

NMTA/USACE Seattle District Regulatory requests your feedback - Puget Sound Initiative June 17th at 9-10AM

Quick recap

The meeting focused on gathering stakeholder feedback on regulatory processes in Puget Sound and Hood Canal through an initiative supported by the Udall Foundation, with participants representing various marine, architectural, and environmental interests. Discussions centered around challenges in the nearshore permitting process, including lengthy timelines, high mitigation costs, and coordination difficulties between agencies, with particular attention to mitigation requirements under the Endangered Species Act. The group explored solutions for streamlining the permitting process, including improved communication between agencies and applicants, and discussed potential tracking systems for permit status, while also acknowledging positive aspects of their interactions with the Army Corps of Engineers.

Next steps

- [Carly to canvass ports and provide written comments to Maria with examples of permitting challenges.](#)
- [Maria to circulate draft report to Jay for distribution to meeting participants for review and feedback.](#)
- [Meeting participants to send any additional comments or feedback directly to Maria via email.](#)
- [WPPA to consider setting up a separate port-specific call with Maria to discuss permitting issues in more detail.](#)
- [Maria to look into the Regulatory Request System \(RRS\) and compare its features to the Permitting Enhancement and Evaluation Platform \(PEEP\) mentioned by Jon.](#)
- [Maria to investigate the state department's tracking and status dashboard mentioned during the meeting.](#)
- [US Army Corps of Engineers to consider implementing a tracking system similar to the PEEP for better permit application visibility and status updates.](#)
- [US Army Corps of Engineers to improve coordination and communication with other agencies \(NMFS, US Fish and Wildlife Service\) involved in the permitting process.](#)
- [US Army Corps of Engineers to address staffing issues, particularly in the mitigation banking group and permit issuance roles.](#)
- [US Army Corps of Engineers to explore ways to increase the supply of mitigation credits and streamline the mitigation bank approval process.](#)

Summary

Nearshore Permitting Input Initiative

Maria Lance from the Corps of Engineers National Center introduces herself and explains her role as a facilitator and public participation specialist. She mentions that the Seattle District Regulatory branch reached out to her team over a year ago for assistance with an initiative to gather extensive input. The meeting begins with introductions from various participants, including representatives from marine trade associations, architectural firms, port associations, and environmental programs, all of whom have experience or interest in nearshore permitting processes.

Stakeholder Feedback on Regulatory Processes

Maria provides an overview of an initiative to gather feedback from stakeholders on the regulatory branch's processes in the Puget Sound and Hood Canal area. The initiative, supported by the Udall Foundation, aims to collect input from various entities including federal and state agencies, private sector, ports, contractors, and tribes. Maria explains that she will summarize the findings in a report with recommendations for improvements, which will be submitted to the district by the end of the fiscal year in September. The conversations are confidential, and comments will be non-attributable in the final report.

Nearshore Permitting Process Challenges

The group discusses challenges in the permitting process for nearshore projects in Puget Sound. Participants highlight issues such as lengthy timelines for simple maintenance projects, high mitigation costs, and difficulties coordinating between agencies. Troy mentions a standstill for projects in Lake Union and the Cut area, while others note problems with the conservation calculator and DNR lease requirements. Jay emphasizes the urgency of maintaining aging facilities to prevent them from falling into the sound. The group agrees on the need for improved coordination and more efficient processes, especially for smaller ports and marinas. Maria offers to schedule port-specific calls to gather more detailed input.

Enhancing Mitigation for Infrastructure Projects

The discussion focuses on challenges with mitigation requirements for infrastructure projects under the Endangered Species Act. Jon highlights the Port's programmatic permit for maintenance activities and expresses concern about the limited supply of mitigation opportunities. Jay and Michelle emphasize the need for more accessible mitigation banks and better alignment between agencies on mitigation obligations. Kimberly points out that the Corps' outdated mitigation rules are causing project delays due to difficulties in finding suitable mitigation options. The group agrees that increasing the supply of mitigation banks and credits is crucial to address these issues.

Permitting Process Streamlining Discussion

The group discusses ways to streamline the permitting process, with a focus on improving communication between agencies and applicants. Ecco expresses interest in programmatic approaches for repetitive repairs, while Kimberly highlights issues with staff turnover notifications. Jay points out frustrations with lack of coordination between the Army Corps and NMFS, emphasizing the need for better leadership in finding solutions for clients. The discussion also touches on the effectiveness of pre-application meetings and other forums for coordination.

Virginia Permit Tracking System Discussion

Jon describes a GIS-based public platform called the Permitting Enhancement and Evaluation Platform (PEEP) used in Virginia, which allows applicants and the public to track permit applications and their status. Maria asks about experiences with the Regulatory Request System (RRS) used by the local district, but participants are unfamiliar with it. The group discusses the importance of tracking and status updates for permits, with Jay emphasizing the need for inter-agency coordination in any potential tracking system.

Enhancing Army Corps Collaboration

The group discusses positive aspects of their interactions with the Army Corps of Engineers. Jay emphasizes the importance of improved communication and prioritization of solving challenges. Ecco praises the Corps' project managers for their communication and efficiency, particularly in the RAP program. Carly and Jon highlight the benefits of hiring a NEPA liaison to assist with permitting, though they note this option is mainly accessible to larger ports. Maria encourages participants to provide written comments and promises to circulate a draft report summarizing the conversation themes for review.