

CAL/EPA RECOMMENDED GUIDANCE ON SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

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A. Introduction

In settlement of environmental enforcement cases, Cal/EPA's Boards, Departments and Offices (BDOs) and local counterparts must insist upon terms that require defendants/respondents achieve and maintain compliance with environmental laws and regulations and where appropriate, pay a penalty for violations. The recovery of economic benefit and the imposition of additional gravity based penalties should be considered in every case. Additional relief remediating the adverse public health or environmental consequences of the violations at issue should be included in the settlement to offset the effects of the particular violation. As part of the settlement, the agreement may require the defendant/respondent to undertake supplemental environmentally beneficial expenditures that exceed regulatory requirements. These additional projects are known as supplemental environmental projects, or SEPs.

Evidence of a violator's commitment and ability to perform a SEP is factor in determining whether a SEP is appropriate. Although SEPs may not be appropriate in all instances, they can play an important part of an effective enforcement program. SEPs can play a role in securing additional significant environmental or public health protection. SEPs may be particularly appropriate to further the objectives in the statutes administered by the BDOs and local agencies, and to achieve policy goals such as pollution prevention and environmental restoration.

B. SEP Procedure

In evaluating a proposed project to determine if it qualifies as a SEP, the following five-step procedure may be used:

1. Ensure that the project meets the basic definition of SEP (See Section C).
2. Ensure that all legal guidelines, including nexus, are satisfied (See Section D).
3. Ensure that the project fits within one (or more) categories of SEPs (See Section E).
4. Ensure that the cost of the project is appropriate in relationship to the fines paid (See Section F).
5. Ensure that the project satisfies all of the implementation and other criteria. (See Section G, H and I).

This guidance is intended to apply to all civil judicial and administrative enforcement actions taken under the authority of the environmental statutes and regulations administered by the Cal/EPA BDOs. It may also be used by local authorities enforcing related environmental ordinances and codes. Claims for stipulated penalties for violations of orders or settlement agreements should not be mitigated by the use of a SEP. This guidance is intended to assist in the settlement of an enforcement action, and thus is not intended for use by any party at a hearing or trial. In addition, the amount of any penalty mitigation that may be given for a SEP is strictly within the discretion of the administering agency, as is the determination of whether the use of a SEP is appropriate in any particular case.

C. Definition and Key Characteristics of a SEP

Supplemental environmental projects are defined as environmentally beneficial projects that a defendant/respondent agrees to undertake in settlement of an enforcement action, but which the defendant/respondent is not otherwise legally required to perform. The three key parts of this definition are elaborated as follows:

1. “Environmentally beneficial” means a SEP must improve, protect, or reduce risks to public health or the environment at large. While in some cases a SEP may provide the alleged violator with certain benefits, there must be no doubt that the project primarily benefits the public health or the environment.
2. “In settlement of an enforcement action” means (1) The enforcing agency has the opportunity to help shape the scope of the project before it is implemented; and (2) the project is not commenced until after the enforcing agency has identified a violation (e.g., issued a notice of violation, administrative order, or complaint).
3. “Not otherwise legally required to perform” means the SEP is not required by a federal, state, or local law or regulation. Further, SEPs cannot include actions that the defendant/respondent may be legally required to perform, such as:
 - a. Injunctive relief in the instant case, or in another legal action that an enforcement agency could bring;
 - b. part of an existing settlement or order in another legal action; or
 - c. federal, state or local requirements.

SEPs may include activities that the defendant/respondent will become legally obligated to undertake two or more years in the future. Such “accelerated compliance” projects are not allowable, however, if the regulation or statute provides a benefit (e.g., a higher emission limit) to the defendant/respondent for early compliance.

Performance of a SEP reduces neither the stringency nor timeliness requirements of applicable environmental statutes and regulations. Of course, performance of a SEP does not alter the defendant/respondent's obligation to remedy a violation expeditiously and return to compliance.

For many of these projects, the defendant/respondent may lack the experience, knowledge or ability to conduct and /or implement the project. In these instances the defendant/respondent should be required to contract with an appropriate expert to develop and implement the compliance promotion project

D. Legal Guidelines

Environmental regulatory agencies have broad discretion to settle cases, including the discretion to include a SEP as an appropriate part of the settlement. The legal evaluation of whether a proposed SEP is within the regulatory agencies' authority and consistent with all statutory and constitutional requirements may be a complex task and should be thoroughly evaluated by the individual agency.

As noted by the Attorney General, statutes and case law allow administrative agencies to settle cases prior to trial or hearing containing sanctions that an agency would not otherwise have the authority to impose (Attorney General Opinion No. 00-510, July 25, 2000). The Attorney General also notes the ability to enter into creative settlements is limited by the caveat that no such settlement shall violate public policy and must further the goals and purposes of the agency. The Opinion concluded that an agency may not enter into a settlement that requires payment of funds that support activities unrelated to the regulatory enforcement responsibilities of the agency.

With this in mind, the following are required when a SEP is considered:

1. A project cannot be inconsistent with any provision of the underlying statutes. In addition a project shall advance at least one of the declared objectives of the environmental statutes that are the basis of the enforcement action.
2. All projects should have adequate "nexus" to the regulatory enforcement responsibilities of the agency. Nexus is the relationship between the violation and the proposed project. This relationship exists if the project remediates or reduces the probable overall environmental or public health impacts or risks to which the violation at issue contributes, or if the project is designed to reduce the likelihood that similar violations will occur in the future.
3. The type and scope of each SEP should be clearly defined in the signed settlement document. Thus a SEP that has terms that are intended to be defined after the settlement document is entered into should be avoided.

E. Categories of Supplemental Environmental Projects

There are several types of projects that may be appropriate as SEPs:

1. Environmental Compliance Promotion

An environmental compliance promotion project provides training, technical support, or publication media to other members of the regulated community to: (1) identify, achieve and maintain compliance with applicable statutory and regulatory requirements; (2) avoid committing a violation with respect to such statutory and regulatory requirements; or (3) go beyond compliance by reducing the generation, release or disposal of pollutants beyond legal requirements. Acceptable projects may include, for example, producing or sponsoring a seminar directly related to correcting widespread or prevalent violations within the defendant/respondent's economic sector.

Environmental compliance promotion SEPs are acceptable where the primary impact of the project is focused on the same regulatory program requirements that were violated, and where the administering agency has reason to believe that compliance in the sector would be significantly advanced by the proposed project. The defendant/respondent should be required to note in any promotional material or credits that the production of the promotion is in response to an enforcement action against the respondent/defendant.

2. Enforcement Projects

Such projects may include contributions to environmental enforcement, investigation and training programs as provided in Penal Code section 14300 and/or contributions to nonprofit organizations such as the California District Attorneys Association, the Californian Hazardous Materials Investigators Association and the Western States Project. These supplemental projects should be consistent with the settlement contribution guidelines for these respective organizations,.

3. Emergency Planning and Preparedness

An emergency planning and preparedness project provides assistance, such as computers and software, equipment, or training, to an emergency response or planning entity. This is to enable these organizations to fulfill their obligations under the federal Emergency Right to Know Act and state statutes to collect information to assess the dangers of hazardous chemicals present at facilities within their jurisdiction, to develop emergency response plans, to train emergency response personnel and to better respond to chemical spills.

Emergency planning and preparedness SEPs are acceptable where the primary impact of the project is within the same emergency planning district affected by the violations.

4. Pollution Prevention

A pollution prevention project is one which reduces the generation of pollution through “source reduction,” i.e., any practice which reduces the amount of any hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant entering any waste stream or otherwise being released into the environment prior to recycling, treatment or disposal. (After the pollutant or waste stream has been generated, pollution prevention is no longer possible, and the waste must be handled by appropriate recycling, treatment, containment, or disposal methods.)

Source reduction may include equipment or technology modifications, process or procedure modification, reformulation or redesign of products, substitution of raw materials, and improvements in housekeeping, maintenance, training, inventory control, or other operation and maintenance procedures. Pollution prevention also includes any project that protects natural resources through conservation or increased efficiency in the use of energy, water, or other materials. “In-process recycling,” wherein waste materials produced during a manufacturing process are returned directly to production as raw materials on site, is considered a pollution prevention project.

In all cases, for a project to meet the definition of pollution prevention, there must be an overall decrease in the amount and/or toxicity of pollution released to the environment, not merely a transfer of pollution among media. This decrease may be achieved directly or through increased efficiency (conservation) in the use of energy, water, or other materials.

5. Pollution Reduction

If the pollutant or waste stream already has been generated or released, a pollution reduction approach, which employs recycling, treatment, containment or disposal techniques, may be appropriate. A pollution reduction project is one which results in a decrease in the amount and/or toxicity of any hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant entering any waste stream, or otherwise being released into the environment by an operating business or facility by a means which does not qualify as “pollution prevention.” This may include the installation of more effective end-of-process control or treatment technology. This also includes “out-of-process recycling,” wherein industrial waste collected after the manufacturing process and/or consumer waste materials are used as raw materials for production off-site, reducing the need for treatment, disposal, or consumption of energy or natural resources.

6. Environmental Restoration and Protection

An environmental restoration and protection project is one that goes beyond repairing the damage caused by the violation to enhance the condition of the ecosystem or immediate geographic area adversely affected. These projects may be used to restore or protect natural environments (such as ecosystems) and man-made environments such as facilities and buildings. Also included, is any project that protects the ecosystem from actual or potential damage resulting from the violation or improves the overall condition of the ecosystem. Examples of such projects include: restoration of a wetland in the same ecosystem in which the

facility is located; projects which provide for the protection of threatened or endangered species by improving critical habitat impacted by facility operations; or purchase and management of a watershed area by the defendant/respondent to protect a drinking water supply where the violation, e.g., a reporting violation, did not directly damage the watershed, but potentially could lead to damage due to unreported discharges.

With regards to man-made environments, such projects may involve the remediation of facilities and buildings provided such activities are not otherwise legally required. This includes the removal/mitigation of contaminated materials, such as soils, asbestos and leaded paint, which are a continuing source of releases and/or threat to individuals.

7. Public Health

A public health project provides diagnostic, preventative and/or remedial components of human health care that is related to the actual or potential damage to human health caused by the violation. This may include epidemiological data collection and analysis, medical examinations of potentially affected persons, collection and analysis of blood/fluid/tissue samples, medical treatment and rehabilitation therapy. Public health SEPs are acceptable only where the primary benefit of the project is to the population that was harmed or put at risk by the violations.

8. Other Types of Projects

Other types of projects may be determined to have environmental merit that do not fit within the above categories but are otherwise fully consistent with all other provisions of this guidance.

9. Projects that are Not Acceptable as SEPs

The following are examples of the types of projects that should not be allowable as SEPs:

- a. General education or public environmental awareness projects, e.g., sponsoring public seminars, conducting tours of environmental controls at a facility, or promoting recycling in a community.
- b. Conducting a project, which, though beneficial to a community, is unrelated to environmental protection, e.g., making a contribution to charity, or donating playground equipment.

F. Penalties

Even when conditions exist which justify the approval of a SEP, the penalty policies of the BDOs should still require that an adequate monetary penalty be assessed. This penalty should be sufficient to provide a deterrent effect as well as to remove any unfair competitive advantage or economic benefit gained by the facility defendant/respondent's prior noncompliance. Penalties help create the level playing field that businesses require to adequately address their environmental compliance needs, by ensuring that violators do not obtain an unfair economic

advantage over their competitors. Allowing “one free bite of the apple” is a disincentive for voluntary compliance, hurts law abiding businesses and requires the regulator to become the compliance manager for business, a function that is neither appropriate or within our limited resources. Penalties also encourage regulated entities to adopt pollution prevention and recycling strategies in order to minimize their pollutant discharges and reduce their potential liabilities.

In general, supplemental projects should be no more than 25 percent of the total settlement, exclusive of projected administrative costs.

G. Oversight and Drafting Enforceable SEPs

The settlement agreement should accurately and completely describe the SEP. It should describe the specific actions to be performed by the defendant/respondent, and provide for a reliable and objective means to verify that the defendant/respondent has timely completed the project. This may require the defendant/respondent to submit periodic reports to the appropriate government agency or court. If an outside auditor is necessary to conduct this oversight, the defendant/respondent should be made responsible for the cost of any such activities in the settlement document. The defendant/respondent remains responsible for the quality and timeliness of any actions performed or any reports prepared or submitted by the auditor. A final report certified by an appropriate corporate official, and evidencing completion of the SEP, should be required.

The defendants/respondents should be required to quantify the benefits associated with the project and provide a report setting forth how the benefits were measured or estimated. The defendant/respondent should agree that whenever it publicizes a SEP or the results of the SEP, it will state in a prominent manner that the project is being undertaken as part of the settlement of an enforcement action.

Settlements should specify that enforcing agencies are entitled to oversee SEP implementation to ensure that a project is conducted pursuant to the provisions of the settlement. The settlement should specify the legal recourse if the SEP is not adequately performed to the agency's satisfaction whether the SEP is performed by the violator or a third party contractor. Government should not retain authority to manage or administer the SEP.

The type, scope, and timing of each project are determined in the signed settlement agreement. Settlements in which the defendant/respondent agrees to spend a certain sum of money on a project(s) to be determined later are not recommended, however on a case by case basis where it is impractical to include the specifics of a project because it is not identified or fully developed at the time of the settlement, the violator should be required to open an escrow account and place funds in the account prior to finalizing settlement. This account would then be utilized to finance the projects as they are developed.

If necessary, there should also be a commitment in the SEP for long term monitoring and upkeep of the SEP. For example, if the SEP requires the construction of a wetland, then there should be a continuing input of water to the wetland so it retains its wetland character.

Pollution prevention, reduction, or environmental restoration projects should be defined narrowly for purposes of meeting supplemental environmental project policy guidelines. They should only be eligible as supplemental projects if they are designed to reduce, prevent, or ameliorate the effects of pollution at the defendant/respondent's facility or environ, as appropriate.

A defendant/respondent's offer to conduct a study regarding they own facility and/or operations, without an accompanying commitment to implement the results should not be eligible for penalty reduction.

The enforcing agency has sole discretion to decide whether it is technically and/or economically feasible to implement the results. There should be a clause in the agreement specifying that the penalty "offset" will be rescinded and the final assessed penalty reinstated in full should the agency decide that the results can be implemented but the defendant/respondent is unwilling to do so.

The form of SEPs easiest to oversee and implement are those that require a donation to a third party made at the time settlement is entered into. More difficult are those that require defendant/respondent to carry on activity over a period of time. These SEPs can require significant staff time to oversee and may be difficult to enforce if difficulties re encountered.

H. Failure of a SEP and Stipulated Penalties

If a SEP is not completed satisfactorily, the defendant/respondent should be required pursuant to the terms of the settlement document, to pay stipulated penalties for its failure. The determination of whether the SEP has been satisfactorily completed (i.e., pursuant to the terms of the agreement) and whether the defendant/respondent has made a good faith, timely effort to implement the SEP is at the sole discretion of the enforcing agency.

I. Documentation and Confidentiality

In each case in which a SEP is included as part of a settlement, an explanation of the SEP with supporting materials must be included as part of the settlement agreement. The explanation of the SEP should demonstrate that the criteria set forth herein are met by the project and include a description of the expected benefits associated with the SEP. Settlement agreements should not allow that documentation and explanations of a SEP are confidential.