

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460
202-564-6665

STATEMENT OF
MARGARET N. SCHNEIDER
DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION
U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT, INVESTIGATIONS,
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Madame Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning, I am Margaret N. Schneider, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Environmental Information at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss data quality.

The Agency takes the issue of data quality very seriously. We are addressing many data quality and accuracy issues as I speak, but most important, we are committed to implementing and enhancing an ongoing plan to ensure the integrity of EPA's data, while continuing to meet our responsibility to provide information to help Americans assess the well-being of themselves, their families, and their communities. We, like you, recognize that no data is perfect, but that it needs to be of appropriate quality to both document performance accurately, and to support sound environmental decisions. To this end, we have been working closely with industry, our

State and Tribal partners, and the public to ensure that information is of the appropriate quality and accuracy, and is presented in a format that is understandable.

Information stewardship has taken on added focus at EPA in recent years. Just this past October, our Agency finalized a major reorganization aimed at consolidating and enhancing EPA's management of environmental information. This reorganization brings together in one organization various functions related to the collection, management, and use of EPA's information by the Agency, its State and Tribal partners, and the public. The creation of the Office of Environmental Information (OEI) resulted from Administrator Browner's view that information is an essential resource for environmental decision-making. This new centralized focus on information, under the leadership of an Assistant Administrator, adds additional authority to the Agency's Chief Information Officer position, and enables the Agency to provide better guidance and oversight of data integrity and quality issues.

OUR COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

In creating OEI, the Administrator placed added focus on the implementation of quality systems within EPA. One of the most innovative steps being taken by the Agency to improve data quality is the Administrator's Information Integration Initiative. The goal of this project is to create an integrated information system that will support the core functions linked to EPA's mission, as well as support a broad data exchange network with our State and Tribal partners and other environmental information stakeholders. This initiative is a fundamentally new approach for the Agency to take in managing its information, one which we believe will improve data coordination and accuracy. It both will build upon the successful implementation of some of the

projects discussed below, but more importantly, will “leapfrog” over the current incremental approach by establishing an integrated information management system that should improve significantly information quality, reduce burden, and enhance environmental decision-making at all levels.

OEI has other important responsibilities for quality across the Agency. OEI houses the Quality Staff, which is the central Agency organization responsible for developing data quality policies and procedures to plan, implement, assess, and document environmental measurement programs across the Agency. These policies are designed to ensure that the environmental measurement programs yield data of appropriate and documented quality to support the Agency’s decisions. These policies also require oversight of data collection and use, to make sure that the environmental measurement programs are being implemented as planned. All EPA organizations and recipients of EPA funds develop plans that describe their quality management systems, and how they will ensure that the environmental measurements that they collect are of the type and quality needed to support the programs. Other initiatives in OEI, are designed to make sure that we keep the data unchanged as they move into and through our information systems.

We believe that the quality of our measurements and our decisions is critical to the success of the Agency and its information programs. We firmly believe that the foundation of all our decisions is the quality and integrity of our project planning, field operations, analytical data, and data evaluation—the Quality System provides the framework for these activities.

As a complement to the quality system, the Agency has a long-established policy requiring independent peer review of major scientific and technical work products that are used

in EPA's decision-making. The scientific and technical products that support our Agency's decisions withstand the scrutiny of independent scientific and technical experts. Peer review has become the expected practice before EPA uses scientific and technical products in rulemakings and other actions, and we have seen a continuing increase in the number of peer reviews conducted each year since the policy was implemented in 1995.

In addition to these management systems, OEI is leading a number of specific new activities that promote data quality and accuracy. As you know, EPA and our State and Tribal partners collect large amounts of data under various statutory and regulatory requirements - much of which, under the right-to-know statutes - is shared with the public. It is our goal to clearly identify the data that we are collecting, ensure the data's accuracy and maintain the data's integrity. To achieve this goal, we are working with our State and Tribal partners to develop better collection approaches, to correct reported errors, and to increase the use of electronic reporting.

In order for the Agency to maintain a complete body of consistent environmental data, data standards need to be developed. Under the Reinventing Environmental Information Initiative, EPA, States and Tribes have developed and begun to implement six important standards: Facility ID; Date; Standard Industrial Codes; Biological/Taxonomic; Chemical ID and Latitude/Longitude. One of the priorities of OEI in the coming year will be to work with States, Tribes, and other parties to continue developing additional data standards. The goal is to select and prioritize the development of standards having common applications to improve the ability of EPA and its partners to collect, exchange, and manage environmental data. EPA has established a workgroup composed of State, Tribal and EPA representatives to identify the next

generation of information topics for which data standards are needed. We also will continue to develop and make available via the Internet EPA's Environmental Data Registry, which is an authoritative database for agreed-upon data standards and business rules for implementation.

EPA and its partners also are developing a common approach to identifying regulated facilities across media-specific environmental information systems. This year the Agency will be building and beginning to operate a Facility Registry System (FRS) with a single master record and verified facility identification information for each facility. The FRS will be a key component of the new integrated system, providing more accurate integration of data across EPA systems.

A key component in maintaining accurate data consists of identifying and correcting errors that occur as data are collected and transmitted. The Agency is working closely with our State and Tribal partners and other stakeholders from industry and non-governmental organizations to build and implement an Agency-wide error correction tracking system, creating a single place within EPA where errors found in national systems can be reported, tracked, and corrected. This new process will coordinate existing processes for each national system, improving accountability and our ability to evaluate data accuracy. It is our plan to implement the error correction process and tracking application for major EPA systems this summer.

As directed by the Government Paperwork Elimination Act, EPA will offer electronic reporting to regulated industries and State and Tribal partners by 2002. We expect this step will solve transmission and transcription errors and improve timeliness of reporting.

All of these initiatives offer promise in reducing errors in data transfer from manual data entry and for detecting errors in source information provided to the Agency. In addition, we will

be actively pursuing new technologies which will allow for shared access to data rather than requiring copying and transmission. This will reduce reporting burden, and at the same time, enable the Agency to maintain high quality and accurate data in our systems.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we take the issue and challenge of providing accurate, complete, and timely data very seriously. We are working on many initiatives right now that we believe will further enhance our ability to provide high quality environmental data to the American public. Let me assure you that the Administrator and senior managers of the Agency are committed to ensuring the integrity, and accessibility of our information as we safeguard human health and the environment.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear here today and to discuss these important issues. I will be happy to answer any questions.