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Staying on Track

The processing of permit applications at the TCEQ occurs more efficiently, thanks to streamlining measures in place; other improvements are being studied.

The TCEQ fine-tunes the evaluation process for permits

The TCEQ is three years into a project to streamline the processing of environmental permits and to complete projects that have fallen behind schedule.

What's the progress so far?

"The first year's results were terrific because we were able to catch up on a large number of permit applications that were moving too slowly or not at all," said Matt Baker, special assistant in the agency's Office of Permitting, Remediation, and Registration. "Since then, we've been analyzing our procedures and looking to identify additional ways to be efficient."

One of the TCEQ's main responsibilities is to issue permits and other authorizations for the control of air pollution, the management of hazardous and nonhazardous waste, and the safe operation of water and wastewater utilities. The agency receives more than 8,200 various applications a year.

Companies or entities that conduct operations affecting the environment must obtain a permit. For example, a firm planning to build a plant that will emit pollutants into the air must obtain a permit before construction begins; so must a municipality proposing to expand a landfill.

The length of time the agency needs to process a permit--and determine whether it should be granted--depends on the complexity of the project and the type of permit sought. For instance, processing an industrial and hazardous waste permit runs, on average, 575 days, while a minor application filed by a water district takes only about 51 days.

During the processing period, TCEQ staff conduct an administrative review to determine whether the application is complete, then embark on a technical review to assess the potential impact of the proposed operations on the environment and nearby communities. Public notices and public hearings may be required.

Currently, about 85 percent of applications meet the TCEQ permit time-frame targets.

The Permit Time-Frame Reduction Project began in 2002, said Baker, "when we discovered some permits had been in the pipeline too long--for years, in some cases. So we decided to evaluate how long it should take to complete permits in a timely fashion. As a result of that study, we developed a range of estimates that became our target processing time frames."

Staff focused on Priority 1 projects that require agency action before the applicants can continue their work. Other projects, including permit renewals, are labeled Priority 2 because the applicants can continue to operate while the TCEQ processes those requests.

In early 2002, only two-thirds of Priority 1 projects were being processed in a timely manner.

Faced with an accumulation of about 1,120 cases, staff began a major push to get permits back on track. In nine months, these pending applications had been condensed to about 100 cases, thanks to measures such as paying overtime, reassigning personnel, hiring year-round interns, and outsourcing some tasks.

Since then, there have been other improvements. The agency has cross trained staff, so when one team sees a work slowdown it can help another team pick up the pace. Managers have found steps within the permitting process that can be eliminated or conducted simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Currently, about 85 percent of applications meet the TCEQ permit time-frame targets. Excluded from the estimate are contested permits or those requiring public hearings.

"All in all, we have a more efficient process, and our improved tracking allows managers to know which projects are falling behind," said Baker. "Still, having 15 percent of permits exceed our own target deadlines is too high. Our goal is to reduce that to single digits."

While streamlining continues and the agency surveys other states for ideas, "we will not eliminate any steps or

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expedite any areas that are necessary for a thorough review," Baker said. "Our job is to provide good customer service and to protect the environment, and that remains our focus."

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