## Successes In Stewardship

August 2012

# Online Tools Help to Streamline the Environmental Review Process

Several Federal agencies have introduced new online information management tools that allow them to streamline the processes associated with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) has recognized three of these tools under CEQ's NEPA Pilot Program for their ability to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the NEPA process. CEQ also recommended that other agencies introduce similar tools to streamline the NEPA process throughout the Federal government. The three tools selected as part of this pilot program are the National Park Service's (NPS) Planning, Environment & Public Comment (PEPC), the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) Electronic Modernization of NEPA (eMNEPA), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) NEPAssist. PEPC, eMNEPA, and NEPAssist have allowed these agencies to coordinate timelines and task schedules, share data, interact with the public, and review documents through common, Internet-based platforms. As there is a constant push to shorten the time to complete NEPA for transportation projects, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is developing its own e-NEPA tool that, like PEPC, eMNEPA, and NEPAssist, will enable FHWA to introduce greater clarity, speed, and collaboration to the NEPA process.

## NEPA Pilot Program Tools

### PEPC

Since 2005, NPS has been streamlining the NEPA and planning public comment processes across its parks through its online PEPC interface. PEPC allows the public to access environmental and planning documents, including scoping letters, meeting notices, and timelines, as well as submit direct comments on documents available for review. The tool provides a centralized location for NPS officials at Headquarters and at individual parks to organize and review public comments, thereby streamlining the public review process. This is a major improvement over the previous system, in which each park managed and administered its own process, often resulting in delays and confusion among the public as to where and how to submit comments. NPS has used PEPC to collect comments on projects such as the Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan, which will determine a preferred alternative for managing vehicle use on the 92-mile Denali Park Road for the next 15 to 20 years.
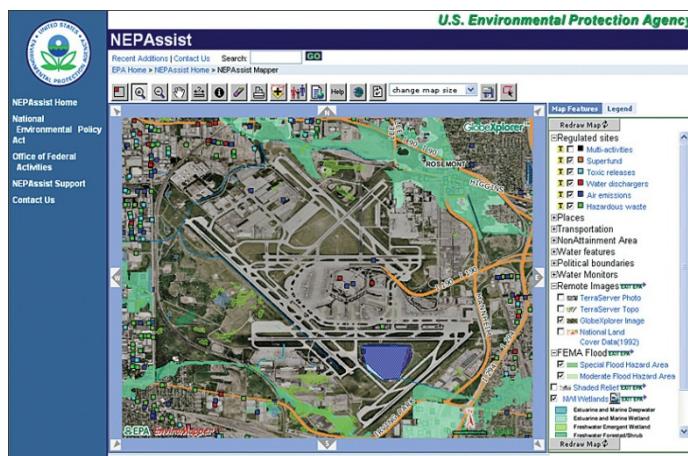


A project in Saguaro National Park is currently open for comment and review through PEPC. Users can access information about the project before offering their views. (Courtesy of NPS)

NPS's success with PEPC has led other Federal agencies to utilize the platform in their own NEPA processes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have partnered to use PEPC to solicit comments on the draft Missouri River Ecosystem Restoration Plan. In addition, a team led by FWS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has used PEPC in the public comment phase of the draft Gulf Spill Early Restoration Plan, which is part of the Federal government's response to the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

### eMNEPA

USFS's eMNEPA tool is changing the way the Agency approaches the environmental review process. eMNEPA allows USFS staff to electronically manage planning, appeals and litigation, distribution of environmental review materials,

maintenance of documents, and administration of the public comment process. eMNEPA provides local forest managers with a standardized workflow process, which has proven invaluable to those unfamiliar with the NEPA process. Before introducing eMNEPA in 2004, USFS's environmental review processes were decentralized and labor intensive. eMNEPA reduces the amount of time that staff spend on NEPA reviews, freeing up time for critical USFS tasks. For

instance, many public comments that were previously sorted manually can now be organized automatically and the public can submit comments via a web form as an alternative to email, direct mail, and fax. The modernization of the NEPA process has enabled USFS to more efficiently and transparently implement policies that balance the needs of all stakeholders.

USFS continues to increase eMNEPA's functionality in response to feedback from the public and USFS employees. The latest improvements aim to increase public participation in USFS actions. The public now has online access to all Schedules of Proposed Actions, a reading room with project-specific public comments, and the ability to download NEPA-related documents. USFS can also use eMNEPA to track public input throughout the environmental review process from pre-scoping through the Record of Decision, providing a transparent and efficient public review process.



eMNEPA's Unit Management Screen allows users to manage and track relevant NEPA procedures. (Courtesy of USFS)

## NEPAssist

EPA deployed NEPAssist nationally in 2008 to increase the accessibility of its growing collection of environmental data to those who rely on its data for the NEPA process. This Internet-based tool displays environmental and other relevant data from EPA's Geographic Information System (GIS) databases. It also allows users to generate customized maps and reports of relevant NEPA-related factors such as wetlands and non-attainment areas for a given geographical area. NEPAssist reduces the length of time needed for project sponsors to gather, input, and analyze relevant data in GIS and other mapping tools used during environmental review. By allowing users to quickly and easily assess environmental issues at the initial stages of project development, NEPAssist provides users with the tools to better manage the NEPA

process. Several metropolitan planning organizations in Texas have become national leaders in utilizing NEPAssist for their transportation corridor studies.



NEPAssist allows users to generate maps that display data, such as flood zones surrounding Chicago O'Hare International Airport. (Courtesy of EPA)

NEPAssist enables EPA to streamline its data-gathering and management procedures by utilizing existing project-specific data collected and maintained by Headquarters and regional offices. This allows EPA staff to easily share data sets throughout the Agency, promoting the collaborative use of these resources.

EPA is devoting considerable resources to continuously review and enhance NEPAssist. An internal EPA work group meets monthly to discuss suggestions from users for adding relevant data, improving current data sources, and increasing user functionality. EPA is currently working on expanding the tool's functionality to generate printable maps of user-defined geographies and adding data layers about the Wild and Scenic River system and the 2010 Census.

## Other Tools
### e-NEPA
FHWA's e-NEPA is a new electronic tool, currently in its pilot phase, designed to increase collaboration between State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) and FHWA in the NEPA process. A direct outgrowth of FHWA's Every Day Counts initiative, which is designed to streamline project delivery schedules, e-NEPA will allow FHWA and its State partners to efficiently submit and collect comments on NEPA documents, schedule tasks and timelines, and interface for NEPA-related compliance, increasing the accountability, reliability, and timeliness of the NEPA process. FHWA expects e-NEPA to standardize the information-sharing process currently conducted by paper and email, which can introduce uncertainty and delays into the environmental review process.

As a part of its e-NEPA beta testing, FHWA is piloting the tool with the State DOTs in Arizona, Connecticut, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin. Although some State DOTs have their own internal systems to manage the NEPA process, a standardized system across the U.S. would allow for more efficient collaboration. FHWA will incorporate comments from the pilot project and expects to roll out the system nationwide in 2013.

## Next Steps

NPS, USFS, EPA, and FHWA are leaders in developing collaborative and streamlined approaches to the environmental review process. Since announcing the first pilot of its NEPA Pilot Program in August 2011, CEQ has announced additional pilot projects at U.S. DOT and USFS that will also help streamline the environmental review processes across the Federal government. Moving forward, the Federal government will continue to improve public participation and the quality of Federal agency administration of NEPA.

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## Look What's New!

- The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation recently issued guidance that addresses common questions about how project proponents should consider Native American traditional cultural landscapes in the review process under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. For more information, visit http://www.achp.gov/natl-qa.pdf.

- On July 20, FHWA released an updated version of the Section 4(f) Policy Paper to provide information about applying the regulation, which requires the consideration of park and recreational lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites in transportation project development.

- On Tuesday, August 21 from 2:30 – 4:00 PM EDT, FHWA will offer a webcast on its recently completed research project, "Alternative Uses of Highway Right-of-Way." Presenters will provide an overview of findings from the research, including an exploration of how select State DOTs have begun to accommodate alternative energy technologies and alternative fuel facilities in highway right-of-way. For more information or to register, click here.

- FHWA is offering a training webinar titled "Advancing Livability with GIS" on August 9, 2012 from 1:00 – 2:30 PM EDT. The training will help planning and development practitioners to better understand the potential applications of geospatial technologies for advancing livability. For more information or to register, click here.

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