

# Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification *Outreach, Feedback, & Next Steps*

Office of Water  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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# Overview

- Quick overview of CWA 401 certification basics
- Concerns with current 401 regulations and practice
- Outreach feedback
- Discussion and comments

# CWA Section 401 Certification

Clean Water Act (CWA) §401 provides:

- No federal permit or license can be issued that may result in a discharge to waters of the United States

Unless:

- The state or authorized tribe certifies that the discharge is consistent with water quality requirements or waives certification

# What is Determined When Certifying?

A §401 certification indicates the activity would be consistent with:

- Effluent limitations for existing and new sources (CWA §§301, 302, 306)
- Water quality standards and implementation plans (§303)
- Toxic and pretreatment effluent standards (§307)
- Any other appropriate state/tribal requirements (§401(d))

# Potential Considerations for CWA 401 Cert

- **Grant** – federal agency proceeds to issue permit or license
- **Grant with conditions** – federal agency proceeds, but must include listed 401 cert conditions in resulting permit or license
- **Deny** – federal agency may not issue the permit or license
- **Waive explicitly or fails or refuses to act**– federal agency proceeds to issue permit or license

# CWA 401 Cert Timeframes

CWA 401(a)(1) provides any reasonable period not to exceed one year

- EPA regulations indicate the reasonable period determined by the permitting or licensing agency, generally considered as “6 months” (40 CFR 121.20)
  - ❑ Corps allows up to 6 months (33 CFR 336.1(b)(8)(iii))
  - ❑ FERC allows up to 1 year (18 CFR 4.34(b)(5)(iii))
  - ❑ EPA’s NPDES specific regulations provide up to 60 days from the date the draft permit is mailed to the certifying state agency for EPA-issued NPDES permits (40 CFR 124.53(c)(3))

# EPA Roles Regarding CWA 401

- EPA is charged with administering the CWA, including Section 401
  - General 401 certification regulations at 40 CFR part 121
  - Coordination with other federal agencies whose permits or licenses may be subject to section 401
- EPA issues NPDES permits subject to 401
  - 401 certification and EPA-issued NPDES permits regulations at 40 CFR 124

# EPA Roles Regarding CWA 401 (cont.)

- Certification on behalf of jurisdictions that do not have section 401 authority, including tribes
- Oversees CWA 401(a)(2) review by neighboring jurisdictions to raise issues on proposed permits or licenses that may affect their water quality
- Training and Guidance



# CWA 401 Certification Concerns

- EPA has heard from stakeholders about a number of CWA 401 certification concerns, including for example:
  - ❑ length of time for CWA 401 certification
  - ❑ scope of issues appropriately considered under CWA 401
  - ❑ availability of necessary information
  - ❑ enforcement of CWA 401 conditions
- Recently the Administration has raised the role of CWA 401 certification in the context of infrastructure projects

# Executive Order 13807

- Establishing Discipline and Accountability in the Environmental Review and Permitting Process for Infrastructure Projects (August 2017)
  - ❑ Established framework known as “One Federal Decision” for federal agency cooperation on environmental review and permitting for major infrastructure projects
  - ❑ Directs federal agencies to use a single, coordinated process for compliance with the NEPA and other federal environmental laws, including preparation of a single EIS and a single record of decision (ROD)
  - ❑ Directs that the NEPA process be completed within an average of two years
  - ❑ Directs that all federal permits for the project approved in the ROD be issued within 90 days after issuance of the ROD
  - ❑ Emphasis on early coordination and coordinated review procedures

# Executive Order 13868

- Promoting Energy Infrastructure and Economic Growth (April 2019)
  - ❑ Directs the EPA to review existing regulations and guidance and coordinate with states, tribes and relevant federal agencies to:
    - ❑ Issue new guidance for federal permitting agencies and state and tribal authorities;
    - ❑ Initiate rulemaking to clarify section 401 to allow for efficient permitting processes and increased regulatory certainty.

# Recent Outreach Efforts

- August 6<sup>th</sup> – Letter from David Ross sent to state associations and tribal organizations
- August 13<sup>th</sup> – Association of Clean Water Administrators meeting
- August 28-29<sup>th</sup> – Environmental Council of the States meeting
- September 10<sup>th</sup> – Association of State Wetland Managers call
- September 12<sup>th</sup> – National Tribal Water Council and National Tribal Caucus calls
- October 10<sup>th</sup> – Big Ten Intergovernmental Associations meeting
- October 24<sup>th</sup> – National Tribal Water Council call
- Throughout, numerous letters from states, tribes, and related organizations

# Feedback Received: States and State Associations

- Respect state authorities and not diminish water quality role of states
- Better integration with other environmental review and permitting processes
- Enhanced communication and coordination among Federal agencies, project applicants, and states/tribes

# Feedback Received: States and State Associations (cont.)

- Guidance on CWA 401 application and CWA 401 review process, reflecting best practices from states
- More training and/or guidance on CWA 401
- Proportional federal response; CWA 401 is not a significant issue in many states

# Feedback Received: Tribes and Tribal Organizations

- Recognize CWA 401 certification is an important water quality tool available for tribes, and reflect this importance in EPA actions
- Additional clarity regarding the timing of CWA 401 review

# Feedback Received: Tribes and Tribal Organizations (cont.)

- Much needed clarity regarding CWA 401(a)(2) neighboring jurisdiction consultation, including process and decision criteria for EPA
- Increased training and information regarding CWA 401 certification generally, including clear statements about how tribes may receive TAS for CWA 401 certification



# Potential Key Issues to Address

- Substance
  - ❑ Proper scope of CWA 401 considerations, including relevance of water quality and discharge
  - ❑ Information needs of states/tribes to process a request
- Process
  - ❑ Timing requirements/deadlines
  - ❑ Responsibilities of federal agencies, permittees, and states/tribes
  - ❑ Information coordination among involved parties

# Discussion and Comments

1. What are ways to increase coordination/information sharing between states, federal agencies, and project proponents? Are there any states or tribes that currently have a process in place that facilitates early information sharing?
2. What factors play a role in slowing down certification decision-making? What factors help speed up certification decision-making?
3. What federal permits and licenses subject to 401 certification for beyond CWA Section 402, 404, Rivers and Harbors Act, and FERC licenses?

# Discussion and Comments

- You may submit pre-proposal recommendations to **EPA-HQ-OW-2018-0855**
- Next webinar – May 8<sup>th</sup> (tentatively)
  - Please visit <https://epa.gov/cwa-401> for more details in the coming weeks