

SESSION 11

SPECIAL TOPIC: ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE FOR WATER PROVISION

SESSION SUMMARY.

This Special Topic session will address environmental compliance for USAID-funded water provision activities. Participants will understand the types of water quality monitoring and testing requirements that might apply, as well as the tools and resources available to support the provision of safe water.

Access to safe water is central to the recovery and/or development of any community. In addition to meeting basic human health needs (for, e.g., drinking, cooking, bathing, etc.), the increased use of water for agricultural irrigation can accelerate economic growth and improve livelihoods. USAID supports a range of activities in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and agricultural sectors, many of which entail the establishment of new water access points or the rehabilitation of existing structures or systems. In these scenarios USAID must assure that water supplies meet certain quality criteria for domestic and agricultural purposes. As such, water safety is a key aspect of environmental compliance for any water provision effort.

Prior to defining specific compliance criteria, such as water testing or monitoring requirements, all water provision-related activities are subject to environmental review consistent with Reg. 216. Certain water provision activities are defined by Reg. 216 as high-risk—“classes of actions” expected “to have a significant effect on the environment”—and will likely require preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA). This includes irrigation projects (including dams and impoundments), and drinking water and sewerage projects. In both cases, however, exceptions are typically made for activities that are considered small-scale; small-scale irrigation and WASH interventions normally do not require the preparation of an EA. For such activities an Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) can usually provide sufficient analysis to identify potential adverse impacts and define mitigating measures (e.g., IEE conditions).

Once the appropriate Reg. 216 environmental compliance documentation is prepared and approved, USAID will need to ensure that the water it provides is safe for its intended purpose over the life of the project. That is to say that Agency responsibility for safe water provision does not stop with the IEE (or EA)—it will depend on continuous management and oversight. Community engagement and support from beneficiaries is critical. So, too, is quantitative testing of water quality to ensure it meets applicable standards. However, water quality testing often presents a practical challenge for project staff. In addition to the logistical demand of initial testing and monitoring across many, potentially dispersed systems or water access points, certain tests may require refrigeration, incubation and laboratory analysis. This can present significant barriers to providing USAID with the information it needs to fulfill its oversight responsibilities.

In order to better implement IEE conditions and meet applicable standards USAID may require preparation of a Water Quality Assurance Plan (WQAP). The WQAP specifies testing and monitoring criteria, as well as corrective measures to be taken if safe water is at risk. The Agency has prepared a range of resources to support the WQAP process, including templates and step-by-step guidance. Additional resources in this area include the Sector Environmental Guideline (SEG) for WASH.