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NEPA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: LINKING RESEARCH TO MANAGEMENT

HEIDI HUBER-STEARNES AND MARIAH ACTON

In response to growing concerns around the management and implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Pacific Northwest Research Station and Ecosystem Management Coordination in the Washington Office launched the “NEPA for the 21st Century” initiative in 2006. The initiative explored ways for improving how the Forest Service executes NEPA responsibilities. Policy analysts, academics, consultants, and other professionals examined agency NEPA practices to uncover opportunities to improve the processes and outcomes associated with compliance. This research synthesizes the studies, publications, agency learning opportunities, and participants’ perspectives on the initiative.

Approach

We reviewed 24 research publications and interviewed 22 individuals related to the initiative or currently active in Forest Service NEPA activities.

Results: Document review

Agency structure and culture can make it challenging to standardize and implement approaches. The Forest Service’s organizational dynamics (culture, values, norms), multiple-use mission, and decentralized bureaucratic structure affect the agency’s approach to NEPA. The decentralized structure can cause goal incongruence between the Washington Office and field operations, leading to inconsistent local implementation and impacting efforts to standardize the NEPA process.

Human resources are integral to the quality of NEPA processes. Staff training, line officer leadership, and ID team formation are critical to the quality of NEPA processes. The agency’s emphasis on hiring and training for technical skills is frequently at odds with skills considered central to conducting a NEPA process, such as team management, interpersonal and written communication, and public involvement coordination.

Science is perceived as central to NEPA processes, but the agency can be hesitant to innovate.

Although the use of best available science is widely supported, perceptions of its role and importance differed between ID team members and line officers. In addition, concerns about public involvement and litigation often limited the adoption of new scientific approaches, including adaptive management.

Public involvement is driven by diverse agency values and skills and external stakeholder relationships. Although public involvement was the most frequently discussed topic in the publications, agency views on it ranged: some viewed it as an obligatory task tangential to NEPA and others saw it as a central exercise fulfilling the intent of NEPA and the agency’s mission.

Concerns for making a project legally defensible can create unclear NEPA documents. Some research found that Environmental Assessments (EAs) and Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) were difficult to read and often missed the intention laid out by CEQ Regulations and the Forest

Service. This was due to beliefs about making these documents legally defensible, for example, by conducting more intensive EIS processes, even when evidence does not suggest this is effective.

NEPA as a process and objective is not consistently understood across the agency. NEPA practitioners often did not have a common definition for success or a shared understanding of the role of NEPA in the agency. Perceptions of success ranged from effectively disclosing and appeasing the public to actively improving land management by minimizing impacts. Agency personnel were divided on whether NEPA is a useful tool for planning and decision-making or a bureaucratic hurdle.

Fear of litigation remains a dominant concern for decision-making in NEPA processes. Across research topics, the threat of litigation drove decisions, behavior, and perceptions. This fear often led to defensive approaches such as disingenuous public involvement efforts, excessive scientific analysis, aversion to integrating new scientific methods, and the “bulletproofing” of documents.

Results: Interviews

The NEPA Initiative prompted focused exploration of a complicated topic and leveraged expertise to advance agency efforts. The initiative allowed researchers to explore agency-specific research with an applied focus intended to inform management. The initiative deliberately used external researchers to provide new perspectives, and feedback between the research and on-the-ground management needs was a unique strength.

The initiative provided valuable engagement points for agency personnel. Venues created by the initiative cultivated a community of practice for NEPA practitioners across forests and regions. eForest offers a place to read and post NEPA questions online, and monthly NEPA Knowledge Café webinars extend information across the agency. Learning Teams focus on timely and relevant topics such as adaptive management, landscape-level planning, and focused EAs.

There are opportunities to build on the initiative's work. Interviewees identified ways for the initiative to have an ongoing positive impact on NEPA implementation in the Forest Service: 1) clearly branding and packaging initiative efforts and products; 2) making initiative research more accessible to encourage quick application and action; and 3) more directly integrating best practices learned through the initiative into improving NEPA training for practitioners.

The bridging of research and management created space for agency personnel to explore new questions and approaches. The initiative brought together a diversity of people to inform NEPA within and across the agency by allocating funding and resources towards asking actionable questions about NEPA. The variety of approaches provided multiple forms and venues for engagement, learning, and inter-agency communication.



Implications

This research summarizes some key considerations of NEPA within the agency from a research perspective, while also drawing attention to what initiative participants got out of their participation. NEPA in the 21st Century impacted how the agency thinks, communicates about, and conducts NEPA, in both direct and indirect ways. The initiative also provided valuable lessons for future models of actionable problem-oriented research within the agency.

More information

Additional information, accomplishments, and findings are available at the NEPA in the 21st Century project webpage:

<https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/about/programs/fsd/NEPA/>

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