

The National Environmental Policy Act

Wildlife Services (WS), a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), provides Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts that threaten the Nation's agricultural and natural resources, human health and safety, and property.

WS officials are fully committed to making well-informed and environmentally responsible decisions that excel at meeting the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). WS views the public's participation as an integral part of its environmental decisionmaking.

In planning and conducting program activities, WS closely follows the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA provides a national policy for protecting the environment by establishing an informed decisionmaking process for Federal activities that have potential impact on the environment. NEPA ensures that Federal agencies consider all applicable environmental laws and regulations in their decisionmaking *before* actions are taken.

Three Paths for Decisionmaking

For WS, the NEPA review process begins when the program receives a request for assistance. While formulating a proposed response to a request, WS officials determine whether the proposed actions may have significant environmental effects. Under the agency's NEPA implementing regulationsⁱ, WS officials may choose to pursue one of three paths to assist in decisionmaking. They may: develop and issue a categorical exclusion (CE), an environmental assessment (EA), or an environmental impact statement (EIS). Regardless of which path is selected, WS completes this process in close consultation and coordination with other Federal, State, and local agencies and Tribal governments.

A categorical exclusion (CE) is a determination that a category of actions do not have the potential to significantly affect the environment and that neither an EA nor EIS need to be prepared. CEs allow for immediate action to be taken, but the situations under which they may be used are limited. APHIS' NEPA implementing regulations identify the criteria for actions that may be categorically excluded.

An environmental assessment (EA) is a concise document that briefly provides evidence of whether or not a proposal may have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. An EA must include information detailing: the need for the proposed action; alternatives to the proposed action, including a "no-action" alternative; the potential environmental effects of the proposed action and its alternatives; and a list of agencies and persons consulted. An EA requires advanced planning, takes several months to complete, and involves the public in the decisionmaking process.

If an EA provides evidence that the proposed action is not expected to have a significant impact on the environment, WS officials prepare a decision document called a "finding of no significant impact" (FONSI). A FONSI document presents the reasons why the agency has reached its conclusion and must be prepared before a proposed action is taken. If an EA does not result in a FONSI, further analyses and documents—including an EIS—may be prepared.

An environmental impact statement (EIS) is a detailed document that is prepared if (1) a proposal's effects on the quality of the human environment are expected to be significant; (2) an EA indicates that one is warranted; or (3) the proposed action is one that requires an EIS due to agency regulations. An EIS is a formalized process that requires advanced planning, substantial public participation, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency review. The process may take 1 or more years to complete.

After publishing a final EIS, WS officials may proceed with publishing a decision document called a "record of decision" (ROD). A ROD document identifies the program's selected environmentally preferred alternative. It also details related program commitments, such as specific enforcement and monitoring activities. After publishing a ROD document, WS officials may proceed with the selected action.

Public Notification and Involvement

WS NEPA notices and documents can be found at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nepa.shtml. Notices are also published in the *Federal Register* and in local newspapersⁱⁱ. WS often uses additional public outreach methods, such as direct mailing, to provide ample opportunity for public participation.

WS exceeds NEPA requirements for public involvement by actively soliciting and responding to

the comments and concerns of citizens during the EA process. The formal EIS process provides extensive public involvement opportunities.

Additional Information

WS' environmental compliance staff includes a national environmental manager and six regional environmental management coordinators. They assist with facilitating the program's NEPA process and with answering questions received. For more information, visit the Web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/> or contact WS/APHIS/USDA at 4700 River Road, Unit 87, Riverdale, MD 20737. The telephone number is (301) 734-7921.

The Council on Environmental Quality has published *A Citizen's Guide to the National Environmental Policy Act*. For this and other guidance documents on NEPA, see <http://www.nepa.gov/>.

^vCEQ NEPA Regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) and USDA APHIS NEPA implementing procedures (40 CFR 372) provide guidance for determining significance and the appropriate level of NEPA compliance. *Federal Register* March 21, 2007 (Volume 72, Number 54, Pages 13237-13238)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W. , Washington , D.C. 20250-9410 , or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.