

Improving Performance of Federal Permitting and Review of Infrastructure Projects

Fulfilling a commitment he made in his State of the Union Address, President Obama signed an Executive Order on Improving Performance of Federal Permitting and Review of Infrastructure Projects that will significantly reduce the amount of time it takes the Federal government to make permitting and review decisions for projects like roads and surface transportation, aviation, ports and waterways, water management, renewable energy generation, electricity transmission, broadband, and pipelines. This executive order builds on a series of recommendations from the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness as well as existing Administration efforts including a series of sector-specific initiatives and pilot programs.

Major components of the Executive Order include:

Nationally and regionally significant infrastructure projects

Agencies are directed, by the end of April, to identify regionally and nationally significant infrastructure projects that demonstrate the goals of the Executive Order. These projects will be tracked on the Federal Infrastructure Projects Dashboard (<https://permits.performance.gov>) so that Federal permitting and review schedules and progress for these important projects are available online.

Federal government-wide initiative

Because many permitting and review decisions for significant infrastructure projects involve multiple Federal agencies, the Executive Order sets up a Steering Committee composed of relevant Federal agencies and directs it to develop a Federal government-wide plan by the end of May that includes clear deliverables and timelines for reducing the amount of time it takes to make permitting and review decisions. This Federal Plan will institutionalize permitting and review improvements like conducting permitting analyses and reviews concurrently rather than sequentially to eliminate duplication; enhancing coordination with State, local, and tribal governments; engaging early with stakeholders; and using information technology to replace outdated paperwork.

Specific and measurable actions

Each Federal agency on the Steering committee is also responsible for developing an agency-specific implementation plan by the end of June that identifies the permitting and review processes under its authority that are most critical to infrastructure projects, defines specific and measurable actions to improve those processes, and implements the Federal Plan. Agencies are further required to report on progress to the Chief Performance Officer every six months.

Transparency and accountability

The Chief Performance Officer will develop and track performance metrics, and publicly report on agency progress on the Dashboard. In addition, all Federal and agency-specific plans to improve permitting and review processes which are required by the Executive Order will be publicly published online.

Building on What's Working: Sector-Specific Initiatives and Pilot Projects

This executive order builds on a series of recommendations from the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness and existing Administration efforts. Since 2009, the Obama Administration has launched a series of sector-specific and pilot programs to improve specific aspects of the infrastructure permitting and review process. These initiatives demonstrate that best practices such as conducting reviews concurrently instead of sequentially, early coordination among agencies, and transparently tracking permitting and review timelines for projects can reduce or eliminate delays and duplication.

- Expediting High Priority Infrastructure Projects. The President issued a Memorandum in August 2011 on Speeding Infrastructure Development Through More Efficient and Effective Permitting and Environmental Reviews which directed agencies to identify and expedite decisions for a set of priority projects and to publicly track their status on a newly created Federal Infrastructure Projects Dashboard. Agencies selected 14 projects for expedited review, three of which have already been completed.
- Launching the Federal Infrastructure Projects Dashboard. All of the priority projects are publically tracked on the Federal Infrastructure Projects Dashboard. For the first time, the Dashboard brings together a transparent picture of all of the Federal permitting and review actions related to each project, together with lessons learned.
- Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) for Transportation, Renewable Energy, and Electric Transmission Lines. Federal agencies have joined together to create Rapid Response Teams to coordinate and expedite Federal permitting and reviews of projects in three sectors: renewable energy, transmission, and transportation. Key agency personnel are "on call" to resolve or elevate issues as they arise to keep permitting and review processes moving.
- Modernizing and Speeding Up Environmental Reviews. The environmental review process required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) helps to protect the health and vitality of local communities and the environment. As a part of a comprehensive effort to modernize the way NEPA works, the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) has led a series of "NEPA Pilot Projects" ranging from technology tools that save time and money to innovative collaborations that reduce duplication and red tape.
- Making Offshore Wind Development "Smart from the Start". In the fall of 2010, the Department of the Interior (DOI) launched the "Smart from the Start" initiative to spur rapid and responsible siting, leasing, and construction of new wind projects that will create jobs. The initiative is focused on improving coordination with state, local, and federal partners; identifying and refining priority areas that are most suitable for development; and making the environmental review associated with commercial leasing more efficient through best practices like conducting earlier and better coordinated reviews.
- Coordinating Safe and Responsible Energy Development in Alaska. Formalizing a step announced in the spring of 2011 to increase safe and responsible domestic oil and gas production, President Obama signed an Executive Order forming a new, high-level interagency working group to coordinate on energy development and permitting in Alaska. This group helps streamline decision-making processes by ensuring collaboration as agencies evaluate permits and conduct rigorous environmental reviews; ensures that decisions are made with recognition of long term issues including oil spill readiness and infrastructure development; and coordinates work with partners outside of the Federal government.