

Water Resources and Public Involvement

Public involvement is a critical part of nearly every project within the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. While the Corps strives to balance the needs of man and the environment, many times there are controversial or opposing viewpoints with a proposed water resource project. The Corps makes informed decisions based on scientific studies, careful analysis, and with much-needed input from stakeholders, state and federal agencies, and the public. The end goal is to avoid impacts to the environment, minimize impacts that can't be avoided, and compensate for the unavoidable impacts to the maximum extent practicable. The public is often given opportunities to provide input on the Corps' decision making process.

A recent example of public involvement is the scoping process for the Glades Reservoir Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Last year, Hall County, Ga., submitted an application to the Corps' Savannah District for a permit to construct and operate an 850-acre reservoir, with pipelines and associated facilities, to meet future water supply needs in Hall County.

Since the proposed action would involve the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters of the U.S., the Savannah district Regulatory division must evaluate it carefully in accordance with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

The project is proposed to be located upstream of Lake Lanier on the Chattahoochee River, which is part of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river basin. This widely-used water resource spans parts of Georgia, eastern Alabama and the Florida panhandle.

"There are many issues we consider to evaluate applications," said Richard Morgan, project manager with the Savannah district Regulatory division. "Are there alternatives to the project that would result in less environmental impacts? How would the project impact downstream flows at other reservoirs? How would the project affect air and water quality, fish and wildlife, or cultural resources? Our role is to examine all these issues and make a fair and balanced permit decision."

Considering the controversy of the decades-long "water wars" among the three states, the Corps decided to prepare an EIS on the Glades Reservoir project. An EIS is an extensive analysis of the social, economic and environmental impacts of a proposed project that provides a range of alternatives and recommends a course of action. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires an EIS for any major federal action that could significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

The first step in the NEPA process is a scoping period. During this time, the Corps meets with state and federal agencies, stakeholders and the public to inform them of the applicant's proposal and seek input on key issues or concerns. Scoping helps to identify and

define issues that need to be addressed in the EIS. The scoping period for the Glades Reservoir project began Feb. 17, 2012 with the release of a "Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS" and lasted for 60 days.

In March, a team from the Corps' Regulatory Division and third-party contractor, AECOM, who



David Crosby, deputy chief of the Regulatory Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District, speaks with a member of the public at the Glades Reservoir scoping meeting at Gainesville State College, March 20, 2012.

works under supervision of the Corps, traveled to three public scoping meetings in Oakwood, Ga., Auburn, Ala., and Eastpoint, Fla., to engage with stakeholders on the proposed project.

“We met with natural resource agencies in each state to explain the proposed project to them and identify concerns they had,” said Katie Freas of the Regulatory division’s field office at Lake Lanier. “We also had a public meeting each night in the three states to engage with members of the public and solicit their comments. It was a great example of being proactive to reach a wide base of stakeholders who may have concerns with the project or additional information we need to consider.”

“With so many people depending on us to have the headquarters ready, we focused on efficiency and ‘doing it right’ the first time.”

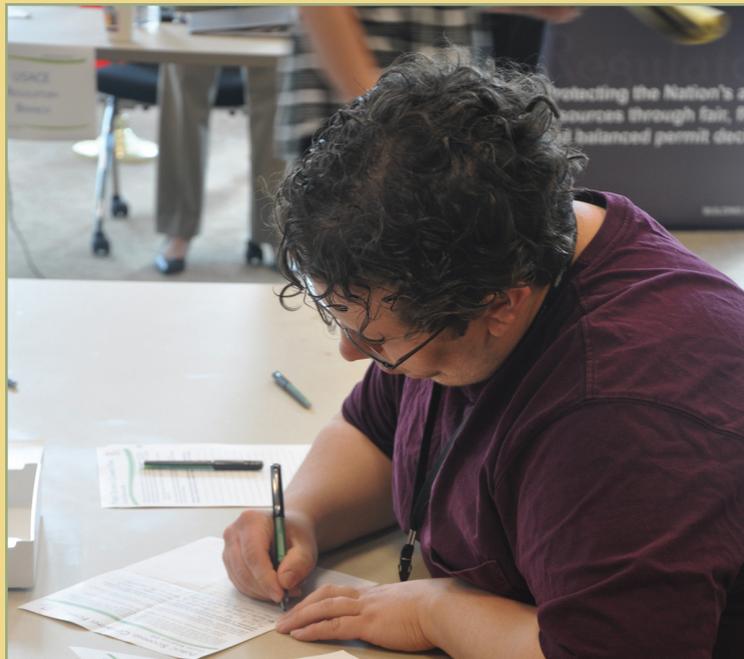
— Daniel Davis, Savannah District FORSCOM-USARC Resident Engineer.

After the scoping period, the Corps gathers comments and enters them into a scoping report, which becomes part of the EIS. Based on the issues identified in the scoping report, the team then prepares a draft EIS. The public has another chance to comment on the project. Often times, a public workshop or public hearing is part of the review period. Comments are then addressed in development of a final EIS. The final EIS also undergoes a public comment period. The final step is the signing of a Record of Decision, which essentially makes the permit decision. The entire process can take several years to complete, depending on the complexity of the project.

“The NEPA process ensures the public gets multiple opportunities to be involved in decision-making at the federal level,” said David Crosby, deputy chief of the Regulatory Division. “It enhances government transparency, it gives people a way for their voice to be heard, and it helps the Corps of Engineers make informed permitting decisions.”

For more information on the Glades Reservoir EIS, visit www.gladesreservoir.com 

*By Tracy Robillard
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A member of the public fills out a comment form at the Glades Reservoir scoping meeting at Gainesville State College, March 20, 2012.



Citizens learn about the proposed Glades Reservoir project area during a scoping meeting at Gainesville State College, March 20, 2012.