

Executive Summary

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), contracted with ORC Macro, a professional research and consulting firm, to conduct a telephone survey of DEC permittees and permit consultants about their experiences with the permitting process from July 1, 2002, to June 30, 2003. The survey's objectives were to obtain accurate, baseline data about the experiences and perceptions of the DEC's permitting processes and to obtain other input that will inform the DEC about improving its processes and services to permittees.

The survey included questions dealing with reasonableness of regulations; process timeliness; staff customer service and coordination; and how Vermont's processes compare with those in other states. Surveyors solicited ideas for improvements at several points during the survey.

Telephone data collection occurred from September 17 to October 5, 2003, and interviews were completed with 851 respondents. Many of these respondents were willing to provide specific feedback, as evidenced by the 1,664 comments received. The number of contacts for some permit programs was very small, making it impossible to allow for analysis at the program level with reasonable confidence. Therefore, responses for all programs were combined for analysis. It should be noted that the analysis included in this report meets statistical precision standards and can be interpreted with confidence.

Major Findings

The majority of respondents did not go through the permitting process themselves. Those who did not were asked for their perceptions of several aspects of the permitting processes. About half of respondents (49%) had received permits prior to fiscal year 2003.

A significantly higher percentage of those who went through the process themselves rated it as excellent or very good as compared to those without first-hand knowledge.

More than 85% of respondents who had been through the process personally felt that the department staff with whom they dealt were courteous and helpful and that they were treated fairly by the department staff during the permitting process.

More than 80% of respondents who had been through the process personally found the application and instruction forms to be clear and understandable. A significantly higher percentage of those respondents who went through the process themselves thought the regulations were reasonable as compared to those who had someone go through the process on their behalf.

A majority of those with first hand-knowledge thought the level of public involvement was about right, while a significantly lower proportion of those without first-hand experience thought the same.

More than three-quarters of respondents experiencing the permitting process reported that the time it took to issue their permit did not cause them problems, while 22% reported that the timing did cause them problems.

Thirty-nine respondents indicated that they had obtained permits from more than one DEC permit program for a single project. Slightly more than half of these respondents rated the coordination between programs for their project as average or above; nearly one-quarter of these respondents rated inter-program coordination as poor.

Of those who serve as consultants in other states, slightly more than half responded that the permitting process is more difficult in Vermont compared to that in other states, while nearly 20% reported that Vermont's permit processes are easier than those elsewhere.