

Nomination Received by Council on Environmental Quality, Executive Office of the President
For the CEQ NEPA Pilot Project Program
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ceq/initiatives/nepa/nepa-pilot-project-nominations>

PART I. NOMINATOR

First Name:	John
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Organization:	ECW Environmental Group
Project Title:	Sustainable Installation Report System (SIRS)
Submitted by:	Member of Public
Date Received:	June 15, 2011

PART II. SHORT ANSWERS

I. What Federal agency or agencies will be involved in this pilot project?

The Sustainable Infrastructure Report System (SIRS) is applicable to any Federal agency. At this time, the Army is most interested in testing SIRS. The Army Environmental Law Division (ELD) was briefed on the benefits and risks of the implementing SIRS. ELD attorneys suggested three pilot projects within the Army seem appropriate: either for 3 different size installations or for 3 different types of installations. SIRS fits almost seamlessly with the Army's May 24, 2011 Integrated Strategic and Sustainability Planning Policy Memorandum.

Four Army installations were approached with the proposal and all four welcomed the proposed pilot project if CEQ would support and outside funding were available. SIRS is easily adaptable to Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Department of Energy facilities. It is also readily adaptable to any agency that is implementing Executive Order 13514 and that prepare multiple EAs that usually lead to a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

SIRS can be taught to professionals of any agency, and they can begin to do more in-house performance-driven NEPA work. Perhaps pilot projects for facilities of dissimilar agencies would be a better test of this unique process.

II. What is the Federal action to which this NEPA pilot project applies?

This NEPA pilot project applies to Federal actions that typically require preparation of environmental assessments and that usually lead to a FONSI. Actions may include proposed construction projects, master plan changes, integrated natural resources management plans, new developments, changed infrastructure, minor road/bridge construction/repair, and many other actions.

SIRS annual report process, including quarterly/periodic public meetings, screens out any proposed actions that may have significant adverse effects for preparation of separate EISs or mitigated FONSI/EAs. This early public scoping and proposed action screening helps reduce the risk of one bad project from causing the other projects from being enjoined in a legal action. The cumulative impacts and mitigation/monitoring results of separate EISs and mitigated FONSI/EAs are still added to SIRS process to ensure updated environmental data are always readily available for other actions.

All other very minor actions that are categorically excluded are tracked under SIRS because a major focus is measuring agency priority/valued environmental components (air quality, water conservation, water quality, endangered and threatened species, wetlands, GHG, energy efficiency, and etc.)

III. How will this pilot project reduce the costs and time needed to complete the NEPA

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process?

SIRS is a teachable, practical process that agencies may use to reduce NEPA costs. SIRS allows in-house expertise to focus on managing the environmental resources rather managing NEPA contractors. In many ways, implementing SIRS method reduces costs and time needed to complete NEPA:

First, implementing SIRS process eliminates the need for many EAs. Any proposed action that will likely lead to a FONSI will not require a separate EA under SIRS pilot project. The agency may direct their attention to how each project can be managed and still achieve environmental performance goals. Funds are used to prepare a single NEPA-compliant, annual report for many of the actions that even cumulatively do not have significant impacts. Some agency locations may eliminate the need for 2 to 5 EAs per year, thus saving \$40,000 to \$500,000 annually.

Second, moderate changes in agency plans during the year will not require a costly new or supplemental NEPA document because SIRS develops significance thresholds collaboratively, and adaptive management is used with public input to reduce impacts to less than significant.

Thirdly, SIRS significantly reduces costs for contractor-prepared EISs and complex EAs because they have less to do. SIRS continuously updates the environmental baseline and cumulative impacts. When an requires a separate EIS, the contractor does not have to gather a lot of baseline data or struggle to pull together cumulative impacts within the region. SIRS does that process every year. Agencies may reduce those tasks from NEPA contracts, thus saving 20% or more each time.

Finally, SIRS makes reaching out to the public easier because the process invites and engages continuous outreach to, and feedback from, them. Periodic/quarterly public meetings are part of SIRS. The continuous public outreach reduces the NEPA contractors level of effort for scoping. They will also be involved with important environmental monitoring results. There are also fewer surprises in the NEPA process which reduces the risk for unexpected, costly emergency studies. SIRS provides for a more manageable and affordable NEPA process.

IV. How will this pilot project ensure rigorous environmental protection?

Transparency and enhanced involvement of interested and affected parties is one key element in ensuring rigorous environmental protection. The periodic/quarterly public meetings are one more way for agencies to gain insight to other activities/actions outside their boundaries that affect regional environmental protection. Communities would have a comprehensive and inclusive method, potentially supported as a CEQ pilot project, to manage resources to achieve shared regional sustainability goals.

SIRS removes the habit of automatically starting another NEPA document for a proposed action, and focuses attention on NEPA providing the environmental solution. The public would have an opportunity to help with environmental solutions rather than demand more NEPA documents to read.

Consistent with the January 14, 2011 CEQ mitigation guidance memorandum, SIRS public meetings will also include quarterly/periodic reports of the status of mitigation commitment implementation, effectiveness and monitoring results, thus helping to ensure rigorous environmental protection.

Resources (people and funds) are directed toward measuring the most valued environmental components, using adaptive management to achieve sustainability goals, and reporting annual progress in an updated state-of-the-environment report. Showing the environmental report card to the public and to regulatory agencies, and inviting public comment regarding our assessment of impacts for any proposed actions for the coming year, will shift

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chronic focus on multiple NEPA documents and drive toward rigorous, quantifiable improvement in environmental performance.

V. How will this pilot project improve the quality and transparency of agency decisionmaking?

Consolidating existing environmental processes and programs and reducing the number of individual NEPA documents helps make NEPA work for better agency decisions. Environmental program managers may focus their expertise on achieving their metrics or program goals rather than correcting multiple EAs.

The public SIRS meetings engage interested and affected parties to inform, collaborate with, and hold agencies accountable for continuous environmental performance improvement. The continuous public and regulatory agency involvement helps reduce the risk of inadequate or misinformed agency decisions.

SIRS implements the public involvement parts described in CEQ's January 14, 2011 mitigation and monitoring guidance. Some of the monitoring of environmental resources may be conducted by entities that are also participants of the SIRS public meetings. The mitigation and monitoring results are included in the annual SIRS report which meets the need of discretionary annual mitigation and monitoring reports described in the aforementioned CEQ guidance.

Measuring and reporting, in public, a facility's state-of-the-environment is a strong incentive for informed decisions. The annual reports show status of each environmental resource. The colorful, plain language report is an annual report card showing decision-makers how well they, and their environmental program managers, are doing to help ensure a sustainable community.

Through annual review of the coming year(s) projects/plans, each agency will keep all stakeholders vested in the NEPA process. SIRS will help decision makers keep better informed of the most important issues and concerns. SIRS helps build transparency, accountability, and trust among all parties through a unique NEPA process. The result is better decisions.

VI. Will this pilot project develop best practices that can be replicated by other agencies or applied to other Federal actions or programs? Please describe?

SIRS develops new best practices, and it is designed to adapt to each agency's unique circumstances, programs, and systems. A basic principal of SIRS is to not create a new requirement or program, rather it must be practical by using and consolidating existing plans, programs, and systems to ensure time and money will be saved while environmental performance improves continuously.

SIRS will be adapted to each agency and to each facility. It will help agency professional staff use their existing systems better for NEPA compliance. It will also reduce paper clutter and each agency's staff burden of reviewing multiple versions of NEPA documents.

SIRS is unique enough that, if the pilot projects are successful, CEQ may need to modify parts of the 40 CFR 1500-1508 regulations to allow agencies to use these procedural innovations to improve their NEPA efficiency, save costs, enhance public involvement, and ensure rigorous environmental protection. The agencies would also need to

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update individual NEPA regulations.

PART III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

(See attachment on following page.)

Sustainable Installation Report System (SIRS)

Proposal for:
Council on Environmental Quality's Call for Innovative NEPA Pilot Projects

ECW Environmental Group

The Sustainable Installation¹ Report System (SIRS) combines many of the elements of CEQ guidance from over the past eight years to help reduce duplication, cut NEPA costs, and increase efficiency. SIRS is a unique method that integrates NEPA, mitigation/monitoring, ISO 14001 EMS, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), agency sustainability plans, and environmental compliance. SIRS maximizes use of existing metrics that installations collect including mitigation monitoring results and encourages public input for transparency in adaptive management of environmental resources.

SIRS is a continuous improvement process which meets the goals of NEPA through enhanced community outreach, focus on adaptive management of impacts and better environmental performance. Public scoping for the new NEPA process is the first step followed by gathering of monitoring data and analyzing cumulative effects of all proposed actions for the coming year or two.

The annual product of SIRS process is a results-rich, NEPA compliant, enhanced state-of-the-environment report that includes a draft Finding of No Significant Impact for public review and comment. The annual report informs the public of environmental and sustainability performance and monitoring results for the past year IAW EO 13514 (and subsequent EOs or agency directives), discusses the local agency's plans and proposed actions for the coming year, and identifies any anticipated impacts to environmental resources (cumulative effects) as a result of implementing agency and community plans/proposed actions. The attractive, colorful, and informative state-of-the-environment report provides excellent material for general distribution to the public and dignitaries and also for special events such as Earth day each year.

SIRS focuses on solving problems and making better use of cumulative effects analysis in decision making and reducing the production of multiple minor environmental assessments that typically achieve a FONSI. An efficient SIRS process will help agencies have more flexibility to support unexpected new actions by determining how to accommodate the changes without breaking a significant environmental threshold.

Guiding principles:

- Must be compliant with NEPA and other environmental laws and regulations
- Must meet Executive Order 13514 requirements for sustainability
- Must be an environmental tool for solving agency planning and decision making challenges
- Must make maximum use of existing agency programs, plans, and systems
 - No new stovepipes or additional requirements
- Must be practical and useful
- Must be able to duplicate/adapt to each agency
- Must serve to improve environmental performance
- Must save time and money

Risks -- It's a pilot project, so there are risks:

¹ The word "installation" is used here because several Army installations want to test SIRS as a pilot project. The word "infrastructure" may be substituted depending on the Federal agency that is using SIRS process. Infrastructure includes all natural (ecosystem) and human made facilities, utilities, and operations.

- Some regulators may resist a new NEPA process at first
- Advocacy groups may not trust a new process at first
- Difficult to determine responsibility for any measurable deterioration in environmental resources – was it caused by actions of the Federal facility, adjoining communities, or both
- Temptation for mischief with new NEPA flexibility for agencies
- Potential lumping of all projects (enjoining) in legal challenge if one project is controversial

The SIRS has built-in remedies to reduce these risks. The continuous public involvement process, accountability, and transparency reduces the risks. Any controversial projects are screened out of the SIRS process early in the planning process.

A SIRS pilot project would further an Administration priorities regarding cost savings, quality environmental management, reducing waste and redundancy, engaging the public, and using effective mitigation and monitoring to reduce environmental effects.

CEQ's support for this pilot project would be appreciated because it answers the question, "is it OK to do this," and encourages agencies to change to think differently about their NEPA processes. Four Army installations in from Virginia to Georgia are interested in being a test site for the proposed SIRS process if CEQ endorses the system and additional resources are available to implement it.

The process addresses all relevant natural resources management issues in any geographic location where Federal agencies are located. The pilot project(s) could be implemented through our GSA contract or one of the Army Corps of Engineers districts.

Milestones:

The first SIRS pilot projects would be completed by July 2012 if funded by September 2011. Public scoping for the proposed SIRS process could begin within sixty days of receiving funding. Gathering of FY2011 monitoring data for the state-of-the environment annual report would begin in October. Publication of the annual report and draft FONSI would be complete by April 2012.

Resources needed to implement SIRS are dependent on the location and complexity of the existing NEPA management system for the installation or site.

Please feel free to contact us if you need more information or have any questions. Thank you for the opportunity to submit our proposal for an innovative NEPA pilot project.