At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We developed this report to identify current voluntary program management challenges. Our goal was to determine whether (1) the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has consistent Agency-wide policies that govern voluntary programs; (2) EPA's definitions of voluntary programs are understood by its staff and the public; and (3) EPA has the necessary processes to consistently develop, test, and review these programs.

Background

EPA increasingly relies on voluntary programs as tools for protecting the environment. EPA's 54 headquarters voluntary programs are diverse, reportedly providing a variety of benefits to several different customer groups, including some non-governmental organizations and the public.

Voluntary Programs Could Benefit from Internal Policy Controls and a Systematic Management Approach

What We Found

EPA has no Agency-wide policies that require voluntary programs to collect comparable data or conduct regular program evaluations. Without a consistent set of policies, EPA cannot determine the overall environmental impact of its voluntary programs. EPA lacks internal controls that outline specific ways to determine the success or failure of EPA's overall voluntary program effort. As a result, EPA cannot determine which voluntary programs are succeeding or failing. EPA also cannot determine which programs should serve as models for future program development.

EPA program offices have difficulty applying the current voluntary program definitions. This is because the scope of EPA's voluntary program definitions has changed drastically in the last 4 years. Depending on the source, the number of EPA voluntary programs varies between 54 and 133. However, the actual number of voluntary programs has not significantly changed. Instead, changes to program definitions simply expanded the scope of the populations. This problem can confuse EPA staff, participants, and the public.

EPA does not have a system to develop, test, and market new programs. EPA also lacks a system to evaluate existing programs, and may benefit from adopting a research and development model. Without a consistent management system, EPA cannot ensure that programs have the necessary elements to demonstrate their impact. Further, EPA lacks a systematic method to design, evaluate, and model programs that are effective at achieving environmental results.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the Deputy Administrator provide the Associate Administrator for the Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation with the authority to develop, implement, and oversee mandatory Agency-wide management policies for voluntary programs. Further, those mandatory policies should implement a systematic management approach similar to a research and development model, and develop specific definitions or criteria that outline the general intent and function for the groups or categories of EPA voluntary programs that are currently implemented.

Agency respondents generally concurred with our recommendations. However, we remain uncertain exactly how the Agency plans to address and resolve each of our individual recommendations. We therefore consider our report recommendations to be open and unresolved.