

Draft Guide Developed for Comments

Council on Environmental Quality
Executive Office of the President

A Citizen's Guide to the National Environmental Policy Act

Having Your Voice Heard



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List of Acronyms

CE: Categorical Exclusion

CEQ: The White House Council on Environmental Quality

CFR: Code of Federal Regulations

EA: Environmental Assessment

EIS: Environmental Impact Statement

EMS: Environmental management system

EPA: The Environmental Protection Agency

FONSI: Finding of No Significant Impact

NEPA: The National Environmental Policy Act

NOI: Notice of Intent

ROD: Record of Decision

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Purpose of the Guide

This is a guide to help citizens and organizations who are concerned about the environmental effects of federal decision-making to effectively participate in federal agencies' environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). With some limited exceptions, all federal agencies in the executive branch have to comply with NEPA before they make decisions about federal actions that could have environmental effects. Thus, NEPA applies to a very wide range of federal actions that include federal construction projects, plans to manage and develop federally owned lands or water bodies, and federal approvals of non-federal activities such as grant proposals, licenses and permits. Some specific examples include issuing regulations that govern particular uses of public lands, expanding a military installation, building or expanding airports, expanding the interstate highway system, designating a new national marine sanctuary, managing a national wildlife refuge, issuing a permit for a transboundary oil pipeline, developing an airspace plan over a National Park, deciding to control a predator, or providing funding for economic development in a community. The federal government takes hundreds of actions every day that are, in some way, covered by NEPA.

The environmental review process under NEPA provides an opportunity for you to be involved in federal agency decision-making. It provides you one of the best ways to understand what the federal agency is proposing to do, to offer your thoughts on alternative ways for the agency to accomplish what it is proposing, and to offer your comments on the agency's analysis of the environmental effects¹ of the proposed action. NEPA requires federal agencies to consider environmental effects that include, among others, impacts on social, cultural and economic resources as well as natural resources.² Citizens often have valuable information about places and resources that they value and the potential environmental, social and economic effects that proposed federal actions can have on those places and resources. NEPA's requirements provide you the means to work with the agencies so they can take your information into account.

Background on NEPA

Signed into law on January 1, 1970, NEPA was the first major environmental law in the United States and is often called the "Magna Carta" of environmental laws. Importantly, NEPA established this country's national environmental policies. To implement these policies, NEPA instructs agencies to undertake an assessment of the environmental effects of their proposed actions prior to making decisions. Two of the

¹ "Effects" and "Impacts" are synonymous terms under the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, 40 C.F.R. parts 1500-1508 (hereinafter referred to as the CEQ NEPA Regulations or CEQ regulations) at 40 C.F.R. Section 1508.8.

² *Ibid.*

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major purposes of the environmental review process are better informed decisions and citizen involvement, both of which should lead to implementation of NEPA's policies.

Before exploring the specifics of the NEPA process, it's important to understand the federal agencies involved in providing oversight in the NEPA process. In NEPA, Congress established the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) in the Executive Office of the President to ensure that federal agencies meet their obligations under the Act.³ CEQ oversees implementation of NEPA, principally through issuance of NEPA regulations that interpret the procedural requirements of NEPA. CEQ also coordinates environmental issues among federal agencies, and helps to resolve

³ National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4347 (2000).

disputes between federal agencies and with other governmental entities and members of the public.

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Federal Activities is another key agency. It reviews Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and many Environmental Assessments (EA) issued by federal agencies, and provides its comments to the public by publishing summaries of them in the Federal Register, which is a daily publication that provides notice of federal agency actions.⁴ EPA's reviews are intended to assist federal agencies in improving their NEPA analyses and decisions.⁵

Another government entity involved in NEPA is the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution, which was established by the 1998 Environmental Policy and Conflict Resolution Act (P.L. 105-156) to assist in resolving conflict over environmental issues that involve federal agencies. While part of the federal government, it provides an independent, neutral, place for federal agencies to work with citizens, state, local and tribal governments, private organizations and businesses to reach common ground rather than through litigation and other adversarial approaches to dispute resolution.⁶ The U.S. Institute is also charged with assisting the federal government in the implementation of the substantive policies set forth in Section 101 of NEPA.⁷

Because NEPA implementation is an important responsibility of the federal government, many federal agencies have established offices responsible for NEPA policy and program oversight. These offices prepare NEPA guidance, policy and procedures for the agency, and often make this information available to the public through sources such as Internet websites. (See Appendix A for access to agency points of contact and agency websites).

Navigating the NEPA Process

Each year, thousands of Environmental Assessments (EAs) and hundreds of Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) are prepared by federal agencies. These documents provide citizens and communities an opportunity to learn about and be involved in each of those environmental impact assessments that are part of the federal agency decision-making process. It is important to understand that commenting on a proposal is not a "vote" on whether the proposed action should take place. Nonetheless, the information you provide during the EA and EIS process can influence the decision makers and their final decisions because NEPA does require

⁴ Clean Air Act, 42 U.S.C. § 7609 (2000). See Appendix B for information on the Federal Register.

⁵ For additional information, see <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/nepa/index.htm>

⁶ Environmental Policy and Conflict Resolution Act of 1998, 20 U.S.C. §§ 5601-5609 (2000).

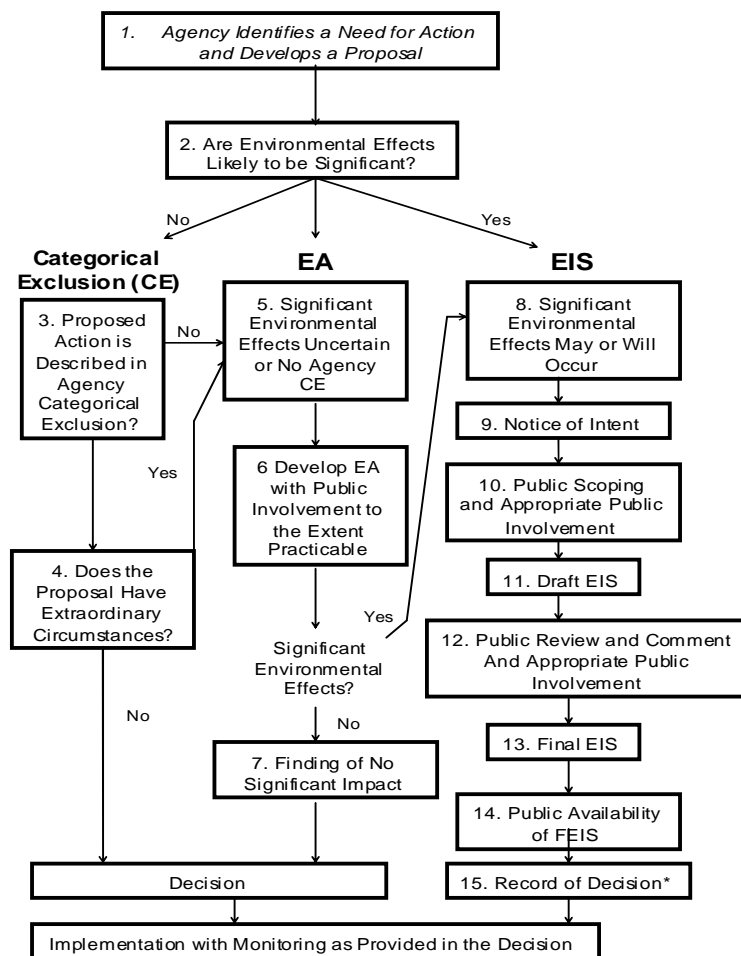
⁷ National Environmental Conflict Resolution Advisory Committee. 2005. Final Report to the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution of the Morris K. Udall Foundation. Available at: <http://www.ecr.gov/necrac/reports.htm>

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that federal decision-makers be informed of the environmental consequences of their decisions.

This guide will help you better navigate the NEPA process and understand the roles of the various other actors. While reading the guide, refer to Figure 1, “The NEPA Process”, which details the steps of the NEPA process. For easier reference, each step of the process is designated with a number which is highlighted in the text discussing that step. While agencies may differ slightly in how they comply with NEPA, understanding the basics will give you the information you need to work effectively with any agency’s process.

Figure 1. The NEPA Process



* Significant new circumstances or information relevant to environmental concerns or substantial changes in the proposed action that are relevant to environmental concerns may necessitate preparation of a supplemental EIS following either the draft EIS or the Record of Decision. See 40 C.F.R. §1502.9(c).

What is NEPA?

In NEPA, Congress recognized that the federal government's actions may cause significant environmental effects. The range of actions that cause significant environmental effects is broad and includes issuing regulations, providing permits for private actions, funding private actions, making federal land management decisions, constructing publicly-owned facilities, and many other types of actions. Using the NEPA process, agencies are required to determine if their proposed actions have significant environmental effects.

Section 101 of NEPA is our country's national environmental policy and applies to all Americans. Part A of the section states:

“ . . . it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and local governments, and other concerned public and private organizations, to use all practicable means and measures, including financial and technical assistance, in a manner calculated to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans.”⁸

Section 102 of NEPA establishes a decision-making process, a tool to comply with the law and meet the intent of Section 101. Section 102 provides the basis for the procedural requirements set out in the CEQ regulations by which federal agencies meet their NEPA obligations.

To Whom Do the Procedural Requirements of NEPA Apply?

NEPA's procedural requirements apply to all federal agencies in the executive branch. NEPA does not apply to the President, his immediate advisors, to Congress or to the federal courts.

To What Do the Procedural Requirements of NEPA Apply?

NEPA's procedural requirements apply to a federal agency's decisions for actions, including financing, assisting, conducting, or approving projects or programs; agency rules, regulations, plans, policies, or procedures; and legislative proposals.⁹ NEPA applies when a federal agency has discretion to choose among one or more alternative means of accomplishing a particular goal.¹⁰

⁸ National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. § 4331 (2000).

⁹ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1508.18 (2005). Note that this section applies only to legislation drafted and submitted to Congress by federal agencies; not legislation initiated by Members of Congress.

¹⁰ 40 C.F.R. §1508.23(2005).

Frequently, private individuals or companies will become involved in the NEPA process when they need a permit issued by a federal agency. When a company applies for a permit (for example, for crossing federal lands or impacting waters of the United States) the agency that is being asked to issue the permit must evaluate the environmental effects of the permit decision under NEPA. Federal agencies might require the private company or developer to pay for the preparation of analyses, but the agency remains responsible for the accuracy of the analysis.

NEPA Is About Informed Decisions

NEPA requires agency decision-makers to make informed decisions. Good NEPA analyses should ensure that NEPA's policy goals (Section 101) are considered and incorporated into the decision to the extent they are consistent with other considerations of national policy. NEPA does not require the decision-maker to select the environmentally preferable alternative or prohibit adverse environmental effects. Indeed, decisionmakers in federal agencies often have other policy considerations, whether social, economic, national security interest or other concerns to weigh in the decisionmaking process. But NEPA does require that decisionmakers be informed of the environmental consequences of what they decide to do.

Agencies are required to develop their own capacity within a NEPA program in order to develop analyses and documents (or review those prepared by others) to ensure informed decision-making.¹¹ The NEPA process can serve to meet other environmental review requirements. For instance, actions that require the NEPA process may have an impact on endangered species, historic properties, or low income communities. The NEPA analysis, which takes into account many potential impacts of the proposed action and investigates alternative actions, may serve as a framework to meet other environmental review requirements, such as the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Environmental Justice Executive Order, and other federal, state, tribal, and local laws and regulations.

The Mechanics of the NEPA Process Demystified

In 1978, CEQ issued binding regulations to direct agencies on the fundamental requirements necessary for agencies to fulfill their NEPA obligations. The CEQ regulations are the foundation of the NEPA process and set forth minimum requirements for agencies. The CEQ regulations also called for agencies to create their own implementing procedures that supplement the minimum requirements based on each agency's specific mandates, obligations and missions.¹² These agency-specific NEPA procedures account for the slight differences in each agency's NEPA process.

¹¹ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1507.2 (2005).

¹² CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1507.3 (2005).

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Most agency NEPA procedures are available on-line at the NEPA net website (<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/regs/agency/agencies.cfm>), some are published in the Federal Register, or you can write or call the agency NEPA point of contacts and ask for a copy of their procedures.¹³

The NEPA process begins when an agency develops a proposal to address a need to take an action.¹⁴ The need may be something the agency identifies itself, or it may be a need to make a decision on a proposal brought to it by someone outside of the agency, for example, an applicant for a permit. Based on the need, the agency develops a proposal for action (Number 1 in Figure 1). If it is the only federal agency involved, that agency will automatically be the “lead agency”, which means it has the primary responsibility for complying with NEPA. However, in many cases, there will be more than one federal agency involved. Some large, complex proposals involve multiple federal agencies along with state, local and/or tribal agencies. If another federal, state, local or tribal agency has a major role in the proposed action and also has NEPA responsibilities or responsibilities under a similar NEPA-like law¹⁵, that agency may be a “joint lead agency”. A “joint lead agency” shares the lead agency’s responsibility for management of the NEPA process, including public involvement and preparation of documents. Other agencies may have a decision or special expertise regarding a proposed action, but less of a role than the lead agency. In that case, a federal, state, tribal or local government agency may be a “cooperating agency”. A “cooperating agency” is an agency that has jurisdiction by law or special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposal (or a reasonable alternative). Thus, a “cooperating agency” typically will have some responsibilities for the analysis related to its jurisdiction or special expertise.

In most cases, the agency will enter the initial analytical approach (Number 2 in Figure 1) to determine if the agency will pursue the path of a Categorical Exclusion (CE), an Environmental Assessment (EA) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

¹³ Contact information for agency representatives are found in Appendix D. The draft agency implementing procedures, or regulations, are published in the Federal Register, and a public comment period is required prior to CEQ approval. Commenting on these agency regulations is one way to be involved in their development. Most agencies already have implementing procedures; however, when they are changed, the agency will again provide for public comment on the proposed changes.

¹⁴ On rare occasions, Congress may exempt an action from NEPA. On other occasions, an agency may face an emergency situation (40 C.F.R. § 1506.11 (2005)). If the agency needs to take an action in response to an emergency that would typically require preparation of an environmental impact statement, the agency can proceed immediately and work with CEQ to develop alternative arrangements for compliance with NEPA. Finally, the NEPA analyses and document may involve classified information. If the entire action is classified, the agency will still comply with the analytical requirements of NEPA, but the information will not be released for public review. If only a portion of the information is classified, the agency will organize the classified material so that the unclassified portions can be made available for review (40 C.F.R. § 1507.3(c) (2005)).

¹⁵ About a quarter of the states have such laws; for example, New York, Montana, Washington, and California all have such laws. New York City also has such a law. A list with references is available at www.nepa.gov by clicking on “State Information” or directly at <http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/states.html>.

Implementing the NEPA Process

Categorical Exclusions (CEs) (Number 3 in Figure 1)

A CE is a category of actions that the agency has determined does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment.

Examples include issuing administrative procedures, making minor facility renovations, and reconstruction of trails. Agencies develop a list of CEs specific to their operations when they develop or revise their NEPA implementing procedures in accordance with CEQ's NEPA regulations.

A CE is based on an agency's experience with that kind of action and its environmental effects. The agency may have studied an action in previous EAs, found no significant impact on the environment based on the analysis, and somehow validated the lack of significant impacts after the implementation. If this is an action that will be repeated, the agency may decide to amend their implementing regulations to include the action as a CE. In these cases, the draft agency procedures are published in the Federal Register, and a public comment period is required. Participating in these comment periods is an important way to be involved in the development of a particular CE.

If a proposed action is included in the description provided for a listed CE, the agency must check to make sure that no extraordinary circumstances exist. Extraordinary circumstances are also set out in the agency NEPA procedures and typically include such matters as effects to endangered species, protected cultural sites, and wetlands (Number 4 in Figure 1). If there are no extraordinary circumstances indicating that the effects of the action may be significant, then the agency can proceed with the action.

If the proposed action is not included in the description provided in the CE, or there are extraordinary circumstances, then the agency must choose whether to withdraw the proposed action, develop a new proposal that may qualify for application of a CE, or prepare an EA or an EIS. When the agency does not know whether significant impacts are expected, the agency will prepare an EA to determine if there are significant environmental effects. An EIS is prepared when significant environmental effects are expected to result from the proposed action.

Environmental Assessments (EA) (Number 5 in Figure 1)

The purpose of an EA is to determine the significance of the environmental effects and to look at alternative means to achieve the agency's objectives. The EA is intended to be a concise document that (1) briefly provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or

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finding of no significant impact (FONSI); (2) aids an agency's compliance with NEPA when no environmental impact statement is necessary; and, (3) facilitates preparation of a statement when one is necessary.¹⁶

The EA will include brief discussions of the need for the proposal, of alternative courses of action for any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources, of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives, and a listing of agencies and persons consulted.¹⁷ Because the EA serves to evaluate the significance of a proposal for agency actions, it should focus on the context and intensity of effects that may "significantly" affect the quality of the human environment.¹⁸ At the conclusion of the EA, the agency will either issue a FONSI or a notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS. Often the EA will identify ways in which the agency can revise the action to minimize environmental effects.

When preparing an EA, the agency has discretion as to the level of public involvement (Number 6 in Figure 1). The CEQ regulations state that the agency shall involve environmental agencies, applicants and the public, to the extent practicable, in preparing EAs.¹⁹ Sometimes agencies will choose to mirror the scoping and public comment periods that are found in the EIS process. In other situations, agencies make the EA and a draft FONSI available to interested members of the public.

An EA is a public document, but its availability is not always advertised. Some agencies, such as the Army, require that interested parties be notified of the decision to prepare an EA, and the Army also makes the EA publicly available. Some agencies keep a notification list of parties interested in a particular kind of action or in all agency actions. Other agencies simply prepare the EA. To further understand the EA process, it is important that you read the specific implementing procedures of the proposing agency or ask the local NEPA point of contact working on the project.

A FONSI (Number 7 in Figure 1) is a document that presents the reasons why the agency concludes that there are no significant environmental impacts projected to occur upon implementation of the action.²⁰ The EA is attached to the FONSI, otherwise the FONSI includes a summary of the EA.

The EA and FONSI are the documents that show how the agency complied with their NEPA obligations. CEQ regulations require agencies to make the proposed FONSI available for public review for 30 days if the type of proposed action hasn't been done before by the agency or if it's something that typically would require an EIS under the agency NEPA procedures.²¹ If this is the case, the FONSI is usually

¹⁶ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1508.9 (2005).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ CEQ NEPA Regulations 40 C.F.R. §1508.27 (2005).

¹⁹ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1501.4(e)(2) (2005).

²⁰ CEQ NEPA Regulations 40 C.F.R § 1508.13 (2005).

²¹ *Ibid.*

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published in the Federal Register,²² and the notice of availability of the FONSI will include information on how and where to provide your comments. If the requirement for a 30 day review is not triggered the FONSI often will not be published in the Federal Register. It may be posted on the agency's website, published in local newspapers or made available in some other manner. If you are interested in a particular action that is the subject of an EA, you should find out from the agency how it will make the FONSI available.

Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) (Number 8 in Figure 1)

While preparing the environmental assessment (EA), an agency may learn that the proposed action is expected to or will have significant environmental effects. An agency may also, based on its judgment and past experience, expect a type of proposed action to have significant environmental effects and thus will have already identified the proposed action as the type normally requiring preparation of an EIS in their agency NEPA procedures. Through NEPA, agencies are obligated to provide opportunities for meaningful public involvement.

Notice of Intent and Scoping

The EIS process begins with publication of a Notice of Intent, stating the agency's intent to prepare an EIS for a particular proposal. (NOI) (Number 9 in Figure 1). The NOI is published in the Federal Register, and it will provide some basic information on the proposed action in preparation for the scoping²³ process (Number 10 in Figure 1). The NOI provides a brief description of the proposed action and possible alternatives. It also describes the agency's proposed scoping process, including any meetings and how the public can get involved. For example, if a meeting changes or one is newly scheduled, the NOI describes where the agency may publish the meeting notice, such as in the local paper or on a website. The NOI will also contain the agency point of contact for the project, and some agencies will include the point of contact for their NEPA process.

The scoping process is the best time to identify issues, determine points of contact, determine project schedules and provide recommendations to the agency. The overall goal is to define the scope of issues to be addressed in depth in the analyses that will be included in the EIS. Specifically, the scoping process²⁴ will:

- Identify the significant issues to be analyzed in the EIS;

²² Government Printing Office Electronic Information Enhancement Act of 1993. 44 U.S.C. §§ 4101-4104 (2000).

²³ Scoping is a NEPA term of art that describes one major public involvement aspect of the NEPA EIS process (40 C.F.R. § 1501.7 (2005)).

²⁴ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1501.7 (2005). More information on scoping can be found in CEQ's guidance on scoping at www.nepa.gov. It is also available by calling CEQ at 202 395-5750.

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- Identify and eliminate from detailed review those issues that will not be significant or those that have been adequately covered in prior environmental review;
- Determine the roles and responsibilities of lead and cooperating agencies;
- Identify any related EAs or EISs;
- Identify gaps in data and information needs;
- Identify other environmental review and consultation requirements so they can be integrated with the EIS; and,
- Indicate the relationship between the development of the environmental analysis and the agency's tentative decision-making schedule.

As part of the process, agencies are required to invite the participation of interested persons. The agency should choose whatever communications methods are best for the communities, whether local, regional or national, that are interested in the proposed action. Video conferencing, public meetings, conference calls, formal hearings or informal workshops are all legitimate ways to conduct scoping. It is in your interest to become involved as soon as the EIS process begins and to use the scoping opportunity to make thoughtful, rational presentations on impacts and

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alternatives.²⁵ Some of the most constructive interaction between the public and agencies occur when citizens identify reasonable alternatives that the agency can evaluate in the EIS.

Draft EIS (Number 11 in Figure 1)

The next major step in the EIS process that provides an opportunity for your input is when the agencies submit a draft EIS for public comment. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) publishes a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register informing you and other members of the public that the draft is available for comment (Number 12 in Figure 1). Based on the communication plan set up by the agency, websites, local papers or other means of public notice may also be used. The comment period is at least 45 days long²⁶; however, it may be longer based on requirements spelled out in the agency specific NEPA procedures or at the agency's discretion. During this time, the agency may conduct public meetings or hearings²⁷ as a way to solicit comments. The agency will also request comments from other federal, state, tribal and local agencies that may have jurisdiction or interest in the matter.

One key aspect of a draft EIS is the statement of the underlying purpose and need.²⁸ Agencies draft a "Purpose and Need" statement to describe what they are trying to achieve by proposing an action. The purpose and need statement explains to the reader why an agency action is necessary, and serves as the basis for identifying the reasonable alternatives available to the agency.

The identification and evaluation of alternative ways of meeting the purpose and need of the proposed action is the heart of the NEPA analysis. The lead agency or agencies must, "objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives, and for alternatives which were eliminated from detailed study, briefly discuss the reasons for their having been eliminated."²⁹ Reasonable alternatives are those that substantially meet the agency's purpose and need. Agencies are obligated to evaluate all reasonable alternatives, or a range of reasonable alternatives, in enough detail so that a reader can compare and contrast the environmental effects of the various alternatives.

Agencies must always describe and analyze a "no action alternative". The "no action" alternative is simply what would happen if the agency did not act upon the proposal for agency action. For example, in the case of an application to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a permit to place fill in an area, the "no action" alternative is no permit. But in the case of a proposed new management plan for the

²⁵ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1501.7 (2005).

²⁶ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1506.10 (2005).

²⁷ Public hearings are run in a formal manner, with a recording or minutes taken of speakers' comments. Public meetings may be held in a variety of formats.

²⁸ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1502.13 (2005).

²⁹ CEQ NEPA Regulations 40 C.F.R. § 1502.14 (2005).

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National Park Service's management of a national park, the "no action" alternative is the continuation of the current management plan.

If an agency has a preferred alternative when it publishes a draft EIS, the draft must identify which alternative the agency prefers. All agencies must identify a preferred alternative in the final EIS, unless another law prohibits it from doing so.

The agency must analyze the full range of direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the preferred alternative, if any, and of the reasonable alternatives identified in the draft EIS. For purposes of NEPA, "effects" and "impacts" mean the same thing. They include ecological, aesthetic, historic, cultural, economic, social or health impacts, whether adverse or beneficial.³⁰ It is important to note that human beings are part of the environment (indeed, Congress used the phrase "human environment" in NEPA), so when an EIS is prepared and economic or social and natural or physical environmental effects are interrelated, then the EIS should discuss all of these effects.³¹

In addition to the purpose and need, identification of reasonable alternatives, and the environmental effects of the alternatives, the draft EIS will contain a description of the environment that would be affected by the various alternatives.

The EIS will have a list of who prepared the document and their qualifications³², a table of contents and an index. The agency may choose to include technical

³⁰ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1508.8 (2005).

³¹ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1508.14 (2005).

³² CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1502.17 (2005).

information in appendices that are either circulated with the draft or readily available for review.³³

Final EIS (Number 13 in Figure 1)

When the public comment period is finished, the agency analyzes comments, conducts further analysis as necessary, and prepares the final EIS. In the final EIS, the agency must respond to the substantive comments received from other government agencies and from you and other members of the public.³⁴ The response can be in the form of changes in the final EIS, factual corrections, modifications to the analyses or the alternatives, new alternatives considered, or an explanation of why a comment does not require the agency's response.³⁵ Often the agency will meet with resource protection agencies (e.g., EPA or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) that may be affected by the proposed action in an effort to resolve an issue or mitigate project effects. A copy or a summary of your substantive comments will be included in the final EIS.³⁶

When it is ready, the agency will publish the final EIS and EPA will publish a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register. The Notice of Availability marks the start of a waiting period (Number 14 in Figure 1). A minimum of 30 days must pass before the agency can make a decision on their proposed action unless the agency couples the 30 days with a formal internal appeals process.³⁷ This provides time for the agency decision-maker to consider the purpose and need, weigh the alternatives, balance their objectives and make a decision. The 30 day waiting period is required by the CEQ regulations, and you should check the agency NEPA procedures to see if those procedures require a longer period to elapse before the agency renders its decision.

There is an additional (but rarely used) procedure worth noting: Pre-decision Referrals to CEQ.³⁸ This referral process takes place when EPA or another federal agency determines that proceeding with the proposed action is environmentally unacceptable. If an agency reaches that conclusion, it can refer the issue to CEQ within 25 days after the Notice of Availability for the final EIS is issued. CEQ then works to resolve the issue with the agencies concerned. CEQ may also refer the agencies to the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution to try to address the matter before formal elevation.³⁹ CEQ typically provides you and other members of the public an opportunity for public involvement during the referral process. Note

³³ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1502.18 (2005).

³⁴ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1503.4 (2005).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1503.4 (2005).

³⁷ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1506.10 (2005). If the end of the 30 day wait period is less than 90 days after the notice of availability of the Draft EIS, was published in the Federal Register, then the decision must await the expiration of the 90 days.

³⁸ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. part 1504 (2005).

³⁹ The U.S. Institute reports disputes it is involved with to CEQ and requests concurrence from CEQ to engage in those disputes involving two or more federal agencies.

that there is no provision for citizens to formally refer an action to CEQ, although CEQ accepts informal complaints.

Supplemental EIS (Asterisk in Figure 1)

Sometimes a federal agency is obligated to prepare a supplement to an already existing EIS. An agency must prepare a supplement to either a draft or final EIS if it makes substantial changes in the proposed action that is relevant to environmental concerns, or if there are significant new circumstances or information relevant to environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed action of its impacts. An agency may also prepare supplemental EIS if it determines that doing so will further the purposes of NEPA.⁴⁰ A supplemental EIS is prepared in the same way as a draft or final EIS, except that scoping is not required. If a supplement is prepared following a draft EIS, the final EIS will address both the draft EIS and supplemental EIS.

EPA's Review

EPA plays a critical role in other agencies' NEPA processes. EPA is required to review and provide comments on the adequacy of the analysis and the impact to the environment.⁴¹ EPA uses a rating system that summarizes their recommendations to the lead agency (See Appendix C). If EPA determines that the action is environmentally unsatisfactory, it is required by law to refer the matter to CEQ.

The Office of Federal Activities (OFA) in EPA is the official recipient of all EISs prepared by federal agencies, and OFA publishes the notices of availability in the Federal Register for all draft, final and supplemental EISs. These notices start the official "clock" for public review and comment periods and wait periods.

Record of Decision (ROD) (Number 15 in Figure 1)

The ROD is the final step for agencies in the EIS process. The ROD is a document that states what the decision is; identifies the alternatives considered, including the environmentally preferred alternative; and discusses mitigation plans, including any enforcement and monitoring commitments.⁴² In the ROD, the agency discusses all the factors that it balanced, including any considerations of national policy, when it reached its decision on whether to, and if so how to, proceed with the proposed action. The ROD will also discuss if all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted, and if not, why they were not.⁴³ The ROD is

⁴⁰CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. §1502.9(c) (2005).

⁴¹ Clean Air Act, 42 U.S.C. § 7609 (2000).

⁴² CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1505.2 (2005).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

a publicly available document. Sometimes they are published in the Federal Register or on the agency's website. If you are interested in receiving the ROD you can ask the agency's point of contact for the EIS for a copy of the ROD.

When and How to Get Involved?

It Depends on the Agency

To determine the specific steps in the process where public involvement will be the most effective, it is very important to review the agency's NEPA implementing procedures. As mentioned previously, NEPA processes differ among agencies. For example, the Federal Highway Administration provides a 30 day comment period (with or without a public meeting) on all EAs that they develop before a FONSI is issued while some other agencies have no required comment periods for EAs.⁴⁴

In addition, new legislation can change the way NEPA is implemented in agencies. For example, after the passage of the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act", which is transportation legislation that Congress passed in August 2005, the Department of Transportation updated its NEPA processes to implement the new transportation legislation. Agencies such as, Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration, have kept websites up to date and are tracking the evolving guidance (<http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/strmlng/index.asp#safetealu>).

Be Informed of Actions

Sometimes citizens are generally interested in actions taking place in a particular area (for example, in your community or in an ecosystem or a facility that affects you). If this is the case, you can inform the appropriate agency or agencies that you would like to be notified of any proposed action and or environmental impact analysis that might be prepared. In addition, many agencies now have websites where they post notices for actions they are proposing.

Active Involvement

Being active in the NEPA process requires you to dedicate your resources to the effort. Environmental impact analyses can be technical and lengthy. Active involvement in the NEPA process requires a commitment of time and a willingness to share your information with the decision-making agency and with other citizens. You may participate as an individual, and you may also get involved by working with other interested individuals or organizations or by working through your local, tribal, or state government. For example, if an agency is taking an action for which your

⁴⁴ Federal Highway Administration NEPA Regulations, 23 C.F.R. § 771.119 (2005).

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local, state or tribal government has special expertise or any approval authority, they can become a “cooperating agency” with the federal agency.⁴⁵ This formal status does not increase their role in decision-making, but it does allow the governments to use their knowledge and authorities to help shape the federal decision-making.

Another way to participate is to check with local experts such as biologists or economists at a university to assist you with your review of the NEPA analyses and documents. You can also form study groups to review environmental impact analyses and enlist experts to review your comments on the documents. There are examples, such as the one provided below, of situations where citizen groups have worked with agencies to develop an alternative to a proposal and the agency adopted that alternative.

Your involvement in the NEPA process does not have to be confined to commenting on the analysis. If the agency has committed to monitoring or mitigation, community groups can be involved in developing these plans and in some cases can assist in monitoring and in assessing the effectiveness of the mitigation. Where the lead agency adopts monitoring and mitigation, the lead agency should report progress in carrying out the mitigation. Executive Order (EO 13148) and subsequent directives

⁴⁵ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. §§ 1501.6, 1508.5 (2005).

issued from the Office of Management and Budget and CEQ direct all agencies to adopt an Environmental Management System (EMS). “An EMS is a systematic approach to identifying and managing an organization’s environmental obligations and issues that can complement many aspects of the NEPA review process.”⁴⁶ EMSs are typically used by organizations and agencies to set up the procedures that will help them comply with the specific requirements of environmental law and regulations, such air and water permits. EMSs are particularly useful in NEPA in the context of post-decision monitoring and mitigation. Using the procedures provided by an EMS, agencies can better ensure they are proper implementation of mitigation measures and provide a mechanism for monitoring the actual effects of the mitigation.

In summary, there are a number of places to be involved in the NEPA process: (1) when the agency prepares its NEPA procedures, (2) before and as a NEPA analysis is being prepared, (3) when a NEPA document is published for public review and comment, and (4) monitoring the implementation of the proposed action and the effectiveness of any associated mitigation.

Other Processes that Require Public Involvement

When a proposed action is part of a permitting process there may be opportunities to comment provided in the statute or regulations for that permitting process in addition to the NEPA public involvement opportunities discussed above. For example, public involvement is required by most federal agency land use planning regulations. While this guide can not cover all of those additional possibilities for commenting, the NEPA team working on a particular proposal will be familiar with the various commenting periods and will be able to inform you of those opportunities. Note that the permitting and NEPA processes should be integrated or run concurrently in order to have an effective and efficient decision-making process.

⁴⁶ Boling, E.A. 2005. *Environmental Management Systems and NEPA: A Framework for Productive Harmony*. The Environmental Law Reporter. 35 ELR 10022. Environmental Law Institute.

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Public Comment Periods

Agencies are required to make efforts to provide meaningful public involvement in their NEPA processes.⁴⁷ Citizens involved in the process should ensure that they know how agencies will inform the public (via Federal Register, newspapers, direct mailing, etc.) that an action is proposed and the NEPA process is beginning; that certain documents are available; and that preliminary determinations have been made on the possible environmental effects of the proposal (e.g., what level of analysis the agency will initially undertake).

Agencies solicit different levels of involvement when they prepare an EA versus an EIS. In preparing an EIS, agencies are likely to have public meetings and are required to have a 45 day comment period after the draft EIS is made available. In the case of an agency preparing an EA, the CEQ regulations require the agency to involve the public to the extent practicable, but each agency has its own guidelines about public review periods for EAs. However, in any case, citizens are entitled to receive public documents involved in the NEPA process.⁴⁸

In terms of a specific agency, required public comment periods associated with an EA or an EIS can be found in its NEPA implementing procedures. In some cases, the draft EIS that an agency prepares may be extremely long. In such cases, an agency will often entertain requests to extend the comment period to ensure enough time for the public and other agencies to review and comment.

Citizens who want to raise issues with the agency should do so at the earliest possible stage in the process. Agencies are much more likely to evaluate a new alternative or address a concern if it is raised in a timely manner. And the Supreme Court has held in two NEPA cases that if a person or organization expects courts to address a concern or evaluate an alternative, the issue must have been raised to the agency at a point in the administrative process when it can be meaningfully addressed.

How to Comment

Comments can be the most important contribution from citizens. Comments should be clear, concise, and on-point and relevant to the analysis of the proposed action. Take the time to organize thoughts and edit the document submitted⁴⁹ As a general rule, the tone of the comments should be polite and respectful. Those reviewing comments are public servants tasked with a job, and they all deserve the same respect and professional treatment that you and other citizens should expect in return. Comments that are solution oriented and provide specific examples will be more effective than those that simply oppose the proposed project. Comments that contribute to developing alternatives that address the purpose and need for the action are also effective. They are particularly helpful early in the NEPA process and should be made, if at all possible, during scoping, to ensure that reasonable alternatives can be analyzed and considered in decision-making.

Before commenting, understand: (1) what the agency's purpose and need is; (2) what decision is being made; (2) who is making the decision; (3) what issues the decision-

⁴⁷ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1506.6(b) (2005).

⁴⁸ CEQ NEPA Regulations, 40 C.F.R. §§ 1501.4(b), 1506.6 (2005).

⁴⁹ There are many reference books for how to research issues, review documents, and write comments. One in particular is "The Art of Commenting" by Elizabeth Mullin from the Environmental Law Institute Mullin, Elizabeth D. 2000. The Art of Commenting: How to Influence Environmental Decisionmaking with Effective Comments, Environmental Law Institute. Washington, DC.

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maker is balancing; and (4) what the agency's NEPA procedures require. In drafting comments, try to focus on the purpose and need of the analysis, the proposed alternatives, and the assessment of the environmental impacts of those alternatives.

Commenting is not a form of "voting" on an alternative. The number of negative comments an agency receives does not prevent an action from moving forward. Numerous comments that repeat the same basic message of support or opposition will typically be responded to collectively. General comments that state an action will have "significant environmental effects" may also not help an agency make a better decision unless the relevant causes and environmental effects are explained.

Finally, remember that decision-makers also receive other information and data such as operational and technical information related to implementing an action that they will have to balance in making a final decision.

What If Involvement Isn't Going Well?

For the purposes of this discussion, "not going well" means that you or your organization believes that the lead agency isn't giving the public sufficient opportunity to get involved or isn't using that involvement appropriately. Perhaps you think that the agency should hold a public meeting, and it refuses to do so. Or you or your community or group has developed an alternative that you think meets the purpose and need of the proposed action and reflects the policies set forth in NEPA, but the agency says it won't analyze it in the NEPA document. Maybe you want an extension of the comment period because the document is very lengthy, and you simply need more time to review it. Or maybe you feel that communications between your organization and the lead agency have, for some reason, not been constructive.

The most appropriate steps to take if you find yourself in these kinds of situations always depend, of course, on the particular people, timing and proposal at hand. Nonetheless, here are some possible factors and courses of action to consider:

I. First, don't wait too long to try to raise your concerns. If you just sit back and hope that things will get "better" or that your comments will have greater effect later, you may hear that "you should have raised this sooner." At times, waiting can be detrimental to you as well as to the rest of the public and the agency involved. For example, if you feel strongly that a particular alternative should be addressed and don't raise it during the scoping process, then it won't get the benefit of comparative analysis with the other alternatives. In addition, it could result in a more expensive and lengthy process (costing taxpayers and yourself more) if your delayed suggestion results in the agency deciding to issue a supplemental EIS analyzing that alternative. Or if you, or your organization, later go to court to argue that a certain alternative should have been analyzed in the NEPA document, the judge may find that the court can't consider that information because you should have raised your concern earlier.

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II. Your first line of recourse should be with the individual from the agency in charge of this particular process. See if you can sit down with him or her and discuss your concern. You may be pleasantly surprised at his or her response.

III. If, for whatever reason, you believe that the process ahead may be particularly contentious or challenging, given a past history of community conflict or deeply divided interests, consider raising with the lead agency the possibility of designing a collaborative process with outside assistance. One source of such assistance is the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution. Located in Tucson, Arizona, as part of the Morris K. Udall Foundation, the Institute is a federal entity that offers neutral environmental conflict resolution design, facilitation, education, training and mediation. Anyone, whether in or out of government, can call the Institute and ask to speak to a professional staff person about what possibilities exist for the Institute's involvement in a proposed federal action. You might want to look at their website at www.ecr.gov or contact the Institute (see Appendix D for contact information) to get a better sense of who they are and what they do. You might also be interested in reviewing the April 2005 report of the National Environmental Conflict Resolution Advisory Committee that discusses the linkages between NEPA's policies and environmental conflict resolution at <http://www.ecr.gov/necrac/reports.htm>. There may be an environmental conflict resolution office in your state that can provide assistance, and there are also many other individuals and organizations in the private sector that provide various types of conflict resolution services. The U.S. Institute also maintains a publicly accessible roster of environmental mediators and facilitators (www.ecr.gov/referral_sp.htm).

IV. Perhaps your concern involves understanding a legal requirement. There are, of course, many ways to obtain the advice of lawyers knowledgeable about the NEPA process: the lead agency, private attorneys, and public interest attorneys. Build your own understanding by reading information on the NEPA net website at <http://www.NEPA.gov>. You may also call the General Counsel's office at the Council on Environmental Quality for assistance in interpreting NEPA's legal requirements (see Appendix D for contact information). You may also call CEQ for advice and assistance if you have tried to work with the lead agency but feel those efforts have been unsuccessful.

V. Finally, of course, there are both administrative and judicial remedies available. A few federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service, have an administrative appeals process. Each process is specific to that agency. If one exists, you must go through that process first. NEPA complaints are heard in federal court. Courts will generally decline to hear a complaint if there is an administrative remedy still open. If you are represented by a lawyer, you should consult with him or her about appropriate options or about communication with federal agencies.

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Please see Appendix D for contact information and other references that may be helpful in these situations.

Appendix A:

NEPA Net and How to Use It

NEPA net
<http://www.NEPA.gov>

NEPA net is the White House Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA website. It contains a wealth of information related to NEPA as it has developed over the years in agencies and through the courts. Guidance as well as studies and reports from CEQ can be accessed from the site; and information on NEPA training can also be found.

Under the "National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)" section there are several useful links including:

- The NEPA Statute
- Executive Orders
- CEQ Regulations for Implementing NEPA
- Individual Federal Agency Procedures for Implementing NEPA
- CEQ Guidance; topics include:
 - Environmental Conflict Resolution
 - Emergency Actions
 - Cumulative Effects Analysis
 - Cooperating Agencies
 - Purpose and Need
 - Forest Health Projects
 - Environmental Justice
 - Transboundary Impacts
 - Pollution Prevention
 - Scoping
 - Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ's NEPA Regulations
 - Wetlands
 - Prime Agricultural Land
 - Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Federal Agency NEPA Web Sites
- Federal NEPA Contacts
- State Information
- Tribal Information

The agency implementing procedures can be accessed here and are mentioned throughout the Citizen's Guide as an important part of the process. Appendix D includes a list of Federal NEPA Contacts which are periodically updated on the NEPA net site as this printed edition ages.

Appendix B:

The Federal Register and How to Use It

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>

The Federal Register is the official daily publication for rules, proposed rules, and notices of Federal agencies and organizations, as well as executive orders and other presidential documents. It is updated daily by 6 a.m. and is published Monday through Friday, except Federal holidays.

This is the location where you'll find notices from federal agencies regarding their NEPA actions. Information on the availability of documents, schedule of meetings, and decisions will be published here. In addition, EPA will publish a list of EISs that they have received from agencies each week and a summary of ratings on EISs that they have just reviewed.

The easiest way to pull up notices is to have as much information as possible. Key words such as the name of the agency, location of the action, date or date ranges of the publication are all helpful in the search.

Appendix C:

EPA's EIS Rating System

EPA's Environmental Impact Statement Rating System Criteria
<http://www.epa.gov/compliance/nepa/comments/ratings.html>

EPA has developed a set of criteria for rating draft EISs. The rating system provides a basis upon which EPA makes recommendations to the lead agency for improving the draft EIS.

- Rating the Environmental Impact of the Action
- Rating the Adequacy of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

RATING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE ACTION

- **LO (Lack of Objections)** The review has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes to the preferred alternative. The review may have disclosed opportunities for application of mitigation measures that could be accomplished with no more than minor changes to the proposed action.
- **EC (Environmental Concerns)** The review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative or application of mitigation measures that can reduce the environmental impact.
- **EO (Environmental Objections)** The review has identified significant environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to adequately protect the environment. Corrective measures may require substantial changes to the preferred alternative or consideration of some other project alternative (including the no action alternative or a new alternative). The basis for environmental Objections can include situations:
 1. *Where an action might violate or be inconsistent with achievement or maintenance of a national environmental standard;*
 2. *Where the Federal agency violates its own substantive environmental requirements that relate to EPA's areas of jurisdiction or expertise;*
 3. *Where there is a violation of an EPA policy declaration;*
 4. *Where there are no applicable standards or where applicable standards will not be violated but there is potential for significant environmental degradation that could be corrected by project modification or other feasible alternatives; or*
 5. *Where proceeding with the proposed action would set a precedent for future actions that collectively could result in significant environmental impacts.*

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- **EU (Environmentally Unsatisfactory)** The review has identified adverse environmental impacts that are of sufficient magnitude that EPA believes the proposed action must not proceed as proposed. The basis for an environmentally unsatisfactory determination consists of identification of environmentally objectionable impacts as defined above and one or more of the following conditions:
 1. *The potential violation of or inconsistency with a national environmental standard is substantive and/or will occur on a long-term basis;*
 2. *There are no applicable standards but the severity, duration, or geographical scope of the impacts associated with the proposed action warrant special attention; or*
 3. *The potential environmental impacts resulting from the proposed action are of national importance because of the threat to national environmental resources or to environmental policies.*

RATING THE ADEQUACY OF THE DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS)

- **1 (Adequate)** The draft EIS adequately sets forth the environmental impact(s) of the preferred alternative and those of the alternatives reasonably available to the project or action. No further analysis or data collection is necessary, but the reviewer may suggest the addition of clarifying language or information.
- **2 (Insufficient Information)** The draft EIS does not contain sufficient information to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment, or the reviewer has identified new reasonably available alternatives that are within the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which could reduce the environmental impacts of the proposal. The identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussion should be included in the final EIS.
- **3 (Inadequate)** The draft EIS does not adequately assess the potentially significant environmental impacts of the proposal, or the reviewer has identified new, reasonably available, alternatives, that are outside of the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which should be analyzed in order to reduce the potentially significant environmental impacts. The identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussions are of such a magnitude that they should have full public review at a draft stage. This rating indicates EPA's belief that the draft EIS does not meet the purposes of NEPA and/or the Section 309 review, and thus should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised draft EIS.

Appendix D:

List of Agency NEPA Contacts

The List of Federal NEPA Contacts is maintained on NEPA.net (<http://www.NEPA.gov>) and is updated on an ongoing basis. The complete list, current at the time of publication, will be printed in the Guide.

Appendix E:

Useful Definitions from the Council on Environmental Quality NEPA Implementing Regulations

40 CFR part 1508

Section 1508.4 Categorical exclusion.

"Categorical exclusion" means a category of actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment and which have been found to have no such effect in procedures adopted by a Federal agency in implementation of these regulations (Sec. 1507.3) and for which, therefore, neither an environmental assessment nor an environmental impact statement is required. An agency may decide in its procedures or otherwise, to prepare environmental assessments for the reasons stated in Sec. 1508.9 even though it is not required to do so. Any procedures under this section shall provide for extraordinary circumstances in which a normally excluded action may have a significant environmental effect.

Section 1508.5 Cooperating agency.

"Cooperating agency" means any Federal agency other than a lead agency which has jurisdiction by law or special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposal (or a reasonable alternative) for legislation or other major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. The selection and responsibilities of a cooperating agency are described in Sec. 1501.6. A State or local agency of similar qualifications or, when the effects are on a reservation, an Indian Tribe, may by agreement with the lead agency become a cooperating agency.

Section 1508.7 Cumulative impact.

"Cumulative impact" is the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time.

Section 1508.8 Effects.

"Effects" include:

- (a) Direct effects, which are caused by the action and occur at the same time and place.
- (b) Indirect effects, which are caused by the action and are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable. Indirect effects may include growth inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density or growth rate, and related effects on air and water and other natural systems, including ecosystems.

Effects and impacts as used in these regulations are synonymous. Effects includes ecological (such as the effects on natural resources and on the components, structures, and functioning of affected ecosystems), aesthetic, historic, cultural, economic, social, or health, whether direct, indirect, or cumulative. Effects may also include those resulting from actions which may have both beneficial and detrimental effects, even if on balance the agency believes that the effect will be beneficial.

Section 1508.9 Environmental assessment.

"Environmental assessment":

(a) Means a concise public document for which a Federal agency is responsible that serves to:

1. Briefly provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact.
2. Aid an agency's compliance with the Act when no environmental impact statement is necessary.
3. Facilitate preparation of a statement when one is necessary.

(b) Shall include brief discussions of the need for the proposal, of alternatives as required by section 102(2)(E), of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives, and a listing of agencies and persons consulted.

Section 1508.11 Environmental impact statement.

"Environmental impact statement" means a detailed written statement as required by section 102(2)(C) of the Act.

Section 1508.12 Federal agency.

"Federal agency" means all agencies of the Federal Government. It does not mean the Congress, the Judiciary, or the President, including the performance of staff functions for the President in his Executive Office. It also includes for purposes of these regulations States and units of general local government and Indian tribes assuming NEPA responsibilities under section 104(h) of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.

Section 1508.13 Finding of no significant impact.

"Finding of no significant impact" means a document by a Federal agency briefly presenting the reasons why an action, not otherwise excluded (Sec. 1508.4), will not have a significant effect on the human environment and for which an environmental impact statement therefore will not be prepared. It shall include the environmental assessment or a summary of it and shall note any other environmental documents related to it (Sec. 1501.7(a)(5)). If the assessment is included, the finding need not repeat any of the discussion in the assessment but may incorporate it by reference.

Section 1508.14 Human environment.

"Human environment" shall be interpreted comprehensively to include the natural and physical environment and the relationship of people with that environment. (See the definition of "effects" (Sec. 1508.8).) This means that economic or social effects are not intended by themselves to require preparation of an environmental impact statement. When an environmental impact statement is prepared and economic or social and natural or physical environmental effects are interrelated, then the environmental impact statement will discuss all of these effects on the human environment.

Section 1508.16 Lead agency.

"Lead agency" means the agency or agencies preparing or having taken primary responsibility for preparing the environmental impact statement.

Section 1508.18 Major Federal action.

"Major Federal action" includes actions with effects that may be major and which are potentially subject to Federal control and responsibility. Major reinforces but does not have a meaning independent of significantly (Sec. 1508.27). Actions include the circumstance where the responsible officials fail to act and that failure to act is reviewable by courts or administrative tribunals under the Administrative Procedure Act or other applicable law as agency action.

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(a) Actions include new and continuing activities, including projects and programs entirely or partly financed, assisted, conducted, regulated, or approved by federal agencies; new or revised agency rules, regulations, plans, policies, or procedures; and legislative proposals (Secs. 1506.8, 1508.17). Actions do not include funding assistance solely in the form of general revenue sharing funds, distributed under the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972, 31 U.S.C. 1221 et seq., with no Federal agency control over the subsequent use of such funds. Actions do not include bringing judicial or administrative civil or criminal enforcement actions.

(b) Federal actions tend to fall within one of the following categories:

1. Adoption of official policy, such as rules, regulations, and interpretations adopted pursuant to the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C. 551 et seq.; treaties and international conventions or agreements; formal documents establishing an agency's policies which will result in or substantially alter agency programs.
2. Adoption of formal plans, such as official documents prepared or approved by federal agencies which guide or prescribe alternative uses of Federal resources, upon which future agency actions will be based.
3. Adoption of programs, such as a group of concerted actions to implement a specific policy or plan; systematic and connected agency decisions allocating agency resources to implement a specific statutory program or executive directive.
4. Approval of specific projects, such as construction or management activities located in a defined geographic area. Projects include actions approved by permit or other regulatory decision as well as federal and federally assisted activities.

Section 1508.20 Mitigation.

"Mitigation" includes:

- (a) Avoiding the impact altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action.
- (b) Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of the action and its implementation.
- (c) Rectifying the impact by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment.
- (d) Reducing or eliminating the impact over time by preservation and maintenance operations during the life of the action.

- (e) Compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments.

Section 1508.22 Notice of intent.

"Notice of intent" means a notice that an environmental impact statement will be prepared and considered. The notice shall briefly:

- (a) Describe the proposed action and possible alternatives.
- (b) Describe the agency's proposed scoping process including whether, when, and where any scoping meeting will be held.
- (c) State the name and address of a person within the agency who can answer questions about the proposed action and the environmental impact statement.

Section 1508.23 Proposal.

"Proposal" exists at that stage in the development of an action when an agency subject to the Act has a goal and is actively preparing to make a decision on one or more alternative means of accomplishing that goal and the effects can be meaningfully evaluated. Preparation of an environmental impact statement on a proposal should be timed (Sec. 1502.5) so that the final statement may be completed in time for the statement to be included in any recommendation or report on the proposal. A proposal may exist in fact as well as by agency declaration that one exists.

Section 1508.25 Scope.

Scope consists of the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts to be considered in an environmental impact statement. The scope of an individual statement may depend on its relationships to other statements (Secs. 1502.20 and 1508.28). To determine the scope of environmental impact statements, agencies shall consider 3 types of actions, 3 types of alternatives, and 3 types of impacts. They include:

- (a) Actions (other than unconnected single actions) which may be:
 - 1. Connected actions, which means that they are closely related and therefore should be discussed in the same impact statement. Actions are connected if they:
 - (i) Automatically trigger other actions which may require environmental impact statements.
 - (ii) Cannot or will not proceed unless other actions are taken previously or simultaneously.

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(iii) Are interdependent parts of a larger action and depend on the larger action for their justification.

2. Cumulative actions, which when viewed with other proposed actions have cumulatively significant impacts and should therefore be discussed in the same impact statement.
3. Similar actions, which when viewed with other reasonably foreseeable or proposed agency actions, have similarities that provide a basis for evaluating their environmental consequences together, such as common timing or geography. An agency may wish to analyze these actions in the same impact statement. It should do so when the best way to assess adequately the combined impacts of similar actions or reasonable alternatives to such actions is to treat them in a single impact statement.

(b) Alternatives, which include:

4. No action alternative.
5. Other reasonable courses of actions.
6. Mitigation measures (not in the proposed action).

(c) Impacts, which may be: (1) Direct; (2) indirect; (3) cumulative.

Section 1508.27 Significantly.

"Significantly" as used in NEPA requires considerations of both context and intensity:

(a) Context. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant.

(b) Intensity. This refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following should be considered in evaluating intensity:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.
2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.
3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

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5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.
7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.
8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.
10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

[43 FR 56003, Nov. 29, 1978; 44 FR 874, Jan. 3, 1979]

Section 1508.28 Tiering.

"Tiering" refers to the coverage of general matters in broader environmental impact statements (such as national program or policy statements) with subsequent narrower statements or environmental analyses (such as regional or basinwide program statements or ultimately site-specific statements) incorporating by reference the general discussions and concentrating solely on the issues specific to the statement subsequently prepared.

Tiering is appropriate when the sequence of statements or analyses is:

- (a) From a program, plan, or policy environmental impact statement to a program, plan, or policy statement or analysis of lesser scope or to a site-specific statement or analysis.
- (b) From an environmental impact statement on a specific action at an early stage (such as need and site selection) to a supplement (which is preferred) or a subsequent statement or analysis at a later stage (such as environmental mitigation). Tiering in such cases is appropriate when it helps the lead agency to focus on the issues which are ripe for decision and exclude from consideration issues already decided or not yet ripe.