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TECHNICAL INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSES AT EPA

A STATUS REPORT

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The Project and Report

A clearinghouse is an information transfer mechanism that gathers information in a central location, so that it is accessible to those who want it. This project was intended to look at clearinghouses as a means of providing technical assistance for environmental programs to State and local agencies, as well as other interested parties.

The report provides an overview of technical information clearinghouses currently in operation and those under consideration. It describes their purpose, who they serve, and how they operate, and offers a sense of how well they meet their objectives. It also identifies some principles and "helpful hints" that help ensure a clearinghouse's success.

The information contained in this report is based on interviews with EPA personnel responsible for managing or overseeing a clearinghouse. Because of the limited scope and timeframe for the project, the information presented is based on conversations with one person for each clearinghouse. Clearinghouse users, who could offer independent assessments of their strengths and weaknesses, were not contacted.

During the course of the project, 12 different information systems were identified; 7 of these were clearinghouses, in operation or proposed. The remaining five represented different types of information distribution mechanisms. This report discusses three operating clearinghouses in detail that use markedly different approaches. The appendices provide a brief description of the clearinghouses and other information systems that were identified.

What is a Clearinghouse?

Before setting out a definition was constructed of a clearinghouse and the characteristics that distinguish it from other kinds of mechanisms to distribute information. In the broadest sense, a clearinghouse is a system that collects subject-specific information from different sources and locations in one central place, where users can easily learn what information is available and where to obtain it. It provides a focal point for identifying and disseminating information that otherwise would be scattered and difficult to locate.

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Clearinghouses generally share several characteristics that set them apart from other information mechanisms:

- o A clearinghouse collects existing information. It does not generate original research reports or technology assessments. While data may be repackaged or summarized to facilitate distribution, a clearinghouse primarily relies on information produced for other purposes.
- o A clearinghouse is not a review and evaluation system. It is passive in the sense that, beyond some measure of quality control, it does not judge the validity of its technical information or the appropriateness of a particular technology or decision with EPA standards.
- o A clearinghouse enables its users to share real world experience with common problems. It is more than a database of test results or a catalogue of research reports. While it may include such information, a clearinghouse often focuses on disseminating information about activities such as State permit actions or experience with new technologies. In many cases, the clearinghouse emphasizes information-sharing; the organizations that use its information supply it as well.

What Clearinghouses Does EPA Operate?

Five information systems currently in operation at EPA met the definition of a clearinghouse, as did two in the early planning stages. Three clearinghouses are operated by the Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards:

- o BACT/LAER Clearinghouse
- o VOC RACT Clearinghouse
- o Air Toxics Clearinghouse

Two are run by the Office of Water Programs Operations to provide technical information on waste water treatment for small communities. OWPO may combine these two operations in the future:

- o National Small Flows Clearinghouse
- o Innovative/Alternative Clearinghouse

The two proposed clearinghouses are little more than thoughts at this point. They include:

- o Asbestos in Schools in the Office of Toxic Substances
- o RCRA Permits in the Office of Solid Waste

The clearinghouses, while similar in purpose and style, differ considerably in scope and in methods for collecting and distributing information. Three of the clearinghouses currently in operation are described below in detail. These three use quite different approaches and amply demonstrate the range and variation in designing and operating a clearinghouse.

BACT/LAER Clearinghouse

The BACT/LAER (Best Available Control Technology/Lowest Achievable Emission Rate) Clearinghouse was the first clearinghouse established in OAQPS. It was initially started in 1979, with mixed results, then redesigned and computerized a few years later. BACT/LAER was established to assist States and Regions comply with the 1977 Clean Air Act Amendments, which required case-by-case decisions on new source emissions for the PSD program and non-attainment areas. BACT/LAER was intended to enable the States and Regions to share data and decisions in setting emission limits for different industry sources.

The clearinghouse is a joint project between EPA and STAPPA/ALAPCO. STAPPA/ALAPCO helped design the clearinghouse, encourages State participation, and serves as a middleman to collect and distribute information. BACT/LAER is run by EPA (one person, full-time), with \$40,000 in contractor support for printing and data management.

BACT/LAER contains limited and carefully selected data, stored on computer at RTP. It relies on information provided voluntarily by the States (the program is now almost completely delegated) on a one page form developed by a workgroup of EPA and State representatives. The data base primarily contains the type of source, emissions limits, type of control equipment, a contact person and phone number, and space for comment on unusual features of the permit.

The limited information available in the clearinghouse strikes a balance between information that is necessary and desirable, and the effort required to supply and manage it. It primarily serves to identify a contact with experience in a particular source or industry. While the data itself is a reference point for the range of emissions limits set for source categories, it is not intended to stand alone. The BACT/LAER manager said that a responsible State agency will always contact the other agency to discuss the basis for its decision and other details; no amount of data, no matter how extensive, could answer all questions.

Once a year, OAQPS prints a hardcopy of all data in the system, which is distributed to all State and local agencies and available through NTIS. While users rely most often on this report for information, OAQPS responds to individual request for more up-to-date data as well. The

Office would like States to have direct access to the EPA's computer database, since new data is relatively inaccessible until the annual report is printed. However, this effort has been stymied by problems in obtaining account numbers for the States, a difficulty faced by other clearinghouses as well.

By all accounts, BACT/LAER is a successful and much-used system. A high proportion of the States participate actively (last year, 23 States, 15 local agencies, and 1 Region submitted 162 new determinations). Only three States and three territories have never provided data. Since most users obtain information from the annual report, it is impossible to determine how often clearinghouse data is used, but feedback from State and local agencies is very positive. To ensure it continues to be responsive to the needs of its users, OAQPS meets annually with State representatives and STAPPA/ALAPCO to evaluate the BACT/LAER Clearinghouse and make adjustments.

VOC RACT CLEARINGHOUSE

The VOC RACT (Volatile Organic Compounds/Reasonably Achievable Control Technology) Clearinghouse became fully operational in February, 1984. It was established, at States' urging, to facilitate the exchange of technical information on developing and implementing emission standards for VOCs. It focuses primarily on source categories not covered by EPA's Control Technology Guidelines (CTG), although it covers some developments in CTG sources as well.

The VOC Clearinghouse follows the approach developed in BACT/LAER in that it was developed and is run jointly with STAPPA/ALAPCO, and relies on information provided voluntarily by the States. However, it differs significantly in the types of information it collects and the products it produces.

The clearinghouse gathers a variety of information, including new research on control technologies and regulatory activities at the State and Federal level, and produces several products. First, it publishes a newsletter on a quarterly basis, which includes articles written by State and local agencies on regulation development, as well reports on EPA activities. The clearinghouse also publishes a directory of State and local agency VOC contacts, a bibliography of technical reports (primarily from EPA at this point), and an up-to-date summary of regulatory developments reported by State and local agencies. It mails its newsletters and updated lists directly to all State and local agencies and has provided a notebook for easy filing and reference. The clearinghouse is not now and is not likely to be computerized.

Like BACT/LAER, the VOC Clearinghouse is run by OAQPS (one person, less than full time, plus an editorial board for the newsletter), with \$27,000 in contractor support for

printing, distribution, and updating the bibliography of technical reports. STAPPA/ALAPCO provide invaluable help in publicizing the clearinghouse and recruiting State participation. While it is too soon to assess the clearinghouse's success, OAQPS reports that States are enthusiastic and supportive and have provided positive feedback on the first two newsletters.

NATIONAL SMALL FLOWS CLEARINGHOUSE

The National Small Flows Clearinghouse is intended to provide information on wastewater treatment technologies for small communities. It was established in 1979 in response to the 1977 Clean Water Act Amendments, which required EPA to set up a clearinghouse for small flows technology information transfer.

The Small Flows Clearinghouse is operated by contractor at the University of West Virginia, with an annual budget of \$112,000. It contains several listings: State contacts; small flow products manufacturers; State codes, regulations, and manuals affecting small flows projects; and Innovative/Alternative systems in operation. It also contains a bibliography of technical reports related to small flows technologies that the contractor keeps current through literature searches.

Unlike the OAQPS clearinghouses, which relies on information supplied voluntarily, the contractor develops and maintains the Small Flows database. While it serves as a central point for technical assistance, it is not a mechanism for information sharing. The clearinghouse primarily distributes information through an 800 number, responding to individual requests for advice and data. The contractor also runs training workshops in state-of-the-art design of alternative treatment technologies.

The Office of Water Program Operations, which funds the clearinghouse, recently completed an evaluation of its use and effectiveness. It found that the clearinghouse was primarily used by consulting engineers, four States, and two Regions. While users surveyed in the evaluation were generally satisfied with the services provided, OWPO concluded that there was not widespread awareness and use of the clearinghouse. However, the evaluators felt that greater publicity could generate more requests than the clearinghouse could handle effectively, given present staffing and funding levels.

The Small Flows Clearinghouse has suffered from breaks in EPA and contractor management and from reduced funding (it has operated at half the original budget for three years). The OWPO report recommends that funding should be increased to \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year to "accomplish a minimum satisfactory operation."

What Makes a Clearinghouse Work?

Several offices in EPA are planning to establish clearinghouses to provide technical guidance to agencies and others affected by EPA's regulatory programs. Offices with experience in operating clearinghouses can offer valuable insights to help ensure the success of these fledgling projects. In our interviews, clearinghouse managers identified several principles in designing and running a clearinghouse that, if followed, can greatly improve its effectiveness and value to its users.

Work Closely With the Intended Users: Most managers stressed that a clearinghouse must be designed and operated in cooperation with the users it is intended to serve. It must contain the information they need and want, in a form that can be easily collected and distributed. Users' participation in the clearinghouse ensures that it is responsive to their needs and, consequently, that it will be used.

The BACT/LAER Clearinghouse learned this lesson the hard way. When first established in 1979, OAQPS designed the clearinghouse and information forms without assistance from the States. The effort was not successful; it did not collect the information States really needed and requested more data than States were willing to provide. A few years later, OAQPS redesigned the clearinghouse, this time in conjunction with a workgroup of STAPPA/ALAPCO and State representatives. The workgroup redirected and simplified the data forms; the system was computerized to improve data management and distribution. The end result is a highly visible and much-used system. Other clearinghouses in OAQPS have followed this successful approach. They are all run jointly with STAPPA/ALAPCO and were developed with the States.

Keep It Simple: A clearinghouse cannot contain all the data and detail a user might want. It is most useful as a first step in the information search, identifying what is available and where it can be found. Simplicity is particularly important when a clearinghouse relies on voluntary submissions of information. The data collected must be a compromise between what a user needs to know and what he is willing to provide.

Provide Sufficient Resources: This is especially important when a new clearinghouse is established. It needs to have room to experiment with different ways to collect and distribute information. An early investment and commitment can result in greater savings in the long run.

There is quite a range in the resources required to operate different clearinghouses. This is a function of the scope and amount of data collected, the mechanism used to operate the system, and the extent of work performed by contractor. It is surprising how few resources some of the

more productive clearinghouses require. This suggests a clearinghouse can accomplish a lot with a little if it is well-designed, contains the minimum amount of information needed to serve its defined purpose, and limits its reliance on contractor support.

Participants Need Constant Encouragement: Clearinghouses, particularly those that rely on information supplied voluntarily, require constant publicity and encouragement. STAPPA/ALAPCO are valuable partners in that they "talk up" the clearinghouses and encourage their members to provide information.

The clearinghouses use a variety of techniques to make their systems responsive. VOC Clearinghouse provides a binder for States to store publications and updates. BACT/LAER sends a form letter to each State acknowledging receipt of a new entry, which assures the supplier that his submission was received and used. The Innovative/Alternative Technologies Clearinghouse recently repackaged its annual report and made it generally available (previously, the Regions and States received xeroxed copies) and discovered a large demand for the data; the report is in its second printing of 8000 copies. The National Small Flows Clearinghouse provides easy access through an 800 number; it found requests for information virtually stopped when this service was eliminated temporarily.

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While these tactics help, the primary incentive for continued use and participation is the usefulness of the information the clearinghouse contains. State agencies will be willing to transmit information on their activities only if they are able to obtain useful data from the clearinghouse in return. In order to ensure its system contains that information, EPA must work closely with the groups it intends to serve and seek their early and continued involvement.

	Purpose	Information Provided	Primary Supplier(s)	Intended User(s)	Distribution Mechanism	Resources	Comment
Operating Clearinghouses							
BACT/LAER (OAOPS) Est. 1979	To enable States to share info. on new source de-terminations	State and local decisions: type of source, emission limit, contact	States and locals	States and locals	Computerized; annual hardcopy of database	1 FTE 40K	Joint effort with EPA/STAPPA/ALAPCO
Air Toxics (OAOPS) Est. 1984	To identify technical info. available and regulatory research activities	State and local permit decisions and contacts; bibliography on research activities	States and locals; literature searches, EPA and other agencies	States and locals	Newsletter, eventually computer	150K, 1 1/2 - 2 FTE for start-up; about 100K, to operate	Joint effort between EPA/STAPPA/ALAPCO; fully operational in Spring 1985
Volatile Organic Compounds (OAOPS) Est. 1984	To exchange technical info. on VOC, especially for non-CTG sources	Technical reports; list of State and EPA contacts; list of State and local regulation development	States and locals; EPA	States and locals	Quarterly news-letter; mailings of lists and bibliographies	<1 FTE 27K	Joint effort between EPA/STAPPA/ALAPCO; no plans to computerize
National Small Flows Clearing-house (OWPO) Est. 1979	To provide info. on small waste-water treatment technology	Lists of State contacts, products manu-facturers, State regula-tions, I/A operating systems	Contractor searches, EPA	States and locals; consulting engineers	800 number, training workshops	112K	Clearing-house re-quired by statute; run by WVA University

Purpose	Information Provided	Primary Supplier(s)	Intended User(s)	Distribution Mechanism	Resources	Comment
Operating Clearinghouses						
Innovative/ Alternative Projects Clearinghouse (OWPO) Est. 1981	List of funded I/A projects by technology, municipality, consulting firm; State and EPA contacts	States, regions	States and locals, consulting engineers	Annual report, States have direct computer access	20K <1 FTE	Clearinghouse required by statute; State I/A coordinators provide feedback
Proposed Clearinghouses						
RCRA Permits (OSW)	Good examples of permits, NODs, drafts	Regions, picked by HQ	Regions, States	Send out copies		Not high priority
Asbestos Clearinghouse (OTS)	To provide info. for asbestos in schools activities	EPA, other agencies, others	Schools, contractors, builders, general public	Maybe 800 number	75K - 250K; includes other activities	Planned for late 1985

	Purpose	Information Provided	Primary Supplier(s)	Intended User(s)	Distribution Mechanism	Resources	Comment
Other Information Systems							
Modeling Clearinghouse (OAQPS) Est. 1982	To review and judge models used in SIPs	Info. on "exceptions" to modeling guidance; review and evaluation of proposed model	Regions only	Regions only	Respond to individual requests; annual summary	1 FTE	Review and approval function; covers only three industries
National Pesticides Information Retrieval System Est. 1983	To provide public access to registered pesticide products info.	All registration data, including name, active ingredients, approved sites and pests	EPA, States	States, USDA, EPA	Computer access	USDA funds and operates. EPA will provide 100K	May become self-sufficient through user fees
Center for Environmental Research Information (ORD-Cincinnati) Est. 1980	To distribute ORD research reports, project summaries	ORD research reports, summaries	EPA, labs	States and EPA (25%) Universities & industries (75%)	By request. Mailing list to 17,000	806K 17 FTE Includes other functions	
Small Business Ombudsmen (OA) Est. 1982	To assist small business with regulations; advocate for and resolve problems	Info. and advice on complying with regulations	EPA	Small businesses	800 number, seminars	1 FTE and regional liaisons; about 200K	

Purpose	Information Provided	Primary Supplier(s)	Intended User(s)	Distribution Mechanism	Resources	Comment
Other Information Systems						
ORD/NGA Project (ORD) Est. 1984	To identify and assist in States' needs	Referral to appropriate experts in ORD labs	EPA	States	Request through NGA; direct referral to ORD lab	200K One year grant; ORD intends follow-up to see State's need is addressed

SUMMARY OF EPA'S CLEARINGHOUSES AND OTHER INFORMATION SYSTEMS

OPERATING CLEARINGHOUSES

BACT/LAER Clearinghouse (Best Available Control Technology/
Lowest Achievable Emission Rate)
Contact: Gary Rust
OAQPS

The BACT/LAER Clearinghouse was established to enable State and local agencies exchange information on setting standards for new source emissions. The clearinghouse collects limited data, including type of source, emission standard, control technology, and contact, which is supplied voluntarily by the States. It serves primarily to identify a contact person with experience in permitting a certain source. Users obtain information through a hardcopy print-out of the database, published annually. The OAQPS manager, who works full-time on the clearinghouse, also responds to individual requests.

The BACT/LAER apparently provides a valuable and much-used resource. OAQPS attributes its success to the involvement and support provided by STAPPA/ALAPCO and State representatives, who encourage State submissions and participated in its design.

Air Toxics Clearinghouse Contact: Bob Schell
OAQPS

The Air Toxics Clearinghouse is a new effort that should be fully operational in the spring of 1985. Initiated at States' urging, the clearinghouse is intended to assist States in developing air toxics programs and setting emission levels. It will cover a wide range of information, from permit decisions provided by the States to bibliographies of toxic effects research. The clearinghouse will rely in part on data submitted by States and Regions, but will also conduct literature searches and cover the activities of other Federal agencies to keep its bibliography current. It plans to disseminate information through various publications, and by request that will be channeled through the Regions. The system will eventually be computerized, which will allow States with compatible systems to have direct access to the database.

Like BACT/LAER, the clearinghouse is a joint project with STAPPA/ALAPCO, and is being developed in cooperation with the States (the manager of BACT/LAER is also on the workgroup). Because of high demand for toxics information, the clearinghouse has published three newsletters and other interim products, which OAQPS reports have been well received.

VOC RACT Clearinghouse

(Volatile Organic Compounds/Reasonably Achievable Control Technology)
Contact: Bill Polglase
OAQPS

The VOC Clearinghouse is intended to assist regulatory activity to control VOC emissions by facilitating the exchange of technical data and experience between State and local agencies. It maintains lists of State and Federal agency contacts, State and local regulation development activities, and pertinent technical reports, which it updates periodically and provides to the States. It also distributes information by newsletter, published quarterly, that contains articles submitted by the States or prepared in EPA.

OAQPS has received positive feedback on its newsletter, first published in February, 1984, and on its other publications. STAPPA/ALAPCO are sponsoring the effort and are helping publicize and recruit State submissions.

National Small Flows Clearinghouse

Contact: Marie Perez
OWPO

The Small Flows Clearinghouse provides information on wastewater treatment technologies for small communities. The clearinghouse, started in 1979, is mandated by the CWA Amendments of 1977. It maintains lists of State laws and regulations affecting small flows projects, small flows products manufacturers, and innovative/alternative projects in operation, as well as a bibliography of technical reports, kept current by literature searches. The clearinghouse operates an 800 number and provides information and advice upon request. It is operated by contract at the University of West Virginia.

A recent OWPO evaluation found that knowledge and use of the clearinghouse is not widespread; only a few States and Regions, as well as consulting engineers, used it extensively. It concluded, however, that better publicity could overwhelm the clearinghouse with requests at current staffing and funding levels.

Innovative/Alternative Projects Clearinghouse

Contact: Dick Thomas
OWPO

The I/A Clearinghouse has been in operation since 1981. Mandated by statute, it provides a database of innovative and alternative projects to enable communities and grant applicants to identify and contact others with experience in certain technologies. The clearinghouse contains limited data, provided by the States: the type of technology, location of the project, and construction firm. It also maintains a list of State and Regional I/A contacts. OWPO is considering combining the National Small Flows and I/A Clearinghouses, since they contain similar information.

States have direct computer access to the datafile and will soon be able to put data directly into the computer. OWPO also publishes its data annually. It recently repackaged its report and made it publically available, and discovered considerable interest in the private sector: its first printing of 1800 copies rapidly disappeared, and it has printed an additional 8000 copies.

PROPOSED CLEARINGHOUSES

RCRA Permits

Contact: Art Glazer
OSW

OSW is considering establishing a clearinghouse to help Regions and States learn what others are doing in permitting hazardous waste facilities. OSW currently plans to obtain "good permits" from the Regions, as well as model Notices of Deficiencies and draft permits, and distribute them to other Regions. It might also include status reports on guidance documents, and provide a more systematic means to distribute policy memos. The project is not a high priority in OSW at the present time.

Asbestos Clearinghouse

Contact: Dave Schanamann
OTS

An asbestos clearinghouse is part of a larger effort to provide technical assistance for the asbestos in school program, and is in the very early planning stages. OTS expects to serve a wide audience, from parents to school boards to contractors responsible for removing asbestos. The clearinghouse will contain training materials, and informational films and booklets prepared by agencies like NIOSH and OSHA, as well as EPA. It may also collect technical reports identified by contractor and information submitted from technical experts in the asbestos field. It may operate

and 800 number and referral service. The entire technical assistance effort is budgeted for \$75,000 initially, growing to \$250,000, and is scheduled to go into operation in April 1985.

OTHER INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Modeling Clearinghouse

Contact: Joe Tikhart
OAQPS

The Modeling Clearinghouse was established a few years ago, at the Regions' request, to review and evaluate models used by the States in SIPs. Focusing on "exceptions" to EPA guidance, its primary purpose is to ensure the Regions act consistently in interpreting EPA guidance and judging the appropriateness of a particular model.

The clearinghouse is very limited in scope. It reviews models in only three industries, and access is limited to the Regions. The Regions and States have asked that it be expanded to cover all industries and made accessible to States. OAQPS has requested additional resources to expand the project.

National Pesticides Information Retrieval System

Contact: Jim Skaptason
OPP

NPIRS, in operation since 1983, is a database that provides ready public access to up-to-date information on the 45,000 pesticides products registered by EPA. The system is run and funded by USDA extension service, although EPA expects to provide some funds in the future. The database contains the name of the product and registration number, company name, active ingredients, and approved uses (pests, crops, and sites). Approximately 20 States have also provided State registration data.

NPIRS data is used extensively by States, many of whom register products based on EPA's evaluation, and private industry and users seeking alternative pesticides. It currently serves OPP's data management needs as well. OPP would like to put other types of data, such as chemical-specific information and experimental permits, into NPIRS, and use NPIRS rather than EPA computers for all its data management needs. It believes NPIRS has several advantages over managing data on EPA computers: greater accessibility to audiences outside EPA, more capacity, and less cost (users pay for time on the computer, which covers a portion of the costs). Negotiations within EPA on this proposal are currently underway.

Small Business Ombudsman

Contact: Marc Jones
OA

The Small Business Ombudsman provides a variety of services to help small businesses understand and comply with EPA regulations. The Ombudsman is more than an information service; it also serves as an advocate for small business interests in the regulatory development process and helps resolve individual problems. It also sponsors seminars and projects designed to help small businesses meet EPA requirements.

The Small Business Office runs a hotline with contractor assistance, which receives 200 to 300 calls per month. About half of these involve requests assistance with specific problems, rather than information, and require follow-up with Regional liasons or program offices.

Center for Environmental Research Information

Contact: Cal Lawrence
ORD-Cincinnati

ORD has centralized most of its information distribution and technology transfer activities in CERI, which has been in operation since 1980. CERI performs a number of technical assistance activities: it conducts seminars and training sessions and prepares technical reports or evaluations at the request of the programs.

It also serves as a central point for distribution of ORD research results and project reports from ORD Headquarters and laboratories. CERI prepares a variety of indexes and abstracts that keep users informed of what reports are available, either directly from CERI or from NTIS, and has a mailing list of 17,000 names. About 25% of its publications are requested by State agencies, EPA programs and Regions; the remainder go to university or industry customers.

ORD/NGA Project

Contact: Mike Mastracci
ORD

ORD has recently inititated a cooperative venture with the National Governors Association that is intended to identify and respond to States' needs for technical assistance. The project provides a contact person in NGA and a middleman in ORD Headquarters who identify an ORD lab or expert who can help resolve its problem. In the early stages of the project, ORD intends to follow up to ensure the State receives the assistance it needs; ORD is currently working on about six technical problems for the States.