



Evaluation at a Glance

Environmental Assessment Program

About the program

The federal government has identified an ongoing need for regulatory processes and a regulatory regime that supports responsible and sustainable resource development. Environmental assessments are an important component of this regulatory regime. An environmental assessment (EA) is a tool for planning and decision making, designed to ensure that adverse environmental impacts are avoided or minimized before they occur.

The Environmental Assessment Program (EA Program) at Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) aims to support evidence-based decision making and policy development through the provision of scientific and technical expertise to the EA processes. The main activity of the EA Program is the provision of scientific expertise to decision makers, to support EAs of designated projects under the [Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, 2012](#) (CEAA 2012) and additional federal EA legislation in the North, as well as provincial EAs as required. The EA Program draws on the contributions from ECCC experts to provide advice to the authorities leading environmental assessments on the characterization a project's environmental effects and the efficacy of mitigation for those effects. The advice relates to issues falling within ECCC's mandate, such as migratory birds and their habitats, preservation of species at risk and the management of toxic substances. In addition, the EA Program conducts reviews of environmental effects of projects on federal lands and lands outside of Canada.

ECCC's Environmental Protection Branch (EPB) manages the EA Program. The branch is responsible for ensuring that the EA Program's corporate approaches and national policies and procedures are consistent. Regional teams are responsible for program delivery and working with experts and specialists from other branches such as the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Science and Technology Branch to coordinate the provision of advice.

Figure 1: the Environmental Assessment Program expert support model



What the evaluation found

- The evaluation found that there is a continued need for the EA Program's contributions of scientific and technical expertise to the EA processes. The EA Program is aligned with current federal priorities and fulfills the requirement outlined in legislation that the department provide its expertise to environmental assessments.
- Overall, evidence indicates that the EA Program is making progress towards achieving its expected results. For the most part, ECCC expert information and knowledge is considered in decision makers' recommendations, conclusions and the final EA documents. There is general agreement that the final EA documents appropriately characterize the environmental effects relevant to ECCC's mandate. ECCC also contributed to the development of broader Government of Canada EA policies and frameworks over the evaluation period.
- Data to assess long-term objectives is limited. However, there is evidence of reduced environmental impacts associated with EA Program activities over the evaluation period.
- The EA Program's approval process serves the important function of ensuring that scientific advice from various sources within ECCC is consistent and of high quality. However, the evaluation identified opportunities to streamline approvals and clarify the role of regional directors.
- EA Program staff is geographically dispersed. In addition, they manage large volumes of information and documents for a high number of concurrent projects. Despite attempts to develop a system to support information management, the EA Program continues to operate without an overarching project tracking and data integration tool.



Recommendations

Two recommendations are addressed to the Assistant Deputy Minister, Environmental Protection Branch, who has accepted them and has developed management action plans in response to each of the recommendations.

Recommendation 1: develop and implement improved project tracking and information management practices.

Management response: The EA Program will review available project tracking tools. Based on this review, the EA Program will implement a tool appropriate to meet the needs of the program.

From an information management perspective, the EA Program will continue to explore efficiencies and solutions to better manage information, including the development of a file structure and national nomenclature.

Recommendation 2: review and identify opportunities to clarify and streamline, where appropriate, internal approvals of expert advice provided through the Environmental Assessment Program (EA Program).

Management response: The EA Program will review the roles and responsibilities and service standards at each stage of the EA process, and look for opportunities for improvement. Based on this review, the EA program will implement a streamlined internal approvals system, while ensuring accountabilities are met.

As a first step, the EA Program will develop and finalize a guidance document on the preparation of information requests.

About the evaluation

The evaluation covered activities completed by the EA Program between fiscal year 2012 to 2013 and fiscal year 2016 to 2017. Multiple lines of evidence informed the results, including a document review, 43 interviews with internal and external stakeholders, a file review, a comparative analysis and two case studies. The following areas were scoped out of the evaluation: the EA Program's participation in the Major Projects Management Office Initiative, the oil sands monitoring program, wildlife toxicology and the grants and contributions funded by the EA Program. The report was approved by the Deputy heads of Environment and Climate Change Canada on March 28, 2018.