What is an Environmental Impact Statement?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to conduct an environmental impact statement (EIS) for major actions that could have significant impacts on the environment. Under NEPA, “environment” includes the natural and physical environment (such as air, water, geography, geology) as well as people’s relationship with the environment (such as health, safety, jobs, schools, housing, and aesthetics). An EIS looks at both short-term and long-term effects and considers possible measures to reduce or mitigate those effects.

*Opportunities for Public Participation

The EIS Process

An EIS is prepared in a series of steps: gathering government and public comments to define the issues that should be analyzed in the EIS (a process known as “scoping”); preparing the draft EIS; receiving and responding to public comments on the draft EIS; and preparing the final EIS. Decisions are not made in an EIS; rather, the EIS analysis is one of several factors decisionmakers consider. The decision is announced in the Record of Decision (ROD) after the final EIS has been published.

Scoping

A federal agency begins the scoping process for an EIS by publishing a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register* to let the public know that it is considering an action and will prepare an EIS. The NOI describes the proposed action and may provide background information on issues and potential impacts. During the scoping period, the public can provide comments on the proposed action, alternatives, issues, and environmental impacts to be analyzed in the EIS. Scoping may involve public meetings and other means to obtain public comments on the EIS.

Draft EIS

Preparation of a draft EIS is the next step in the process. The draft EIS presents, analyzes, and compares the potential environmental impacts for the proposed action and alternatives and their implementation, and provides additional information on the methodologies and assumptions used for the analyses. A Notice of Availability (NOA) is published in the *Federal Register* announcing the availability of the draft EIS for public review and comment. The NOA begins a minimum 45-day comment period. Public comments on the draft EIS are considered in the preparation of the final EIS.

Final EIS

Once the public comment period on the draft EIS has been completed, a final EIS is prepared and distributed. Responses to public comments on the draft EIS are included in the final EIS.

Record of Decision

After the final EIS is published, a minimum 30-day waiting period is required before a ROD can be issued. The ROD notifies the public of the decision made on the proposed action and presents the reasons for that decision. The decisionmaking process may include consideration of factors such as cost, technical feasibility, agency statutory missions, and national objectives, as well as the potential environmental impacts of an action(s). No action can be taken until the decision has been made public.