



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) began this project to identify issues in the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program that would be suitable for future evaluations. Our preliminary review revealed issues for Agency management to review at this time concerning TMDL program data and performance measures.

Background

TMDLs are designed to play a critical role in restoring impaired waters by calculating pollutant loads consistent with water quality standards. A TMDL specifies the amount of a pollutant that a water body may receive and still meet water quality standards. EPA is responsible for working with States to develop TMDLs to address impaired waters. EPA had approved over 24,000 TMDLs through Fiscal Year (FY) 2006. To achieve environmental results, TMDLs must be implemented through National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits or best management practices.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2007/20070919-2007-P-00036.pdf

Total Maximum Daily Load Program Needs Better Data and Measures to Demonstrate Environmental Results

What We Found

EPA does not have comprehensive information on the outcomes of the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program nationwide, nor national data on TMDL implementation activities. Although EPA and States are responsible for implementing point source TMDLs, EPA cannot identify all of the permitted dischargers that should receive or have received wasteload allocations. Measuring nonpoint source TMDL implementation is difficult because it is highly dependent on State and local stakeholders, and EPA does not have statutory authority to regulate nonpoint sources. EPA's lack of information prevents the Agency from determining if TMDL implementation activities are occurring in a timely manner, and the extent to which TMDLs are restoring impaired waters.

EPA measures the pace at which TMDLs are developed and approved. For the last 2 years, EPA and States have exceeded goals for these measures. EPA has begun to take steps to measure program results and improve program data, has sponsored several studies of TMDL implementation, and is studying additional TMDL results measures. Developing meaningful measures of the environmental results of water quality programs is challenging. However, EPA needs to provide more management direction to improve its ability to assess how well this critical program is functioning.

The TMDL and surface water quality performance measures we reviewed do not provide clear and complete metrics of the program's accomplishments. Since the TMDL program did not have any outcome measures, we reviewed the two TMDL output measures along with two of EPA's annually reported surface water quality measures that are broader than, but related to, the TMDL program. All of these measures are unclear, and some are inconsistently reported in EPA's publications.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the Assistant Administrator for the Office of Water:

- Require regions to ensure that the National TMDL Tracking System is complete.
- Report information on TMDL implementation activities and on the water quality improvements associated with TMDLs.
- Clarify terminology, activities included, and other elements of the TMDL development measures, and the surface water program's efficiency and effectiveness measures.