

Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents

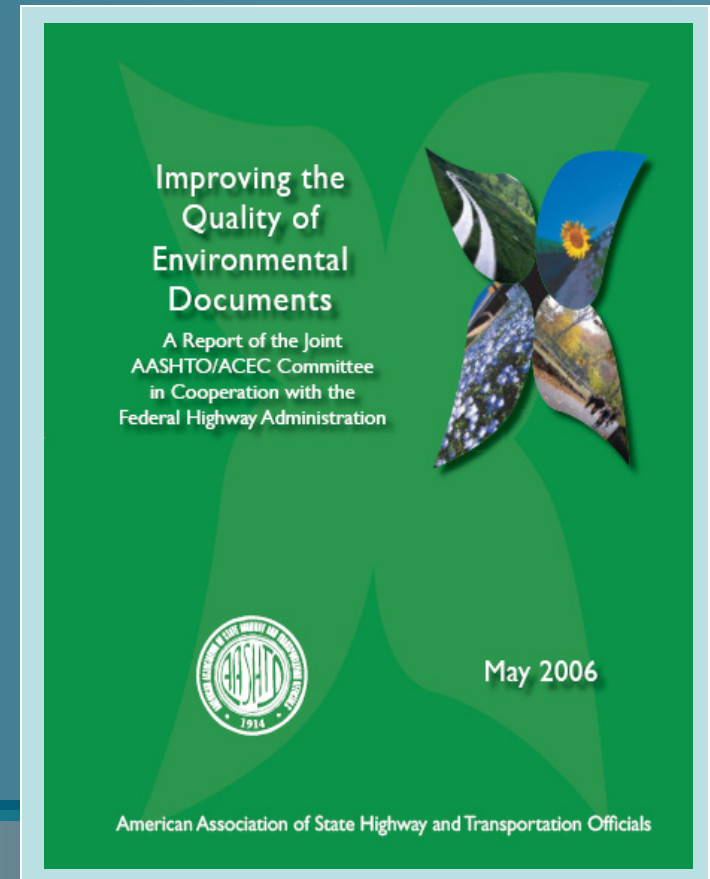
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Improving Environmental Documents

✦ Joint AASHTO/ ACEC Committee in Cooperation with FHWA – May 2006

✦ Issues

- Quality and clarity
- Legal sufficiency
- Training and education



“Common Complaints”

- ✦ Large, wordy, complex, cumbersome
- ✦ Lack of consistent format, approach
- ✦ Legally “air-tight” vs. “Reader-friendly”
- ✦ “Look” vs. Application
- ✦ Lack of coordination between multiple authors



Areas of Emphasis

- ✦ Core Principles of Improving Quality
- ✦ Content and Process
- ✦ Techniques
- ✦ Legal Sufficiency

CEQ—Regulations for Implementing NEPA

Agencies shall focus on significant environmental issues and alternatives and shall reduce paperwork and the accumulation of extraneous background data. Statements shall be concise, clear, and to the point, and shall be supported by evidence that the agency has made the necessary environmental analyses.

40 C.F.R. Sec. 1502.1
Purpose.



Core Principles of Improving Quality

✦ Principle 1:

Tell the story. . . make it easy to understand

✦ Principle 2:

Keep it brief, clear and concise

✦ Principle 3:

Ensure legal sufficiency



Content and Process

- ✦ Provide a clear, logical, consistent theme
 - “What is the document trying to accomplish?”
- ✦ Plain, “lay-man’s” terms
 - Avoid/ minimize acronyms
 - Use figures or tables
 - Focus on information relevant to decision
- ✦ Make use of summaries and overviews
- ✦ Use a “reader friendly” format



“If only technically trained individuals are likely to understand a particular discussion, then it should go in the appendix; a plain language summary of the analysis and conclusions of that technical discussion should go in the text of the EIS”

-CEQ, March 23, 1981

(emphasis added)



Techniques

“Question and Answer” Headers

⊕ Purpose and Need =

“Why do we need the project?”

⊕ Alternatives Considered =

“What is an alternative?”

⊕ Impacts and Mitigation =

“How does the alternative effect resource X?”



Techniques

“Reader-Friendly” Format

Main Body

Current Approach

Purpose & Need

Alternatives

Affected Environment

Environmental
Consequences

(Section 4(f))

Comments Coordination &
Public Involvement

New Blueprint

Purpose & Need

Alternatives Considered

Environmental Resources,
Impacts, and Mitigation

Public Comments and
Agency Coordination

Section 4(f) Chapter *

Comparison and Selection
of Alternatives

**Include 4(f) in main body if 4(f)
issues are significant*



Techniques

“Reader-Friendly” Format – What is Different?

+ Alternatives Considered

- Scoping Process
- Methods of Screening
- Results of Screening
- What Alternatives are Carried Forward
- Why Were Alternatives NOT Carried Forward
- How do Alternatives Achieve Purpose and Need



Techniques

“Reader-Friendly” Format – What is Different?

✦ Environmental Resources, Impacts and Mitigation

- Combines “Affected Environment” and “Environmental Consequences”
- Discusses each resource in total
- Eliminates need to cross-reference
- Focuses on information and analysis relevant to decision making process



Techniques

“Reader-Friendly” Format – What is Different?

+ Comparison and Selection of Alternatives

- Advantages and Disadvantages
- Rationale for selection of preferred alternative(s)
- What did all of that data mean?
- How was it used to select an alternative?



Legal Sufficiency

- ✦ Identify and explain key assumptions
- ✦ Describe methods used to develop data
- ✦ Use effective visuals to present key results
- ✦ Don't just summarize . . . analyze
- ✦ Document compliance with regulatory requirements
- ✦ Provide clear overview of major issues
- ✦ Review data for internal consistency



“The FHWA fully supports the findings and recommendations included in the report. . . [t]he approach outlined in the report is consistent with FHWA’s current guidance on environmental documentation (T 6640.8A).”

Frederick Skaer – Director

Office of Project Development and Environmental Review



Memorandum

Subject: **INFORMATION:** Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents

Date: July 31, 2006

From: Frederick Skaer, Director, Office of Project Development and Environmental Review

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Frederick Skaer", is written over the "From:" line.

Reply to
Attn. of: HEPE

To: Directors of Field Services
Division Administrators



Links

✦ Improving the Quality of NEPA Documents

<http://environment.transportation.org/>

✦ WSDOT Reader-Friendly Document Tool Kit

<http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/environment/compliance/ReaderFriendly.htm>

✦ Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement (Washington DOT)

<http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/Viaduct/>

✦ Southern Corridor (Utah DOT)

<http://www.udot.utah.gov/sc/>

✦ Reno Railroad Corridor (Nevada DOT)

<http://www.cityofreno.com/gov/retrac/library/feis.php>