



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We undertook this evaluation to determine how well the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is doing in four critical elements to advance the watershed approach. These four elements are integration, stakeholder participation, strategic planning, and performance measurement.

Background

A watershed refers to a geographic area in which water drains to a common outlet. A watershed includes not only all water resources, such as lakes and rivers, but also the land that drains into these resources. The watershed approach is a strategy for achieving clean water that relies on decentralized decision making and stakeholder involvement to effectively protect and restore aquatic ecosystems.

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

To view the full report, click on the following link:

www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2005/20050921-2005-P-00025.pdf

Sustained Commitment Needed to Further Advance Watershed Approach

What We Found

If EPA is committed to the watershed approach, it needs to make improvements in four key elements:

- Integrating watershed activities into its core water programs.
- Addressing stakeholder concerns to increase their participation.
- Refining and improving key aspects of its strategic planning process.
- Improving the watershed performance measurement system.

EPA adopted the watershed approach to help focus existing, traditional water pollution control programs in a more comprehensive manner and address emerging problems. The premise is that many water quality problems are best solved at the overall watershed level rather than the individual waterbody or discharger level. It is a holistic approach that considers cumulative impacts from a variety of sources, and represents an effort to enhance EPA's ability to improve and protect the Nation's water quality.

Although progress has been made in each of the four critical elements that we reviewed, further improvements are needed for each. EPA has made progress integrating watershed approach principles into some of its core water programs, but needs to address challenges to ensure further success. Stakeholders were enthusiastic about the watershed approach, but identified a number of obstacles when adopting the approach. EPA has made important strides incorporating the watershed approach into its strategic plans, but it must improve some key steps. Although EPA developed a performance measurement system for improving water quality on a watershed basis, EPA did not develop measures to evaluate key programs and activities, and its national outcome measures were not understandable, comparable, and reliable.

What We Recommend

We recommend that EPA address challenges to integrating watershed approach principles into its core programs, as well as obstacles identified by stakeholders concerning the watershed approach. EPA also needs to improve its strategic plans and performance measurement system that address the watershed approach. If EPA is committed to the watershed approach, it will make these needed improvements. EPA provided comments in response to our draft report. The Agency generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.