

Defining factors that contribute to NEPA success

Since 2006, the [NEPA for the 21st Century Research Initiative](#) has examined how the Forest Service implements the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). One stream of this research has explored how we, as an agency, define the purpose of NEPA, how we define success related to NEPA, and the techniques we value most at different levels within the agency. This stream of research has revealed that no singular conceptualization of the NEPA process exists within the agency. However, it has also revealed a number of hypotheses people within the agency hold regarding what works best in the NEPA process.

The current effort represents a final survey of agency employees in this series. It tests many of our internally held hypotheses about NEPA processes by directly linking specific practices to particular outcomes. The survey addresses this broad question:

What practices and techniques within NEPA processes tend to lead to different types of outcomes, as defined by Forest Service employees, across various contexts?

Scope of this survey

The survey, administered entirely by Virginia Tech, will be made available online for approximately 900 Forest Service employees who served as interdisciplinary team (IDT) leaders or were the responsible officials on projects completed in 2007 to 2009. Two questionnaires will be available: one for IDT leaders (which should take about 30 minutes to complete) and one for responsible line officers (which should take fewer than 10 minutes to complete). The survey will be available online for 3 to 4 weeks to encourage participation.

Survey questions are designed to uncover specific aspects of the NEPA processes (techniques, leadership styles, team interactions, etc.) as well as team leaders' and responsible officials' perspectives on various project outcomes. Response analyses will help us determine which practices are most successful under varying circumstances.

This study will be the first of its kind to identify specific practices at the IDT level that lead toward better or worse outcomes in Forest Service NEPA processes. The results may be used to inform best practices for many aspects of Forest Service NEPA processes and could have meaningful implications for training. Not only are we exploring the meaning of NEPA process success for Forest Service employees, we're also exploring which paths lead to success and which do not.

Relationship with other data collection efforts

The [NEPA for the 21st Century Research Initiative](#) has undertaken several data collection efforts over the past couple of years. The results of many of these efforts have been published in reports and papers. In 2008, about 3,300 employees from all levels of the Forest Service completed a survey, also administered by Virginia Tech, which identified the most widely held views about purposes of NEPA within the agency, agency definitions of success, and valued practices. This survey provides the basis for the current effort, which will link actual practices with perceived outcomes.

Additional comparative studies, conducted by Oregon State University, Indiana University, and Virginia Tech have used personal interviews with a small sample of Forest Service and other government employees to gather information about how different organizations develop and provide direction about their environmental planning processes. A consultant conducted 12 in depth interviews with district rangers to examine factors that influence their decision processes. Indiana University researchers explored the Forest Service's intranet to examine how the agency currently uses knowledge transfer technology.

Relationship with the NEPA feasibility study

The NEPA feasibility study, completed in 2007, also collected a wealth of information about the agency's NEPA process. The study compiled data from nearly 8,500 employees about their participation in the NEPA process. Hundreds of employees provided comments in response to the study's report. The research initiative will use this information to further our understanding of the agency's environmental planning process.