

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

Democracy in Action



Aspen grove on the Grand Mesa Uncompahgre Gunnison National Forests - Public involvement through NEPA protected groves such as this from a plan to clear cut hundreds of thousands of acres of aspen groves in Colorado.

What is the National Environmental Policy Act?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was enacted in 1969 by overwhelming bi-partisan majorities and signed into law in 1970. NEPA was the first major environmental law in the United States and established a national policy calling for “productive harmony” between man and nature. NEPA also created the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), which has primary responsibility in ensuring agencies meet their obligations under NEPA.

NEPA requires the federal agencies to fully assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions. This assessment ensures that major federal actions are grounded in rigorous scientific analysis and that our government’s decisions are made in a transparent manner, enabling the public to hold their government accountable. NEPA is an essential tool for providing citizens with adequate information about agency decisions and providing the public an opportunity to have a say in federal actions that impact their environment, their families’ health, and their quality of life.

How NEPA works

NEPA applies to all major federal actions that may significantly affect the environment. To comply with NEPA, federal agencies assess and disclose the potential environmental effects of their actions in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. At the heart of these assessments is an analysis of the proposed action and alternatives to that action. In preparing these documents, the agencies must summarize the environmental impacts of their proposed action and alternatives, as well as the interrelated economic, health, or social effects. This process provides citizens an opportunity to learn about the actions that federal agencies are proposing and offers agencies an opportunity to receive valuable input from the public, state and local governments, other agencies, and other stakeholders. Although NEPA does not require agencies to choose the most environmentally friendly option, it does require that agencies “look before they leap” and ensures that the effects of federal actions will not be overlooked or underestimated.

Does NEPA work?

Since its implementation, NEPA has made agencies take a hard look at the potential environmental consequences of their actions, and it has fostered unparalleled public participation in the agency decision-making process. Through NEPA, state and local governments, Indian tribes, and countless citizens have taken the opportunity to be involved in the federal government’s decisions, contributing to better decision-making by the government. NEPA has given the public access to information about decisions that affect the places and resources they value, and enabled citizens to offer important input on the potential environmental, social, and economic effects that a proposed federal action may have.

Thanks to NEPA, communities and individuals can participate in countless federal decisions, such as decisions on visitor access to our National Seashores, the permitting of a hazardous waste landfill next to a school, or the decision to build a new highway that would entail bulldozing a local park. NEPA has achieved the aims that Congress intended in enacting it, helping our government to strive toward the lofty goal set forth in the act “to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans.”

For more information, please contact:

Stephanie Young, NEPA Campaign Director, (202) 429-3947, stephanie@saveourenvironment.org