Innovations in Core Functions

The more than 70 innovations tested under Project XL are sorted by EPA's core functions—the processes and operations that EPA typically performs to carry out its mission to protect human health and safeguard the natural environment—(1) regulations, (2) permitting, (3) information management and access, (4) enforcement and compliance assurance, (5) environmental stewardship, (6) stakeholder involvement, and (7) Agency culture change. These core functions are defined briefly below.

Regulations

A significant portion of EPA's work concerns developing regulations that define for businesses, municipalities, other regulated entities, and the public the actions, technologies, and standards required to meet federal environmental laws passed by Congress. Under Project XL, EPA seeks to explore new and flexible approaches to implementing existing and future environmental regulations. Projects have provided Agency regulation writers with experiential data and results that influence the options available in new regulations. Project XL has been particularly successful at exploring specific regulatory and policy options under the Clean Air Act (CAA), the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), and the Clean Water Act (CWA).

Permitting

A permit is an authorization, license, or equivalent control document issued by EPA or a state or tribal agency to implement the requirements of environmental standards for a specific facility or group of similar facilities. Federal permitting requirements are very important environmental protection tools, but they can pose a burden for regulated entities and regulators alike. The alternative permitting approaches tested in Project XL fit into a national reform effort to shift permitting toward measuring performance while providing more flexibility in how standards are met, strengthen the role of the public in important decisions, focus on results instead of procedures, reduce unnecessary burdens, and improve environmental performance.

Information Management and Access

EPA has national information policy and management responsibilities which stem from the nation's environmental laws and include collecting, maintaining, and ensuring the quality of data used for both internal decision-making and public purposes. EPA's regulations and permits have data collection and reporting requirements that can be burdensome for facilities to prepare and for regulators to collect, when publicly presenting environmental information and results. In many cases, state and tribal governments are the primary collectors and managers for this information. The required data are often in a specified format that is difficult for the general public to access and understand. Project XL explores different approaches that seek to improve government systems for managing environmental information. These approaches include gaining more stakeholder input on data presentation, building performance-based incentives into reporting requirements, and eliminating duplicative or unnecessary information requirements.

Enforcement and Compliance Assurance

EPA, tribal governments, and authorized states are responsible for ensuring that the regulated community complies with the laws and regulations that protect human health and safeguard the natural environment. To do so, an array of approaches are employed, including EPA's traditional regulatory enforcement program and compliance assistance support and incentives. In recent years, national efforts have centered around identifying and addressing environmental problems using innovative, integrated initiatives that combine compliance assistance, incentives, monitoring, and enforcement. These compliance incentives include self-certification, compliance measurement and management programs, tiered compliance testing requirements, and options to use new technologies that will ensure compliance by preventing pollution. Compliance incentives encourage improved environmental performance and have been explored by states, tribes, local governments, and EPA. Project XL provides another platform for testing these new activities as well as innovative approaches for measuring compliance on a facility and sector level.

Environmental Stewardship

Environmental stewardship is a way of identifying and pursing good business strategies that are consistent with environmental protection. Environmental management systems (EMS), pollution prevention, and recycling are pathways to environmental stewardship that help organizations improve their environmental performance and potentially go beyond regulatory compliance. An EMS allows an organization to systematically integrate environmental concerns into business and operations decisions, address environmental decisions and focus on improvements in compliance rates, while boosting efficiency, compliance rates, and improving worker safety. Pollution prevention, or "source reduction" as defined by the 1990 Pollution Prevention Act and EPA guidance, involves protecting natural resources through conservation or increased efficiency in the use of energy, water, and materials. Recycling shares many of the advantages of pollution prevention: they both reduce the need for treatment or disposal by conserving energy and natural resources. Project XL is a platform for testing different EMS approaches, and many projects have incorporated pollution prevention and recycling activities into their agreements.

Stakeholder Involvement

The American people have demanded active involvement in decisions that affect their health and the quality of their environment. In response, EPA has worked to increase stakeholder involvement

by providing them opportunities to participate in the development and implementation of projects that may affect them. A stakeholder may be a civic organization, particular interest group, governmental entity, or individual. Past, present, and potential participants in Project XL have identified the stakeholder involvement process as an area in which all groups (e.g., project sponsors, government staff, and public participants) will benefit from additional experience and better guidance. These projects are producing important insights into the site-specific, multi-stakeholder involvement process and its role in Agency experimentation and innovation.

Agency Culture Change

The emphasis on innovation has changed the way EPA thinks and operates, leading to real environmental improvements and cost reductions. The challenge ahead is to make these innovative ideas a permanent part of EPA's culture and reinforce those Agency processes and behaviors that will address constantly changing conditions—environmental, technical, socioeconomic, and political—through new, creative solutions. Project XL has served as a laboratory for creating a work environment that supports cross-Agency multimedia innovation. While designing and testing potential innovations, the Agency has also undertaken management, team-building, and experimentation challenges. ❇