

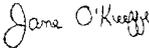
CQ456

ASSOCIATION OF OREGON COUNTIES

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September 18, 2002

Attention: National Environmental Policy Act Task Force (CEQ)

From: Commissioner Jane O'Keeffe, President 

Subject: Response to your request for comments.

AOC represents all 36 Oregon county governments. We are pleased that the Council on Environmental Quality is exploring potential improvements to the National Environmental Policy Act. We offer comments based on our experience and expertise as locally elected officials with extensive, important, and long-standing business relationships with federal natural resources and environmental agencies, and a commitment to effective and productive public participation in important policy decision-making.

Your question A.1. Our counties typically rely on the federal agency to provide information we need to review and prepare comments on NEPA analyses. Occasionally on matters of great importance to the local area, a county or group of counties will commit limited resources to retain an expert to take a "fresh" look at data and studies from the agencies and other sources, such as universities.

Q. A.2. Compatibility of GIS systems and data formats continues to be a challenge. Coordination among federal agencies should be mandated.

Q. A.5. Our preferred method of conveying and receiving information about proposed actions is face-to-face with decision-makers to discuss the project and potential environmental consequences. As government-to-government collaborator with the federal agency, this method saves resources and permits us to delve quickly into the nuances of the project. We receive hard copies and often have access to data bases and analysis as needed.

Q. A.6. Certain counties, e.g., Union, Wallowa, and Jackson, have formed citizen advisory panels to provide advice and recommendations to

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commissioners regarding federal land management issues. Collaboration within the advisory panels has been a successful tool.

Computer modeling used by the Forest Service, for example, can show potential consequences of their proposals on the landscape. This tool is effective, particularly to inform the public.

Q. B.1. Counties, particularly those in rural areas, simply do not have the resources to become a joint-lead or cooperating agency. However, our ability to assist the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project is instructive. Working through four state associations of counties, counties in the Basin were represented at the table from the beginning of the process, discussing each phase and providing expertise where appropriate. Federal project managers will confirm that county participation resulting in a better product - better written and understood, with the genuine issues clarified. With federal commitment to provide resources to counties where needed, counties can continue to be productive and effective partners as joint-lead or cooperating agencies.

Q. C.1. Recurring land management actions best lend themselves to programmatic analysis and tiering, e.g., road maintenance, forest stand brush removal and small tree thinning that does not use heavy machinery, and use of prescribed fire. These types of activities on national forests follow stringent guidelines to ensure environmental standards are met. These activities should be allowed to proceed with minimal environmental documentation so long as programmatic standards are designed into the project. Adequate research and information is available to decision-makers to permit these low ground-disturbance projects to move forward under larger landscape programmatic reviews.

On the other hand, broadscale management guidelines do not work well if prescribed. They often do not fit site-specific conditions, and hamstring critical local flexibility.

Q. D.4. Adaptive management and monitoring are critical means to incorporate the ever-growing body of knowledge about natural processes. Given limitations in resources, however, an adaptive management program should be based on watersheds and identify environmental thresholds to be monitored.

In Oregon there are many partnerships beyond, but including, federal

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agencies that participate in monitoring programs and determine appropriate changes in management. The Oregon Plan, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, and numerous local watershed councils can give federal agencies a jump start on institutionalizing adaptive management.

Q. E.3. Improvements are needed in the categorical exclusion process. Many management actions are recurring, have little or no environmental risks, and follow strict guidelines to ensure environmental standards are met. See Q.C.1 for examples in addition to wildlife stand improvement and recreational facility enhancement. These types of actions should be permitted through categorical exclusions, which should be adopted through a less burdensome process than formal federal rulemaking. The rule itself could provide the standards that must be met by categorical exclusions, and leave to the agency regional executive the determination of which activities meet the standards.

Q F. NEPA needs to permit streamlined processes that support public involvement in the beginning, but manages administrative appeals to bring certainty sooner to agency findings and decisions.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

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