 2000 Public Involvement Policy is available at <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/response.pdf>

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