



Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making

Panel on Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making, Board on Environmental Change and Society, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council

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Federal agencies have taken steps to include the public in a wide range of environmental decisions. 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.

This book concludes that, when done correctly, public participation improves the quality of federal agencies' decisions about the environment. 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. This book recommends that agencies recognize public participation as valuable to their objectives, not just as a formality required by the law. It details principles and approaches agencies can use to successfully involve the public.

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