
Working with Local Government

Henry Habicht

Our country's growing recognition of its environmental problems resulted in the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 20 years ago. Since then, states, local governments, and EPA have made enormous progress in addressing major sources of pollution. As we have worked through the complex and frustrating issues of the past, we have discovered that we have barely scratched the surface of our pollution prevention and control needs.

Today, EPA understands better the dangers of toxic pollutants to health and the environment. We now recognize that it makes much more sense to focus on preventing and reducing sources of waste than on trying to clean up later. We know that we must begin to address thousands of small, widely dispersed, and often hidden sources of pollution ranging from highly localized radon and leaking underground storage tank problems to widely dispersed nonpoint source control and acid rain problems.

It is clear that solutions to most of these problems will rely more on education than on enforcement. Several studies have documented the enormous capital and operations and maintenance needs for small wastewater and drinking water systems and for solid waste management. These situations pose difficult institutional and financial problems and are occurring in an era when federal and most state and local resources appear to be stretched to their limits. There is growing understanding that environmental protection and economic development can, and must be, mutually supportive objectives and that we must work more effectively with our educational systems to instill a working environmental ethic. Most important, EPA understands that local governments and citizens must ultimately find and pay for solutions to these problems. We need to focus increased attention on the costs of legislation

and regulations and support justifiable regulatory flexibility, especially for smaller communities and small businesses.

EPA is beginning to understand the limits of traditional regulation and the need to build cooperative governmental and nongovernmental approaches to achieve our mutual environmental goals. The agency is recognizing the need to go beyond its traditional roles of regulation and research, emphasizing delivery of information, education, and assistance to create integrated problem-solving systems. We clearly recognize the need to increase our focus on "enabling" and "empowering" state and local government environmental management capacity by the day-to-day environmental managers and implementers. We know that we need to listen to the needs of local governments, to improve delivery of local information and assistance to help meet those needs, and to work with local governments as allies.

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Efforts are underway to improve cooperation and communication among local, state, and federal levels of government as well as directly between states and between local governments. Systematic approaches are being established to improve communication channels, to understand the issues that are of concern to you, and to help meet your needs. We want to improve your opportunities to provide input. The agency is working on developing multi-media solutions and on improving internal EPA coordination so that we speak with a consistent voice. We want to

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make sure regulations are feasible and implementable and to provide information on what is expected. We want to make sure that timely, useful information reaches you.

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We are working closely with ICMA, and with other key associations, to “put the wind at your backs.” Major projects with ICMA are focusing on identifying local government needs, transferring successful local problem-solving approaches, and demonstrating innovative approaches to funding infrastructure needs. EPA has also created the National Advisory Council for Environmental Technol-

ogy Transfer (NACETT), including a State and Local Programs Committee chaired by Terry Novak, city manager of Spokane, Washington. This and other NACETT committees will be providing the agency with action recommendations.

Several other key national programs are implementing comprehensive local outreach strategies designed to deliver better, more coordinated assistance and information. We are also emphasizing development of less expensive treatment systems for smaller communities and delivery of environmental trend and research and development data. Improved review processes are being established to implement the federal Regulatory Flexibility Act. Local government contact persons are being named in my immediate office and in each regional office. We are working on expanding education and training opportunities at all levels. We know we can meet these challenges, but only by working effectively *together*, as a family of governments. **PM**