



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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Washington, D.C. 20240

DIRECTOR'S ORDER #12: CONSERVATION PLANNING, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS, AND DECISION-MAKING

Approved: *Jonathan B. Jarvis*
Director
Effective Date: 10/5/2011

Duration: This order will remain in effect until updated or rescinded

This Order updates and replaces the 2001 edition. Together with Handbook 12, this Order supersedes and replaces any conflicting guidance issued previously.

Contents:

- 1. Background
- 2. Purpose and Scope
- 3. Authority
- 4. Instructions, Requirements, and Policies
 - 4.1 Sources of NEPA Guidance
 - 4.2 Director's Order and Handbook
 - 4.3 Full and Open Evaluation
 - 4.4 Interdisciplinary Approach Required
 - 4.5 Technical and Scientific Analysis
 - 4.6 Unknown or Uncertain Impacts
 - 4.7 Peer Review
 - 4.8 Alternative Dispute Resolution
 - 4.9 The Decision File
- 4.10 Prohibition on Impairment
- 4.11 Decision Documents
- 4.12 Evaluating Proposals by Others
- 5. Responsibilities
 - 5.1 Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science
 - 5.2 WASO Environmental Quality Division
 - 5.3 Regional Directors
 - 5.4 Park Superintendents
 - 5.5 Park Resource Specialists
 - 5.6 Project Managers and Contracting Officers

1. Background

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.), as amended, is landmark environmental protection legislation establishing as a goal for Federal decision-making a balance between use and preservation of natural and cultural resources. NEPA requires all Federal agencies to (1) prepare in-depth studies of the impacts of and alternatives to proposed "major Federal actions"; (2) use the information contained in such studies in deciding whether to proceed with the actions; and (3) diligently attempt to involve the interested and affected public before any decision affecting the environment is made. The 1916 National Park

Service Organic Act (16 U.S.C. 1 et seq.) directs the National Park Service to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." (16 U.S.C 1) Read together, the provisions of NEPA and the National Park Service Organic Act are consonant and jointly commit the Service to make informed decisions that perpetuate the conservation and protection of park resources unimpaired for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. Planning, environmental evaluation, and public involvement in management actions that may affect national park system resources are essential in carrying out the trust responsibilities of the National Park Service. Particularly in this era of heightened environmental concern, it is essential that NPS management decisions (1) be scientifically informed, and (2) insist on resource preservation as the highest of many worthy priorities.

2. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this Director's Order is to set forth the policy and procedures by which the NPS will comply with NEPA. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), part of the Executive Office of the President, is the "caretaker" of NEPA. The NPS will abide by all CEQ NEPA regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) and any other procedures and requirements imposed by other higher authorities, such as the Department of the Interior (DOI). This Order is not intended, however, to document all those procedures and requirements; for a comprehensive compilation, employees must refer to Handbook 12.

The NPS also administers a broad range of programs that form a vital part of the NPS mission and which may require NEPA compliance, but are not subject to the provisions of the 1916 Organic Act as they are generally unrelated to management of national park system units. Handbooks applicable to the specific programs should also be consulted for additional guidance.

3. Authority

Authority to issue this Order is contained in the NPS Organic Act and in delegations of authority found in Part 245 of the DOI Manual. This Order is intended only to improve the internal management of the NPS, and is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its departments, agencies, instrumentalities or entities, its officers or employees, or any other person.

4. Instructions, Requirements, and Policies

4.1 Sources of NEPA Guidance. The NPS will comply with the substantive and procedural requirements of NEPA, 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508, 43 CFR Part 46, 516 DM, and any additional NPS procedures or instructions regarding NEPA.

4.2 Director's Order and Handbook. References in NPS *Management Policies* to public involvement, alternative analysis, and environmental evaluation of NPS and other government actions on resources administered by the NPS are supplemented by this Order and Handbook 12.

The Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science will develop and issue Handbook 12, containing uniform Servicewide implementing procedures and such supplemental material as may be necessary to carry out NPS responsibilities under NEPA and related statutes. For NPS program activities unrelated to managing units of the national park system, directives and handbooks specific to those programs should also be consulted for more information. Where other directives and guidelines appear to differ from this Order and Handbook in the areas of impact analysis and other responsibilities under NEPA, this Order and Handbook take precedence.

4.3 Full and Open Evaluation. The procedures contained in Handbook 12 will ensure that both adverse and beneficial impacts of NPS proposed actions are fully and openly evaluated before actions are taken that may impact the human environment. This evaluation must include provisions for:

- Meaningful participation by the public and other stakeholders;
- Development and critical evaluation of alternative courses of action;
- Rigorous application of scientific and technical information in the planning, evaluation and decision-making processes;
- Use of NPS knowledge and expertise through interdisciplinary teams and processes; and
- Aggressive incorporation of mitigation measures, pollution prevention techniques, and other principles of sustainable park management in all actions.

4.4 Interdisciplinary Approach Required. Laws, regulations, and policies applicable to the NPS require interdisciplinary approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. NPS decisions need to reflect this approach as the standard for management within all park units. Both present and new NPS managers must consistently apply the principles of interdisciplinary decision-making in order to achieve our goals as resource stewards and “environmental leaders.” Benchmarks demonstrating best management processes in development, analysis, and review of projects (such as interdisciplinary teams and project review teams) will be established for use by parks and regions.

4.5 Technical and Scientific Analysis. Pursuant to NEPA and the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 (16 U.S.C. 5901 et seq.), NPS management decisions will be based on technical and scientific studies properly considered and appropriate to the decisions made. In making decisions, the NPS will articulate a reasoned connection between the technical and scientific information considered and the final agency action. Technical and scientific analyses of potential impacts that are essential in making a well-reasoned decision will be obtained even though such information may not be readily available. If such information cannot be obtained due to excessive cost or technical impossibility, the proposed alternative should be modified to eliminate the action causing the unknown or uncertain impact or another alternative may be selected.

4.6 Unknown or Uncertain Impacts. When it is not possible to modify alternatives to eliminate an activity with unknown or uncertain potential impacts, and such information is essential to making a well-reasoned decision, the NPS will follow the provisions of the CEQ regulations (40 CFR 1502.22). The NPS will include in the environmental document (1) a statement that such information is incomplete or unavailable; (2) a discussion of the relevance of

the incomplete or unavailable information to evaluating reasonably foreseeable significant adverse impacts on the human environment; (3) a summary of existing credible scientific evidence which is relevant to evaluating the reasonably foreseeable significant adverse impacts on the human environment; and (4) an evaluation of such impacts based upon theoretical approaches or research methods generally accepted in the scientific community. Reasonably foreseeable impacts—including impacts that have catastrophic consequences—will be included, even if their probability of occurrence is low, if such analysis (1) is supported by credible scientific evidence; (2) is not based on pure conjecture; and (3) is within the rule of reason. Scoping processes will be used to help determine data needs.

4.7 Peer Review. Peer review will be used to address conflicts among resource specialists regarding validity and interpretation of data and resource information. When conflicting information and opinions concerning resource impacts exists, managers must resolve such disputes. Peer review and similar mechanisms will be used as a primary method for resolution of such conflicts. These processes will be reflected in the decision file.

4.8 Alternative Dispute Resolution. In order to reduce the potential for litigation, relationships with established alternative dispute resolution providers and scientific professional societies will be established and used within the NEPA process, when appropriate, to provide a vehicle for resolution of internal and external disputes. In those instances where the NPS has been sued successfully under NEPA, or has settled litigation, a review and evaluation of the process will be conducted so that corrections can be made to improve our project planning, evaluation, and decision-making processes. (*See also Director's Order #93: Conflict Resolution.*)

4.9 The Decision File. Where an action undertaken by the NPS may cause an adverse effect on park resources, the decision file must reflect the manner in which park unit resource studies have been considered, alternatives examined, mitigations incorporated, and final decisions reached.

4.10 Prohibition on Impairment. In managing units of the national park system, the Service may undertake actions that have beneficial or adverse impacts (or both) on park resources and values. However, by the provisions of the laws governing the NPS, the Service is prohibited from taking or authorizing any action that would impair park resources or values unless specifically authorized by Congress. In addition, under other environmental laws, certain adverse impacts may be prohibited as well.

4.11 Decision Documents. Decisions described in findings of no significant impact (FONSI)s and records of decision (RODs) will record information as required by the CEQ NEPA regulations and by NPS policies and practices described in the Handbook accompanying this Order.

4.12 Evaluating Proposals by Others. The NPS will participate in the early and candid evaluation of proposals by other governmental or private entities to avoid adverse environmental impacts to NPS park units or other park or recreation resources subject to the provisions of Federal law. This is an essential element of effective NPS stewardship. When participating in

the environmental impact analysis processes of other entities, the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science will ensure that the NPS's responsibilities for commenting are clearly defined and that the Service and its personnel work with Federal, tribal, State, and local governments in identifying and evaluating potential impacts to resources under NPS jurisdiction or within areas of NPS expertise. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Consultation under provisions of Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act;
- Evaluation of noise, visual, or other impacts to national park system resources resulting from external activities;
- Hydropower re-licensing projects through Federal Energy Regulatory Commission procedures;
- Impacts of proposed projects on non-NPS areas that have benefited from NPS-administered partnership programs (e.g. Land and Water Conservation Fund, Rivers and Trails, National Natural Landmarks, National Register Properties, etc.);
- Analysis of cumulative ecosystem or other impacts upon the integrity of NPS administered resources; and
- The impacts of any Federal activity on other park resources.

Further, the NPS will provide to other agencies or project proponents responsive and professional evaluation of the potential impacts of their proposals, including whether such impacts may result in the derogation of national park system resources or values, or the derogation of other park and recreation resources subject to the provisions of Federal law. The purpose of these efforts will be to assist other agencies in avoiding or successfully mitigating impacts to resources and values of NPS units, or to NPS programs administered under other statutory or administrative authorities.

5. Responsibilities

5.1 The Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science is responsible for issuing and updating procedures for implementing this Order and will work cooperatively with other associate directors, regional directors, support offices, superintendents, and field personnel to ensure that training, technical assistance, and other resources are available and fully used to implement the legal, regulatory, and policy requirements of this order.

5.2 The WASO Environmental Quality Division, which reports to the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, will:

- Serve as the focal point for all matters relating to NEPA planning and other related environmental mandates;
- Provide technical assistance to parks and regions;
- Provide project management and coordination on nationally significant environmental impact analysis issues and proposals; and
- Coordinate NPS review of NEPA and other documents prepared by other agencies.

The Environmental Quality Division may provide policy review and clearance for NPS EISs on a case by case basis, depending on the level of controversy or policy issues involved in the proposed action. Information concerning NPS NEPA documents or the NEPA process can be obtained by contacting this office.

5.3 Regional directors are responsible to the Director for integrating the NEPA process into all regional activities and for NEPA planning in their regions. Regional directors are delegated the authority to approve most park-specific environmental impact statements (EISs) for public review and are responsible for approval of environmental assessments (EAs) for public review. Regional directors are delegated the authority to sign an ROD or FONSI. The Director retains signature and approval authority for proposals of nationwide application and may assume signature and approval authority for any proposal that is unusually controversial or that involves major policy issues.

Regional directors also accept or reject requests for the NPS to be a cooperating or joint lead agency on another agency's environmental documents.

Regional directors should designate a regional environmental coordinator or similar position for their particular region. Subject to the direction of the regional director, regional environmental coordinators:

- Have functional oversight responsibility for all environmental compliance activities within a given region;
- Usually are the point of contact with the Washington Office, Department of the Interior, Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance, and Solicitor's Office on significant environmental issues;
- Provide policy review for all NPS NEPA documents and coordinate external review for the region; and
- Serve as a resource to other NPS professionals for understanding the various environmental requirements under which the Service operates.

Regional directors should also designate an associate regional director to serve as a contact for the peer review and alternative dispute resolution processes described in paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8, above.

5.4 Park superintendents are responsible for day-to-day implementation of conservation planning and impact analysis activities related to parks under their administration. They must:

- Assure that within-park actions have been adequately analyzed, an adequate range of alternatives considered, and the public and other agencies appropriately involved;
- Assure that ample resource information appropriate to a decision is available, and the technical and scientific studies appropriate to analyze proposed actions are conducted;
- Assure that resource conflicts and allocations are adequately resolved before projects are implemented;
- Recommend EAs, EISs, RODs, and FONSI for approval by the regional director;
- Assure that all actions approved under a FONSI or ROD are implemented;
- Designate a park resource specialist to serve as coordinator for NEPA and related impact analysis activities;
- Assure that mitigation measures are included in projects once they are approved;
- Approve actions that fall under established NPS categorical exclusions; and
- Assure that park comments on external project proposals are consistent with NPS guidelines for review of non-NPS NEPA documents.

5.5 Park resource specialists, subject to the direction of the superintendent, are responsible for:

- Having knowledge of existing technical and scientific information on park resources and the quality of such information;
- Identifying additional resource information needs and technical and scientific studies necessary to ensure that ample resource information appropriate to analyze proposed actions is available;
- Serving as park NEPA coordinator to facilitate conservation planning and impact analysis;
- Having knowledge of impact analysis processes and procedures;
- Working with the park superintendent and other park staff to assure consideration of potential resource impacts in park proposals; and
- Working with contracting officers in parks, regions, and the Washington Office to ensure that mitigating measures identified in environmental documents are included in the subsequent contract documents implementing projects.

5.6 Project managers and contracting officers are responsible for working with park staff to assure that mitigating measures and other items identified in environmental documents to provide for resource protection are included in the subsequent documents implementing projects.

-----*End of Director's Order*-----