

Public involvement usually leads to better environmental decision making

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When done correctly, public participation improves the quality of federal agencies' decisions about the environment, says a new report from the National Research Council. Well-managed public involvement also increases the legitimacy of decisions in the eyes of those affected by them, which makes it more likely that the decisions will be implemented effectively. Agencies should recognize public participation as valuable to their objectives, not just as a formality required by the law, the report says. It details principles and approaches agencies can use to successfully involve the public.

In response to legislation and pressure from citizens' groups over the last three decades, federal agencies have taken steps to include the public in a wide range of environmental decisions, such as how best to clean up Superfund sites or manage federal forest lands. Although some form of public participation is often required by law, agencies usually have broad discretion about the extent of that involvement. Approaches vary widely, from holding public information-gathering meetings to forming advisory groups to actively including citizens in making and implementing decisions.

Proponents of public participation argue that those who must live with the outcome of an environmental decision should have some influence on it. Critics maintain that public participation slows decision making and can lower its quality by including people unfamiliar with the science involved. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Food and Drug Administration, and departments of Energy and Agriculture asked the

Research Council to assess whether public participation achieves desirable outcomes, and under what conditions.

Substantial evidence indicates that public participation is more likely to improve than to undermine the quality of decisions, the report says. Although scientists are usually in the best position to analyze the effects of environmental processes and actions, good analysis often requires information about local conditions, which is most likely to come from residents. Moreover, public values and concerns are important to frame the scientific questions asked, to ensure that the analyses address all of the issues relevant to those affected.

Studies show that public participation also tends to increase the legitimacy of agency decisions, which in turn raises the likelihood that they can be implemented effectively and efficiently. And the process itself builds citizens' knowledge of the scientific aspects of environmental issues, which increases their ability to engage in future decisions.

The report recommends ways agencies can manage public participation effectively. A key factor in having a good outcome is matching the process to the context; there is no one right way to design public participation for all environmental issues. An agency should make clear at the outset how it intends to use the public's input, and should commit adequate staff and resources to public participation efforts. And agencies and the public should collaborate to identify difficulties that might arise during the participatory process, select ways to address them, monitor the results, and adjust procedures as needed.

To ensure the quality of the science, the report recommends independent review of official analyses by outside experts who are credible to the parties involved. The process should also allow for the reconsideration of past conclusions in light of new information and analysis.

In some cases, efforts to involve the public have made matters worse, the report notes. Some participatory processes have functioned as a tactic to divert the public's energy away from criticism and into activities considered safe by an agency. This use of public participation, which ignores conflicts on important issues, is counterproductive in the long run, the report says. And participation convened as a superficial formality or without adequate support by decision makers increases public distrust of government.

Source: National Academy of Sciences

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