



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We conducted this audit to determine what improvements from the Region 7 Kaizen event for the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program can be applied on a wider scale, what barriers existed in the development and implementation of event results, and what lessons were learned from the event.

Background

In August 2008, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) headquarters, Region 7, and Region 7 states conducted a Kaizen (i.e., rapid process improvement) event to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the NPDES program. The event resulted in redesigned processes for planning inspections and issuing permits that better address crucial technical issues and provide for greater collaboration between EPA and states.

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

The full report is at:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20110706-11-P-0315.pdf

Agency-Wide Application of Region 7 NPDES Program Process Improvements Could Increase EPA Efficiency

What We Found

Although Region 7 NPDES Kaizen event participants continued to follow up on the commitments and action items identified, no single authority was responsible for tracking the process improvement outcomes. Also, EPA did not have a process to develop and track quantifiable results and outcomes from the event. Further, EPA encountered barriers involving scope, performance measures, implementation, and accountability when planning the Kaizen event. While EPA and states collaborated to create guidance for Kaizen events, such as the lean starter kit and primer, EPA did not, nor was it required to, use them to assure that barriers were overcome in the execution of the Region 7 event.

The EPA Administrator's January 2010 memorandum, "Our Top Priorities," as well as other recent EPA and state initiatives, discuss the need to improve internal operations and/or conduct more Kaizen events with the states to more efficiently protect the environment and public health. The Region 7 Kaizen event for the NPDES program identified three process improvements (resolution of technical issues and communication, permitting and enforcement oversight reviews of states, and annual strategic planning) and one implementation action (data collection and reporting) that can potentially be implemented in other regions. Agency-wide permitting process changes could result in better communication; time and cost savings in the states; and avoidance of duplicate inspections, reviews, and data reporting. Using lessons learned from the Region 7 Kaizen event can increase the potential benefits achieved in future process improvement efforts.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the Deputy Administrator direct the Office of Water and Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance to identify process improvements from the Region 7 Kaizen event that can be applied elsewhere. We further recommend that the Deputy Administrator direct the Office of Policy to develop a national policy on how to plan, design, and implement business process improvement events; and direct the 10 regions to work with the Offices of Water, Enforcement and Compliance Assurance, and Policy to implement recommended process improvements. In replying to the draft report, the Deputy Administrator agreed with applying the results more widely but did not fully respond to our recommendations on developing national policy.