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CQ223

Having been involved in the NEPA process in the West for the last 17 years, I have seen the NEPA process when it has worked well and when it has worked not so well. In its purest sense, NEPA's intent was and continues to be to provide decision makers with more and better information to make better decisions. The process is sound and time tested. When the process has not worked, one area that clearly has affected this is the lack (of desire) of extensive and upfront (and ongoing) public and agency input in a cooperative environment. Still to this date, the lead agencies and project proponents fail to see the benefit of this; in fact, in many instances, it seems there is a fear factor about letting agencies and public know what is going on. This inevitably leads to more energy expended in a confrontational setting at the end of the process; where it is highlighted in the press! When the process has worked well is when the same amount of energy is expended upfront. The results are commonly very positive and undertaken in a cooperative setting. And I can identify many such examples.

Another area affecting the effectiveness of NEPA is a function of staffing. With administrations in place, such as the one in place now, federal staff positions for handling NEPA keep diminishing. In the late 90s of exceptional growth, the number of projects went sky high (all with fast track schedules), yet the number of staff able to handle the projects went down. In these current slower times, I suspect NEPA will not be so much of an issue. Similarly, the wages paid to federal and state staff are so low that many are forced into early retirement and the turnover rate is very high. In California for example, the average years of experience for Senior NEPA specialists in state government is five years; FIVE YEARS. This is further hampered by the lack of project continuity due to turnover.

A major problem is project changes. Study after study clearly show that the NEPA process is NOT the culprit in project delays. Substantial changes to the proposed action and alternatives late in the process cause analysts to revisit conclusions and contributes to public skepticism.

Finally, as to the supposed gridlock in the West. Maricopa County, AZ is the fastest growing County in the country. Nevada is booming. Sacramento... house after house while ag lands disappear. Seattle... booming. The only gridlock I see is the aging infrastructure such as our roadways and perhaps in a few porkbarrel projects supported by strong lobbies. As to NEPA itself, the number of projects that successfully complete the process so to speak is extremely high. Those that reach the papers (the logging industry for example) have difficulty because they should have difficulty. They are very controversial with potential ramifications to adversely harm the natural AND human environments. Thank you.