



At a Glance

Why We Did This Project

We conducted this audit to determine whether (1) the data collected and used to assess the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Research and Development's (ORD's) Strategic Measure (SM) 21—whether research products are meeting customer needs—provide a reasonable and accurate measure of customer satisfaction, and (2) the ORD faces any barriers when collecting data to support this measure.

The ORD was assigned objective 3.3 (prioritize robust science) in the EPA Fiscal Years (FYs) 2018–2022 Strategic Plan, and SM-21 was the strategic measure for that objective. Per the ORD, a product is a deliverable that results from a specific research project or task and is meant for use by an ORD customer. The ORD developed a data collection instrument for FY 2018 baseline data.

This report addresses the following:

- *Improving EPA research programs.*

Address inquiries to our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391 or OIG_WEBCOMMENTS@epa.gov.

List of [OIG reports](#).

EPA Office of Research and Development Needs to Address Barrier to Gathering External Customer Feedback

What We Found

The ORD is in the process of gathering internal customer satisfaction data for FY 2019. However, without sufficient data beyond the FY 2018 baseline, we cannot completely answer our first objective on whether the data collected and used to assess the ORD's SM-21 provides a reasonable and accurate measure of customer satisfaction.

Surveying non-federal external customers will widen the ORD's reporting under the strategic measure on whether research products meet customer needs.

With regard to our second objective, the ORD faces a key barrier of being significantly limited in surveying non-federal external customers when collecting data to support its strategic measure. Under the Paperwork Reduction Act, the ORD cannot survey more than nine non-federal external customers without approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The ORD is aware of this barrier and noted that, because of it, current SM-21 customer input is not representative of the ORD's full user base.

To address this barrier, the ORD is in the process of developing, for the OMB's approval, an information collection request to obtain non-federal external customer feedback. The information collection request is in draft and the ORD has not yet submitted it to the OMB for review. According to the ORD, the process to obtain approval from the OMB for the information collection request is expected to take as many as 18 months. Completing actions to address this barrier to gathering non-federal external input will widen the customer base the ORD could survey to determine whether its research products meet customer needs.

Recommendation and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the Assistant Administrator for Research and Development submit to the OMB for review an information collection request to be allowed to survey more than nine non-federal external customers regarding research products meeting customer needs. Should the OMB not grant approval of the information collection request, we recommend that the ORD develop alternatives to assess non-federal external customer satisfaction to more fully inform reporting under the strategic measure. The ORD concurred with our recommendation and plans to complete corrective actions by July 30, 2020 (July 30, 2021, in the event the OMB rejects the information collection request). Our recommendation is resolved with corrective actions pending.