

The Water Quality Framework – Next Steps Towards Improved Accountability

What's the Issue?

In the early to mid-2000s, many Clean Water Act programs designed and developed data systems to track water quality information to meet their specific program needs. As a result, water quality information has been tracked in multiple data systems, and linking information across systems has been difficult, and sometimes resulted in unclear and inconsistent communication about water quality. And, the public remains unable to answer basic questions about their waters, which include:

- Is water quality getting better?
- What is the quality of the water in the stream in my neighborhood?
- Where water quality is poor, what's being done, and are those activities working?

EPA and state water quality data systems need to be integrated to:

- support evidence-based decision making by water quality managers
- accurately and clearly describe the condition of the Nation's waters
- track the success or failure of actions taken to help waters attain standards, and
- reduce the reporting burden for states and streamline EPA's processes

What was the intervention?

After conducting a retrospective review,¹ EPA created the Water Quality Framework to align and integrate the disconnected water quality data systems.

The Framework:

- links water quality monitoring data from hundreds of sources,
- provides analysis tools to screen and interpret water quality data,
- displays water quality assessment conditions at the national, state, and local scale, and
- tracks actions aimed at helping to attain water quality standards.

How was performance management useful?

A key goal of the Framework is to increase transparency about water quality, and the new 303(d) program performance measures² are one mechanism to achieve this goal. In 2013, the EPA, in collaboration with states, developed the 303(d) Program Vision.³ The Vision lends itself to states collaborating across Clean Water Act Programs and among various stakeholders to identify priorities and plans that will lead to water quality improvements and restoration, and maintenance of healthy waters.

One component of the new measures is the ability to view on a map the location of state identified priorities and those that have plans to improve or maintain water quality. This new

¹ [Final Report: Reducing Reporting Burden under Clean Water Act Sections 303\(d\) and 305\(b\)](#)

² More information about these measures (WQ-27 and WQ-28) can be found in the [FY 2016-2017 National Water Program Guidance](#) on pages 47 and 95.

³ [A Long-Term Vision for Assessment, Restoration and Protection under the Clean Water Act Section 303\(d\) Program](#)

direction in reporting on measures is an evidence-based approach that integrates data from the national, state, and local scale that will show the effectiveness of the EPA and state investment in water quality. Also, this approach will provide greater accountability and transparency while supporting more flexibility in how the EPA and states achieve the Clean Water Act goal to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the Nation's waters.

EPA will be able to report FY2016 end-of-year results for the new 303(d) Program measure, which is a major accomplishment. These results will help water quality managers at the national, state, and local level make strategic decisions about where to put resources and effort to help achieve water quality goals.

What was the impact?

The Framework will lead to improved transparency and accountability in reporting on the status of the Nation's waters. We will be able to answer questions about the health of America's waters at all levels: local, state, regional, and national. Where water quality is poor, we will know what actions are taking place to clean up those waters and whether or not those actions are producing results.

The new performance measures flowing out of the Framework will improve cross-program integration and communication among stakeholders, and allow states increased flexibility in how they go about attaining water quality standards.

The Framework ties national, state, and local information together to tell the complete story about water quality while reducing the burden (e.g., time and money) for the EPA and states to show successes in water quality.⁴

⁴ The EPA is currently working with tribes to develop approaches and metrics for capturing successes by tribes and reducing reporting burden.