



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted this review in response to a request from the former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Deputy Administrator. We evaluated whether (1) current laws, regulations, guidance, and other relevant requirements for EPA expert peer review panels are adequate to produce objective scientific reviews; and (2) the current system of populating and managing such panels could be improved.

Background

Peer review is a process for enhancing a scientific or technical work product so that the decision or position taken by the Agency, based on that product, has a sound, credible basis. EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment produces highly influential scientific assessments such as human health risk assessments; thus, it is one of EPA's primary users of peer review services.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2009/20090429-09-P-0147.pdf

EPA Can Improve Its Process for Establishing Peer Review Panels

What We Found

The laws, regulations, guidance, and other relevant requirements governing EPA's peer review process are adequate to produce objective scientific reviews, but certain areas of EPA operating guidance can be better defined.

When we compared the EPA National Center for Environmental Assessment's (NCEA's) peer review panel selection process with the processes used by other major science-based organizations, we found that NCEA's process does not differ in many aspects from those other processes. However, NCEA's current system for populating and managing expert panels can be improved:

- Although NCEA strives to select "impartial" panelists, this concept is vaguely defined and not explained in any NCEA-specific operating guidance.
- NCEA does not have procedures for addressing conflicts of interest or potential biases that become known after a panel has completed deliberations.
- There was no clear documentation of authority and responsibility for making final determinations regarding panel selection or how potential conflicts of interest were resolved.

Following a prior OIG report, NCEA improved its peer review process by developing a questionnaire for EPA contractors to use in identifying potential conflicts of interests or biases of prospective panel members. Also, according to the NCEA Director, NCEA recently started to document its peer review process and is implementing a quality assurance checklist to ensure EPA contractors follow EPA's procedures.

What We Recommended

We recommended that the Assistant Administrator for Research and Development, which oversees NCEA, improve management controls by better defining the concept of "impartiality" and maintaining records of all management decisions pertaining to the selection of peer reviewers, particularly resolution of potential conflicts of interest. We also recommended that the Assistant Administrator develop guidance to address conflict of interest issues that arise after panel formulation and amend contracts for external peer review services to require that panelists re-certify their conflict of interest status prior to the panel convening. The Office of Research and Development agreed with our recommendations, and the Assistant Administrator's planned actions meet the intent of our recommendations. Additional information is needed regarding the timeframe for the Agency's implementation of one of our recommendations.