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JANUARY 2002

## Democracy On-Line

*An Evaluation of the National Dialogue on Public  
Involvement in EPA Decisions*

THOMAS C. BEIERLE



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# Democracy On-Line

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## *Acknowledgements*

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The author would like to thank Charlie Atherton, Patricia Bonner, Barbara Brandon, Bob Carlitz, Lisa Kahn, Laurie Maak, Rich Puchalsky, and Andrea Stoeckel for their insightful comments on this report. Thanks also go to Maria Reff for her invaluable research assistance and to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for funding this evaluation.





# Democracy On-Line

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## *Executive Summary*

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The National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions (the Dialogue) brought together 1,166 people in July 2001 for a two-week on-line discussion of public participation at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).<sup>1</sup> EPA designed the Dialogue to complement the formal notice-and-comment process for its draft Public Involvement Policy (PIP) and to solicit ideas for implementing the PIP. Although participants' submissions did not constitute formal public comments, it was the first time that EPA (and perhaps any federal agency) had so highly integrated a sophisticated on-line participation process into its decision-making.

This report evaluates the Dialogue as a case study of electronic public participation. It examines the dynamics of the participation process and how participants felt about it. It describes the quality of communication when public participation moves from the meeting room to the computer screen. Finally, it looks at what participants and EPA got out of the process.

The Dialogue took the form of messages posted to a Web site and linked together (or "threaded") into ongoing conversations among participants. Participants read and posted messages at their convenience, resulting in exchanges that evolved over hours and days. Information Renaissance, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization, conducted the day-to-day planning and management of the Dialogue in cooperation with lead staff at EPA. Information Renaissance received contract funding from EPA and grant funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to conduct the Dialogue. Resources for the Future received grant funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to conduct this evaluation.

By most of the criteria one could use to evaluate the Dialogue, it was a great success. Most people reported being satisfied by the process and thought similar on-line Dialogues should be conducted in the future. Communication in the Dialogue was rich and respectful. Both participants and EPA staff reported learning a great deal, and EPA now has much broader input to use as it goes about finalizing and implementing its Public Involvement Policy.

Certainly some problems emerged during the process. Participants raised concerns that there was too much participation by "experts" rather than average citizens. The "digital divide" appeared to exclude certain segments of the population that EPA has had a hard time reaching in the past. Many people found it difficult to keep up with the volume of messages. Some people charged that messages critical of EPA were downplayed in discussions and daily summaries.

Most of the problems, however, are challenges that future dialogues can overcome through experience and experimentation. As an early effort in on-line public participation, the Dialogue was quite remarkable. It was a clear improvement over the notice-and-comment process that it

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1. The Dialogue archive and all related material can be found at: <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/>.

complemented. By combining broad participation with the intensive interaction typically found only in small-group participation processes, on-line dialogues offer a whole new approach to public involvement.

This Executive Summary briefly highlights the most important aspects of the Dialogue and its evaluation.

***A large number of people participated, creating complex communication dynamics.***

By the end of the Dialogue, 1,166 people from all over the country had registered to participate; they represented a broad range of interest groups, “average citizens,” government agencies, and other organizations. A total of 1,261 messages were posted by 320 people. Many more people read the messages and daily summaries: Web site data suggest that participants read about 70 messages for each message posted.

After an initial burst of introductions and discussion in the first three days, participation leveled off to about 40 to 60 people posting 90 to 130 messages each day. Throughout the Dialogue, new voices kept emerging; 29 people posted their first message on the last two days alone.

The amount of time people spent participating differed considerably. As with other dialogues of this type, a relatively small group of people provided a large percentage of the total messages. This “inner circle” was largely representative of the affiliations and points of view of the larger group and had a high degree of experience in public participation at EPA and other government agencies. The inner circle didn’t necessarily dominate the discussion, though: many of the discussion topics were actually initiated by those who participated less. In a followup survey, most of the participants reported that the Dialogue was not dominated by a few people.

A group of recruited EPA hosts and expert panelists introduced each day’s topic and kept the Dialogue moving forward. They supplied a useful and appreciated function, but sometimes their active participation risked crowding out other participants.

***Participants were highly satisfied with the process.***

In a followup survey, 76% of respondents rated the Dialogue experience as very or somewhat positive, and only 9% rated it as very or somewhat negative. EPA should definitely or probably conduct such dialogues in the future, according to 87% of respondents, and only 4% said the agency should definitely or probably not conduct future on-line dialogues. A large number of participants thought that EPA should use on-line dialogues only in conjunction with traditional participation processes, mainly because of concerns about who has access to computers.

***By combining broad participation with the intensive interaction typically found only in small-group participation processes, on-line dialogues offer a whole new approach to public involvement.***

***The process increased the number of voices heard, but the voices were not necessarily new.***

The Dialogue clearly reached a much larger and more geographically diverse group than could ever have participated in person. However, moving participation on-line may have distanced EPA even more from those who have historically had little interaction with the agency.

Participants reported being very familiar with EPA and its public participation processes (although there were some interesting exceptions). This created a tension between the benefits of having a highly experienced group of participants and the disadvantage of perceptions that the “experts were just talking to each other.”

Participants were not representative of the broader U.S. population in terms of age, education, race, gender, and computer usage. Some of the discrepancies are consistent with what one would expect from the “digital divide.” That said, representatives of environmental justice organizations and tribal governments did participate in the Dialogue. Discussions about environmental justice, access of low-income citizens to environmental information, and the concerns of tribal governments were prominent on various days of the Dialogue.

***Communication in the Dialogue was good, but many found it difficult to participate.***

The quality of communication in the Dialogue was high in a number of respects. Participants were well informed about the issues at hand, and they approached them from a variety of points of view. There was a high degree of interchange as participants responded to each other, debated issues, and answered questions. EPA staff replied to messages, sometimes in refreshingly direct and informal exchanges, but at other times in overly formal and legalistic language. Communication was highly respectful, and the Dialogue kept moving forward through its agenda while still giving participants flexibility to discuss what they wanted.

Some communication problems did emerge, however. Foremost was people’s difficulty in keeping up with the flood of messages and the large number of conversations going on at any one time. Many people did not have time to read all the messages, and they relied heavily on daily summaries. The Dialogue could probably have taken better advantage of some critical voices that emerged, using them as starting points to examine how ideals and “best practices” can break down when confronted with reality.

Participants offered a variety of solutions to some of the communication problems. Ideas about different formats, software features, and norms of behavior for both participants and agencies were all offered to improve the effectiveness of future dialogues.

***Participants learned much, networked a little, and felt they would have some influence on EPA policy and practice.***

Participants reported learning a great deal from the Dialogue, mainly about each other. In the survey, 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned a great deal about how other participants view public participation. Networking was less a part of the Dialogue; only 27% of survey respondents said they had made contacts that they planned to follow up on.

Over half the participants (59%) thought their participation would have at least some influence on EPA's Public Involvement Policy and its implementation. Others weren't sure, but only 21% thought they would have little or no influence. It is too early to tell how much influence the process will actually have, but EPA largely followed best practices in terms of being clear about the public's role and providing feedback on what the agency learned from the Dialogue.

***EPA accomplished its goal of garnering broader input about what it does right and wrong. It also opened up new lines of communication with the public, encouraged a few more formal comments on the Public Involvement Policy, and generated some public good will.***

EPA largely met its goals of getting more, and more diverse, input into the PIP and its implementation. Lead agency staff members have already begun the process of incorporating information from the Dialogue into the PIP implementation plan. Because many of the EPA participants were already deeply involved in public participation, much of the public input they heard was not necessarily new. However, agency staff cited a number of ways in which the public input would be useful. Moreover, the number of agency staff who were participating in the Dialogue was high—many more than would be involved in most conceivable off-line forms of public participation.

The Dialogue generated only about 10 to 15 additional formal comments on the PIP. Interestingly, many fewer people actually commented than said they would when surveyed after the Dialogue.

EPA staff never suggested that they were conducting the Dialogue to generate public goodwill, but they generated some of it anyway. Forty-three percent of those surveyed reported feeling more positive about the agency after the Dialogue, and only 6% reported feeling more negative. Even many of those who came to the process critical of EPA reported having an improved image of the agency at the end of the Dialogue.

## ***Conclusion***

As an experiment in on-line public participation, the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions was highly successful. It demonstrated that on-line dialogues are a viable approach to public participation and are significantly different from more traditional methods. The Dialogue turned a static commenting process into an interactive and dynamic discussion. It involved vastly more (and different) people than had previously provided input in the Public Involvement Policy. Unlike any other form of public participation, it allowed people to participate as much or as little as they wanted without any sort of selection process or agency control. And what they were participating in was an interactive dialogue usually found only in small-group processes.

Many of the problems that arose during the Dialogue can largely be addressed through future changes in design, software, and norms of participation. Others may be addressed through societal trends in computer ownership, use, and familiarity. Like any new format for participation, on-line dialogues need to evolve through an iterative process of experimentation and learning.

To advance the use and development of electronic dialogues and to build on the success of EPA's Dialogue, the administration and Congress should do the following:

- The President should establish a stakeholder task force on electronic democracy to review experience-to-date with electronic democracy initiatives, develop guiding principles for future electronic democracy efforts, and draft proposed legislation as appropriate.
- Through an executive order, the president should encourage all federal agencies to conduct pilot on-line public dialogues in conjunction with traditional participation processes for rulemaking and policy formulation activities. The executive order should encourage agencies to consider electronic democracy in their electronic government planning efforts.
- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should issue a bulletin on on-line dialogues, clarifying how they relate to the Paperwork Reduction Act, the Privacy Act, and other relevant legislation.
- Congress should make funding available for a broad research program, perhaps housed in an interdisciplinary research center, designed to: 1) evaluate agency dialogues, 2) research administrative law issues related to on-line dialogues, 3) develop information technology tools for electronic democracy, and 4) provide training to agency staff.
- Congress should make funding available to expand computer access in poor and minority communities in order to assure equal access to electronic democracy processes. Programs should consider the purchase of hardware and software and the provision of grants for encouraging libraries, community centers, businesses, and other institutions to make better use of existing information technology resources.
- OMB should develop a process by which electronic government resources related to rulemaking, permitting, and other policymaking activities are reviewed for consistency with principles of electronic democracy and for compatibility with electronic democracy processes such as electronic dialogues.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Introduction*

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**F**rom July 10 to July 20, 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hosted an on-line event that brought together 1,166 people from all over the country to consider public participation at the agency. The National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions (the Dialogue) covered issues ranging from the information and assistance the public needs to be effectively involved in EPA decisionmaking to the particulars of participation in rulemaking, permitting, and Superfund. EPA convened the Dialogue to obtain input on its draft Public Involvement Policy (PIP) and gather ideas on how best to implement the PIP.

Participants posted 1,261 messages over the 11 days of the Dialogue (including a rest day). The collected commentary provided a wealth of information for EPA and opened up new lines of communication between agency staff and the public as well as among citizens themselves. An archive of the Dialogue, along with concise daily summaries of the discussion, will remain available on the Internet for at least a year.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the Dialogue as a case study of on-line public participation. It addresses five questions:

- How satisfied were participants with the Dialogue?
- To what extent did the Dialogue introduce new voices into the policy process?
- What was the quality of communication in the Dialogue?
- What did participants get out of the Dialogue?
- What did EPA get out of the Dialogue?

Some of the conclusions drawn from the evaluation apply to electronic dialogues generally. They join a growing literature on the dynamics of on-line communication and what it can offer as an innovative approach to public involvement. Other conclusions are specific to EPA's use of the on-line dialogue mechanism in this particular case. These conclusions speak to public participation more generally, touching on the challenges of constructively engaging the public, the usefulness of the input obtained, and the extent to which public input influences agency policy.

Chapter 2 provides background on the PIP and what led EPA to initiate an on-line dialogue to discuss it. Chapter 2 also describes the principal features of the Dialogue and the sources of

data for this evaluation. Chapter 3 describes the dynamics of the Dialogue, discussing how many people participated, how they participated, who they were, and so forth.

Chapter 4 addresses the evaluation questions. It starts by examining participants' satisfaction with the process and the extent to which the Dialogue brought new voices into policymaking. Next, the chapter addresses a number of questions about communication in the Dialogue, such as the extent to which it was respectful, reciprocal, and constructive. The chapter then discusses what participants got out of the Dialogue in terms of influence, education, and networking. It closes by discussing what EPA got out of the Dialogue in terms of new ideas, more formal comments, new communication channels, and goodwill.

The final chapter recaps the report by sketching what the Dialogue might have looked like if it had been conducted off-line. The chapter concludes with suggested steps for improving future on-line dialogues and recommendations for the administration and Congress for enhancing electronic democracy.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Background*

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#### *The Public Involvement Policy*

EPA convened the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions as a vehicle for obtaining input on the agency's draft Public Involvement Policy (PIP) and advice on how to implement it. The PIP will provide agency-wide guidance on how to plan for and conduct public participation in agency programs. It will complement general administrative law on public participation, such as the Administrative Procedure Act, as well as specific public participation regulations governing individual EPA programs.

EPA first produced a policy on agency-wide public participation in 1981, but it was never fully implemented.<sup>2</sup> The agency's official efforts to revisit the policy began with a July 1999 recommendation from the EPA Innovations Task Force to "evaluate and update EPA's public participation requirements."<sup>3</sup> EPA created a cross-program Public Participation Policy Review Workgroup in October 1999 to implement the recommendation. The workgroup conducted an internal evaluation of the viability of the 1981 policy, and asked for public comments on the need for an update. Based on the internal and external reviews, the workgroup called for a revision of the 1981 policy.<sup>4</sup> Over the next year, EPA staff produced the draft PIP.

The PIP reflects changes since 1981 in legislation and regulations, public participation techniques, and information technology. It is to be accompanied by a comprehensive implementation program involving staff training, information sharing, and evaluation of public involvement activities. Public comments and EPA's own analysis showed that the problem with the 1981 policy was not its content, but that it had not been adequately implemented.

EPA had originally planned to hold a series of public meetings around the country on the draft PIP, but neither regional offices nor the lead office at EPA headquarters had sufficient funding to do so. The idea for holding an on-line public dialogue on the PIP took its cue from a similar dialogue that EPA conducted in September 2000 on the use of public libraries as resources for environmental information.<sup>5</sup> Although a second dialogue seemed like an appropriate way to get public input on the PIP, funding was still inadequate.

Still hoping to find funds for a dialogue, EPA distributed a draft of the revised PIP on December 28, 2000, and requested public comments through the end of April 2001.<sup>6</sup> While the comment period was open, EPA located the funds necessary for the Dialogue, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided a matching grant to support development of an exten-

sive resource bibliography, daily summaries, and a follow-up evaluation. EPA extended the official comment period on the PIP until July 31, 2001, to enable Dialogue participants to submit formal comments after the event.

Although the Dialogue fell within the formal comment period, messages posted to the Dialogue were not considered formal comments. The number of anticipated messages would overwhelm EPA's ability to officially respond to all comments. Moreover, EPA staff believed the Dialogue could best be used to discuss how EPA would actually implement the PIP, rather than to discuss the draft policy itself.

Based on public comments and input from the Dialogue, EPA will finalize the PIP and release a draft implementation plan for public review. EPA plans to issue both the final PIP and the final implementation plan in early 2002.

### *The National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions*

In undertaking the Dialogue, EPA broke new ground. It was the first time that the agency—and certainly one of the few times that any federal regulatory agency—had sponsored an on-line public dialogue in conjunction with a formal public comment process.

Information Renaissance, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization, conducted the Dialogue with contract funding from EPA and a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Prior to the event, Information Renaissance worked with lead EPA staff to publicize the Dia-

logue and recruit people from inside and outside the agency to play active roles in leading the discussion. During the Dialogue, Information Renaissance managed day-to-day operations, and lead EPA staff members were active as participants. Resources for the Future received grant funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for this evaluation report. The total cost of the Dialogue, including the evaluation, was \$100,000.

The basic building blocks of the Dialogue were messages posted to a public site on the World Wide Web. Participants could read and respond to previous messages as well as post new messages. Behind these basic functions was considerable complexity of design and up-front effort.

To attract participants, EPA and Information Renaissance conducted a vigorous advertising campaign. EPA staff sent announcements via EPA mailing lists and listservs and spread the word through personal contacts and mailings to a wide variety of institutions involved in environmental

policy, including environmental organizations, state and local governments, small businesses, and tribal groups.<sup>7</sup> Internally, they distributed information to 1,500 EPA staff—including all coordinators of environmental justice, tribal, communications, and community-based environmental protection programs—with a request to pass on information about the Dialogue to their regular contacts. Information Renaissance publicized the Dialogue through information channels it had developed through previous on-line dialogues. Some people who received announcements about the Dialogue forwarded them through their own networks. For example, one par-

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ticipant forwarded the announcement to a 25,000-member listserv concerned with environmental sustainability. Some people reported hearing about the Dialogue from as many as eight sources.

Registration for the Dialogue began a month before the start date. When registering, participants provided basic information about themselves, including name, email address, city, and state; information on organizational affiliation was optional. They registered either as active participants, who would post and read messages, or as observers, who would only read messages. They were also asked to volunteer for a followup evaluation survey.

So that participants could have a foundation of information about the PIP and about public involvement at the agency, EPA and Information Renaissance compiled an electronic briefing book as part of the Dialogue Web site. The briefing book contained a large amount of background material on public participation, which participants were encouraged to read ahead of time.

Once the Dialogue began, active participants were asked to contribute by posting messages on daily topics. Participants could either post a new message or respond to an existing message. Responses appeared as part of a “thread”—an online conversation of linked messages. Various features for sorting and filtering messages allowed participants to track them by date, subject, thread, or daily topic. Information Renaissance staff monitored messages for inappropriate language, and procedures were in place to notify EPA staff if such language appeared (it did not).

To keep the Dialogue focused on topics relevant to the PIP and its implementation, EPA and Information Renaissance developed an agenda of daily topics, summarized in Table 1. Project organizers also recruited 36 EPA “hosts” from agency headquarters and regional offices and 36 expert “panelists” who represented a range of interest groups, levels of government, academic institutions, and so forth. Each day, different hosts and panelists were asked to help guide the discussion, and many stayed very active throughout the Dialogue.

To assist participants in keeping up with the Dialogue, Information Renaissance compiled daily summaries that condensed the main ideas of each day into two or three pages. The summaries were posted to the Dialogue Web site and emailed to all registered participants on the morning following each day’s discussion.

EPA’s Office of General Counsel (OGC) raised legal concerns about privacy and restrictions on free speech that affected some aspects of the Dialogue. For example, to protect privacy, OGC advised project staff against allowing an index of messages sorted by author. A proposal to link messages to short, voluntarily submitted biographies of participants was similarly rejected. Concerns about violations of free speech led OGC to restrict the role of a moderator to merely setting the tone each day with an introductory message, offering support for participants encountering technical difficulties, and monitoring messages for obscene language. Free speech concerns also prevented Information Renaissance from establishing rules about the length of messages, the number of messages a person could post each day, and so forth. With little precedent to draw on, OGC’s strict interpretation of privacy, free speech, and other laws to the Dialogue is subject to debate. To varying degrees, OGC’s legal restrictions affected how the Dialogue played out, and we return to the need for systematic thinking about legal issues at the end of this report.

Table 1.

Dialogue Agenda

DAY	DATE	TOPIC
1	July 10	<b>Introduction and public involvement goals.</b> Participants introduced themselves and critiqued the goals outlined in the PIP.
2	July 11	<b>Outreach.</b> Participants discussed how EPA should go about identifying and notifying the interested public—particularly minority, low-income, and under-served populations.
3	July 12	<b>Information dissemination.</b> Participants discussed how EPA should disseminate timely, useful, and understandable information to national and local audiences and to small businesses.
4	July 13	<b>Assistance.</b> Participants discussed how EPA should provide technical and financial assistance to support public participation and help people educate themselves about environmental issues.
5	July 14	<b>Catch-up day.</b> Participants were given a day to catch up on previous days' topics and an opportunity to participate if they had been unable to do so during the week.
—	July 15	<b>Day off.</b> There was no agenda topic this day, but people could post messages on previous topics.
6	July 16	<b>Collaborative processes.</b> Participants discussed when and how EPA could more effectively use processes such as stakeholder negotiations, mediation, regulatory negotiations, and Federal Advisory Committee Act proceedings.
7	July 17	<b>Permits and rules.</b> Participants discussed how EPA could better implement laws and policies regarding public participation in permitting, enforcement actions, rulemaking, and policy development.
8	July 18	<b>Superfund, local environmental partnerships, and risk communication.</b> Participants discussed how EPA could be more effective in involving the public in Superfund decisions and other local environmental and risk communication issues.
9	July 19	<b>States, tribes, and local governments.</b> Participants discussed how EPA could more effectively partner with states, tribes, and local governments, given these entities' dual role as governments and interested parties.
10	July 20	<b>Evaluation.</b> Participants discussed how EPA should use public input, provide feedback to the public, and evaluate its public involvement processes, as well as what lessons EPA should take away from the Dialogue.

## *Evaluation Methodology and Data*

The primary task of this report is to evaluate the success of the Dialogue. Evaluation necessarily starts with an understanding of what is being evaluated. EPA describes public participation as falling into one of four categories along a spectrum: outreach, information exchange, recommendations, or agreements.<sup>8</sup> The Dialogue falls into the second category: the exchange of information between the agency and the public. Because at least as much information was coming into the agency as was going out, the process was not simply outreach. However, the process did not extend to the stages of developing group recommendations or forging agreements.

On-line dialogues potentially offer more than their off-line information exchange kin, such as public hearings and notice-and-comment procedures. First, by breaking down geographical and other barriers, on-line dialogues promise to reach many more people than traditional participation processes. Second, on-line dialogues introduce a more dynamic mode of communication. Participants are not only making statements for others to hear, they are listening to, responding to, and questioning statements made by others. Such a process starts to look like the kind of deliberation found in more intensive participation processes, such as those oriented toward developing recommendations and agreements.

How should we define the success of such a process? The literature on public participation is rife with different, and often competing, definitions and measures of success. Here we use measures that capture what participants thought about the process, what moving on-line may have added to the participation process, and what participants and EPA got out of the effort.

The evaluation begins by discussing how satisfied participants were with the process and whether they think EPA should conduct similar dialogues in the future. Questions of satisfaction allow participants to evaluate the process against their own conceptions of success.

The evaluation then addresses two questions related to what is gained by moving participation on-line. Did the process allow EPA to hear new and different voices? And how good was the quality of communication in the Dialogue?

Finally, the evaluation examines what benefits participants and EPA derived from the process. For participants, it examines their influence on the PIP and its implementation, as well as how much they learned from participating and whether they developed networks with other members of the public. For EPA, the evaluation looks at what the agency learned in terms of new ideas and information, and also the extent to which the Dialogue opened up new lines of communication, generated additional formal comments on the PIP, and created some goodwill for the agency.

Various components of the Dialogue produced information used to help answer these evaluation questions. Data from the registration form mapped the geographical distribution and affiliations of all registered participants. Because the Dialogue adhered to OGC's interpretation of the Paperwork Reduction Act and the Privacy Act, we were not able to collect demographic data on each participant via the registration form. We were also restricted from gathering data on participants' interest group affiliations, although we could ask about what organizations they represented or worked for and extrapolate from that information.

Web site statistics showed what participants viewed when they visited the site and how much time they spent on-line, reading and posting messages. The record of posted messages detailed the volume and origins of written material. The content of those messages was used to under-

stand and illustrate various aspects of the Dialogue. (Message content remains a rich resource for future study using more formal content analysis than conducted here.)

The best information about participants' experiences in, and feelings about, the Dialogue came from a survey conducted after the conclusion of the Dialogue. On the registration form, participants were asked whether they would take the survey. Because the survey was voluntary and conducted independently of EPA, we were able to ask people to provide demographic data and other information that could not be obtained via the registration forms.

The survey, consisting of 29 questions plus four invitations for comments, was made available on a Web site immediately after the Dialogue. Three reminder messages were sent out over the following two weeks. In all, 309 participants submitted surveys. Based on the 891 people who originally volunteered to take the survey, the overall response rate was 35%. The response rate differed according to people's degree of participation in the Dialogue. For those participants who posted five or more messages to the Dialogue, the survey response rate was 78%. For those participants who posted one to four messages, the response rate was 47%. For participants who only read but did not post messages, the response rate was 22%. In short, those who participated more in the Dialogue were more likely to participate in the survey.

Interviews with EPA staff rounded out the evaluation. The interviews were designed to understand what EPA staff members got out of the process and how they thought the Dialogue would influence agency policy.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Describing the Dialogue*

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Online dialogues are a new enough addition to the public participation repertoire that we don't really know what they will look like until they happen. Even after they are over, we are not sure what we saw. With the benefit of hindsight and multiple sources of data, this section seeks to describe what went on in the Dialogue—who participated, how they participated, how much they participated, and what roles they played. It is descriptive rather than evaluative, but it helps characterize just what kind of public participation we are talking about.

#### *Who Participated?*

When the Dialogue began, 957 people had registered to participate. By the time it ended, that number was up to 1,166. Of the registrants, 70% signed on as active participants prepared to post messages, and 30% signed on as observers, interested only in reading messages.

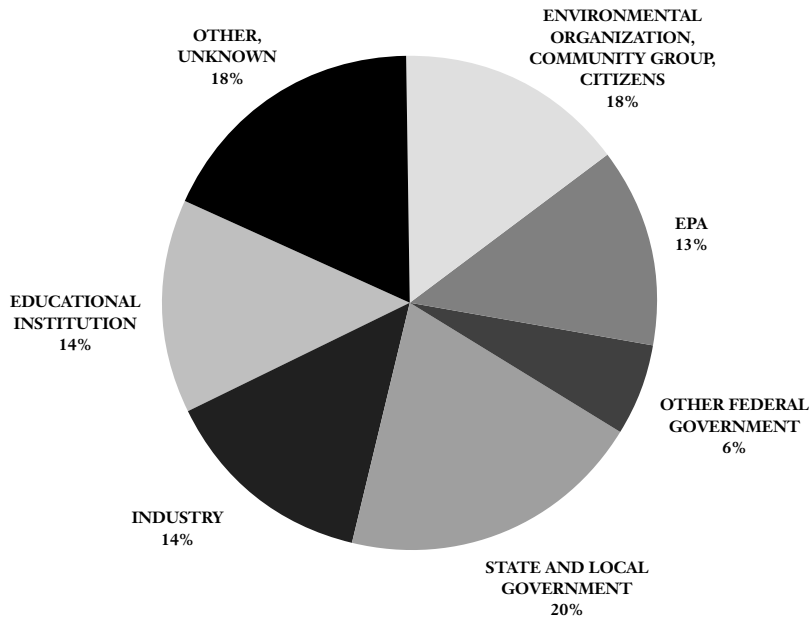
Figure 1 shows the broad range of affiliations of people who registered for the Dialogue.<sup>9</sup> Fully 39% of registrants worked in government, 13% at EPA. Roughly 18% were affiliated with an environmental or community group or identified themselves as individual citizens. About 14% came from industry (including consulting firms, law firms, and trade associations), and 14% came from educational institutions. Another 11% described their affiliation in other ways—tribal organizations, media, elected officials, mediators, civic groups, and more. (The remaining 7% of the affiliations could not be identified from the registration form.) The distribution of affiliations reported by participants in the registration form was roughly similar to that reported in the survey (see Figure 2). However, a higher percentage of people in the survey reported their affiliation as environmental group, community group, or citizen.<sup>10</sup>

The survey suggests relative balance in terms of what people thought of EPA and how the agency conducts public involvement: 37% of respondents said they felt very positive or moderately positive about the agency and its approach to public involvement prior to the Dialogue, 28% said that they felt neither positive nor negative, and 31% said they felt moderately or very negative. More than half (58%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Dialogue was balanced among different points of view, 27% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

*Figure 1.*

**Affiliations of Registrants**

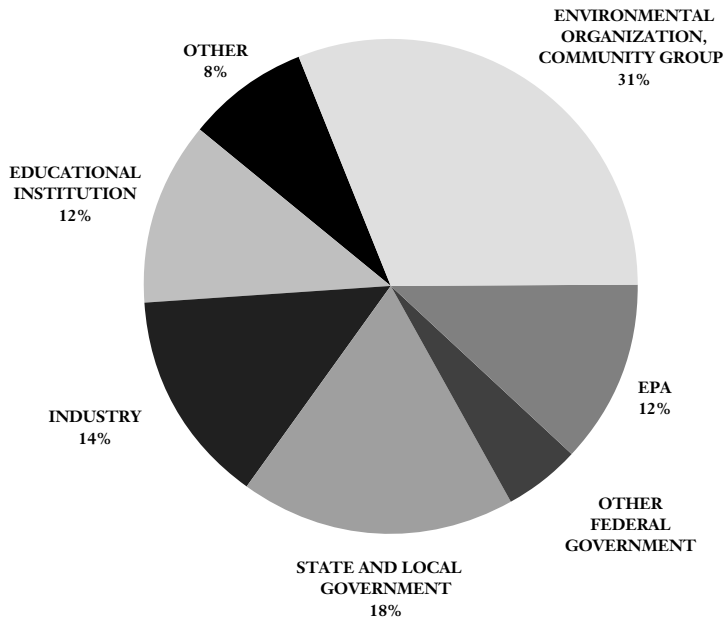
(n=918)



*Figure 2.*

**Affiliations from Survey**

(n=309)





Registrants came from every state in the United States as well as two territories. Figure 3 shows the locations of participants in the continental United States. A small number of participants also joined from Canada, Australia, Brazil, The Netherlands, and South Africa.

Demographic data from the survey suggested that participants were considerably older and better educated than the general U.S. population and somewhat more likely to be female and white:

- 79% of respondents were over the age of 40 (versus roughly 45% of the general population).<sup>11</sup>
- 66% of respondents had a graduate or professional degree (versus 9% of the general population).
- 57% of respondents were female and 43% were male (versus 51% female and 49% male in the general population).
- 87% of respondents were non-Latino white (versus 75% of the general population), 3% identified themselves as African American (versus 12.3% of the general population), and 1% identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic (versus 12.5% of the general population).<sup>12</sup>



*Figure 3.*

**Location of Participants in Continental United States**

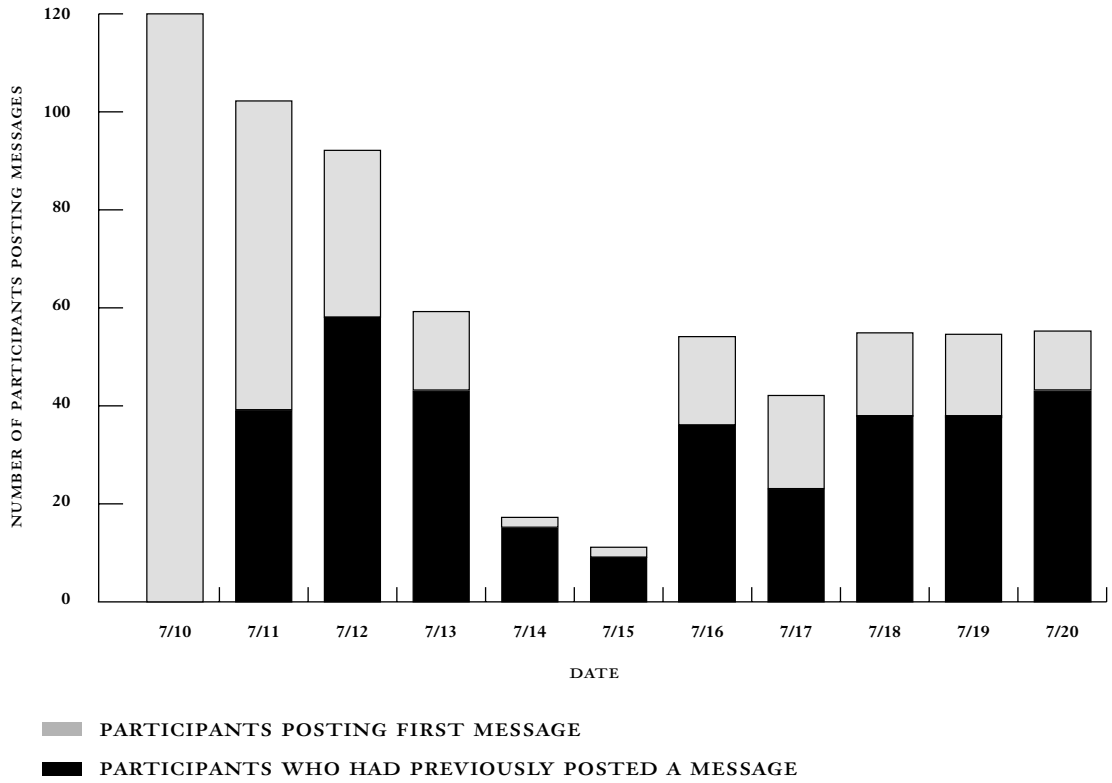
***Patterns of Posting and Reading Messages***

Of the people who registered as active participants with the intent to post messages, 320 actually posted at least one message. The first three days saw the greatest number of people posting messages, many of them simply introducing themselves to the group (see Figure 4). Starting with the fourth day, the number of people posting messages each day leveled off at 40 to 60 (excepting the low level of participation on the weekend, July 14 and 15). New individuals kept appearing over the course of the Dialogue—83 people waited until the second week to post their first message, and 12 new voices were heard on the last day alone. The decline in people posting messages after the first few days suggests that some participants may have dropped out of the Dialogue, but the new voices suggest that a significant number of others were dropping in.

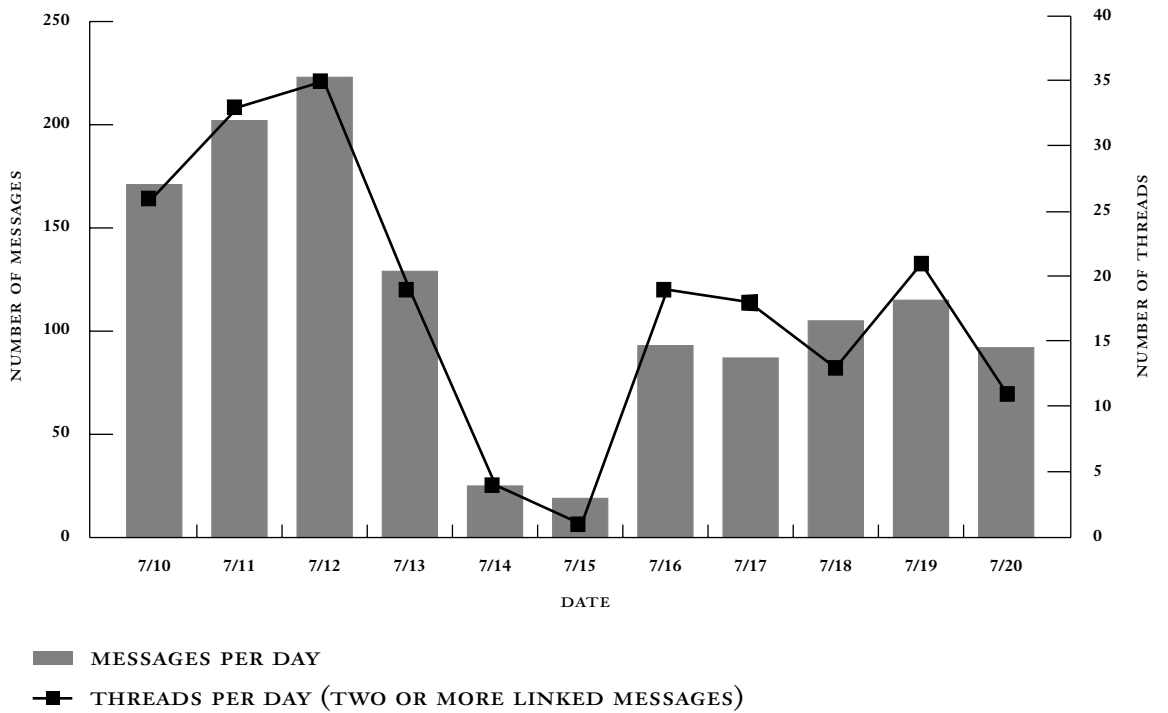
The 320 people who posted messages generated 1,261 messages over the entire Dialogue. After a burst of messages on the first three days—many, again, involving introductory messages—the number of posted messages leveled off at 90 to 130 each day thereafter (excepting the weekend), as shown in Figure 5. Of the total messages, 83% were part of threads (that is, two or more linked messages). The 200 threads in the Dialogue contained from 2 to 104 messages.

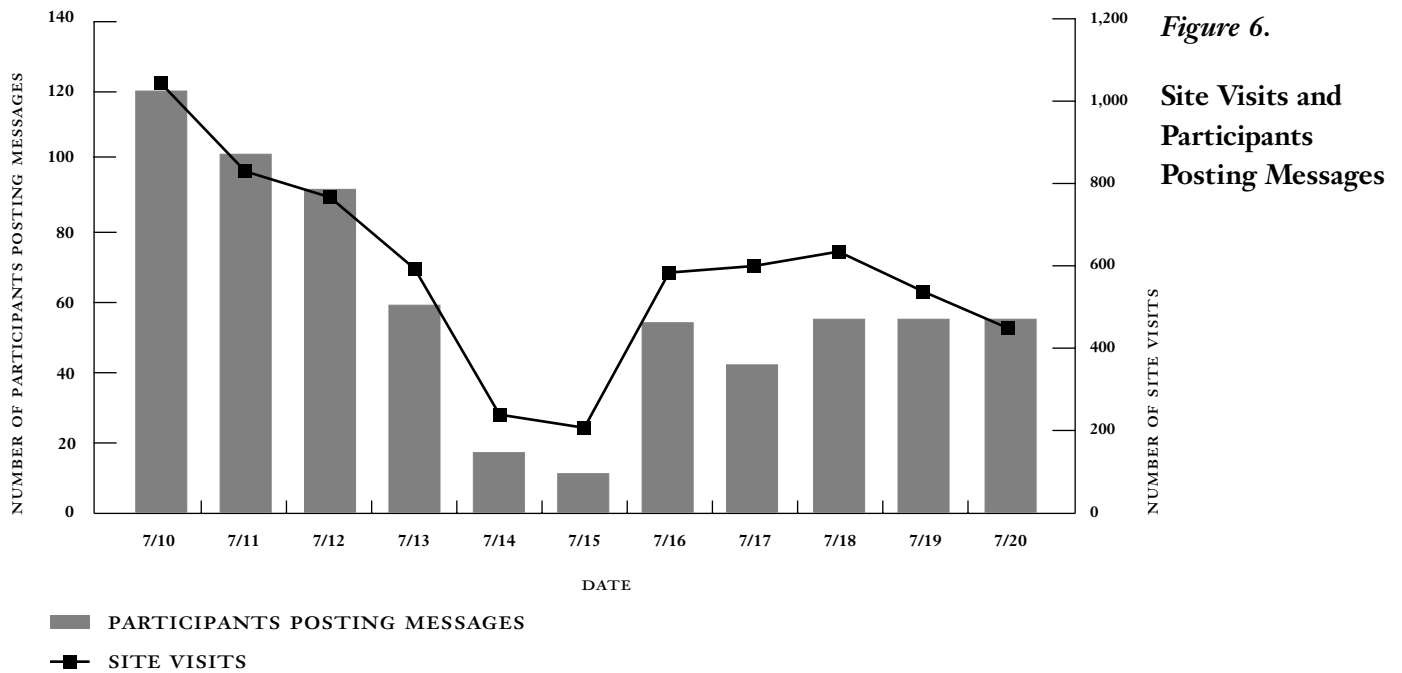
Getting an idea of how many people were reading messages—and how many they were reading—requires using Web site data. The daily pattern of user visits to the Web site largely paralleled that of the number of people posting messages each day (see Figure 6). Each visit averaged around 17 minutes and involved viewing about 20 pages. Based on the cumulative time spent during these visits, we can estimate that on average, somewhere between 150 and 310 individuals visited the site each day. This translates into one to four readers for each person posting a

**Figure 4.**  
**Number of Participants Posting Messages**



**Figure 5.**  
**Messages and Threads per Day**





**Figure 6.**  
**Site Visits and**  
**Participants**  
**Posting Messages**

message.<sup>13</sup> Based on how many messages people read in their site visits, we can estimate that for each message someone posted, around 70 messages were being read.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, much more reading than writing was going on. And the reading doesn't seem to have stopped with registered participants. In the survey, some respondents talked about sending daily summaries or individual messages to interested friends, coworkers, members of email listservs, and others who were not actively involved in the Dialogue. Some mentioned that the Dialogue entered into their daily off-line conversations as well:

*I feel the information provided by this Internet Forum will expand beyond the actual participants. I have found that not only the members of the organization I represent, but other friends and family members are interested in hearing just what I have learned from this experience.*

### ***Levels of Participation***

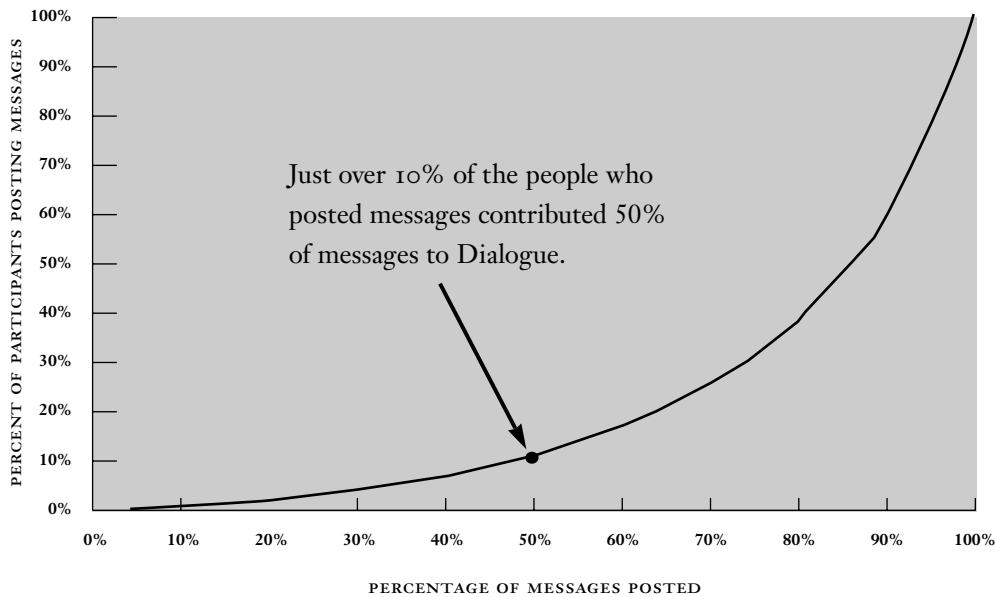
Based on the survey, the median participant in the Dialogue spent half an hour to one hour on the Dialogue on each of three to five days. This median participant read a bit more than a quarter of all the messages and posted fewer than five messages. By definition, half the participants spent less time and half spent more.

Indeed, there were large differences in participation. As shown in Figure 7, a small percentage of participants contributed a large percentage of the total messages. For example, just over 10% of the 320 people who posted messages contributed half the messages to the Dialogue.

Based on the data illustrated in Figure 7, we can identify four concentric circles of activity in the Dialogue: an inner circle of very active posters, a middle circle of moderately active posters, an outer circle of infrequent posters, and a reader's circle of those who read messages but did not post any. The inner circle comprises those people who contributed either 25% of the messages

Figure 7.

Percentage of Participants Posting Messages Compared with Percentage of Messages Posted



overall or 25% of the messages on any given day. These 32 people—10% of the total number of people who posted messages—contributed 43% of the Dialogue’s messages.

Because they contributed so much of the content of the Dialogue, it makes sense to spend a bit of time describing the inner circle. Of these 32 people, 10 were members of environmental organizations or community groups, or citizen members of governmental advisory committees; 7 were university faculty, facilitators, researchers, or librarians; 6 were staff members from EPA headquarters; 5 came from federal and state government agencies other than EPA (including a staff member from a Canadian national agency); and 4 represented industry trade associations or consulting firms.

Members of the inner circle had a deep level of experience in environmental policy and participation but from quite different perspectives. Brief descriptions of some of the environmental and industry participants are illustrative:

- A member of a local environmental activist group in the Southeast concerned with industrial pollution. He introduced himself as a “nobody citizen” who had once worked at a state department of environmental quality.
- Two community cochairs of public advisory committees established by the Department of Defense to advise on the cleanup of military bases. One served previously as a councilman and had a strong scientific background. The other was involved in local environmental issues and appeared to be participating at home in the evening.
- A citizen with a professional background in geographic information analysis who was active in various efforts to clean up a military base in Massachusetts.
- Three staff members of national environmental organizations concerned with the cleanup of contaminated military sites, community right-to-know, and industrial permitting.

- Two participants from industry trade associations (synthetic organic chemicals and printing), both of whom had been involved in previous EPA multistakeholder projects.
- Three environmental consultants working on various sides of issues: environment and community, industry, and government.

Other inner-circle participants had backgrounds and experience as academics, librarians, researchers, and facilitators involved in various aspects of public information access and participation. It doesn't take much imagination to envision this group as what EPA might convene for a traditional policy dialogue or advisory committee on public participation in environmental decisionmaking.

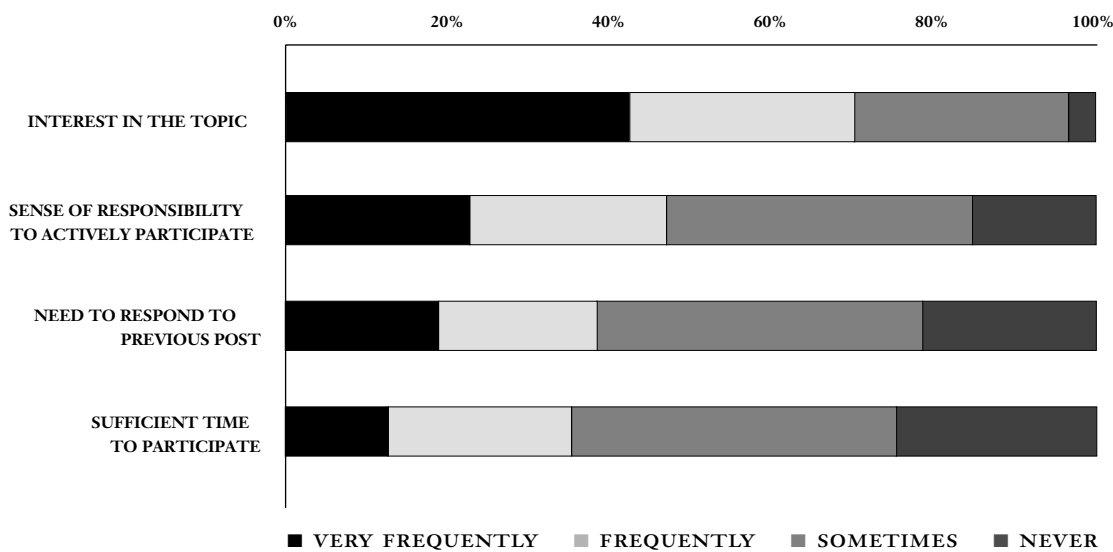


Figure 8.

How Often Were You Motivated to Post Messages by the Following?

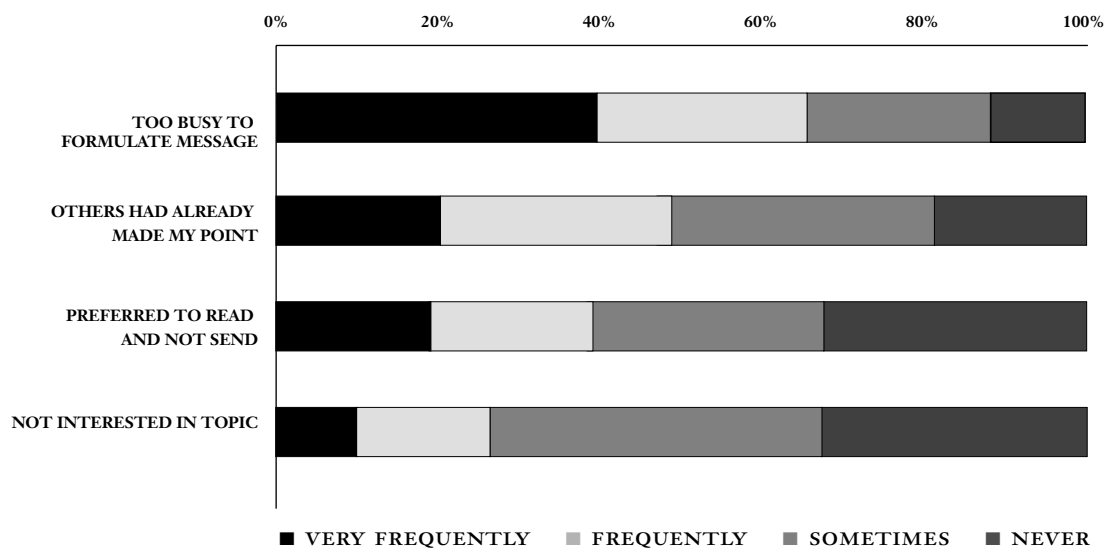


Figure 9.

How Often Did the Following Explain Why You Did Not Post a Message?

Beyond the inner circle was a middle circle of people who posted more than two messages but not enough overall, or on any given day, to place them in the inner circle. The 87 people (27% of the total participants) in this middle circle contributed 36% of all messages.

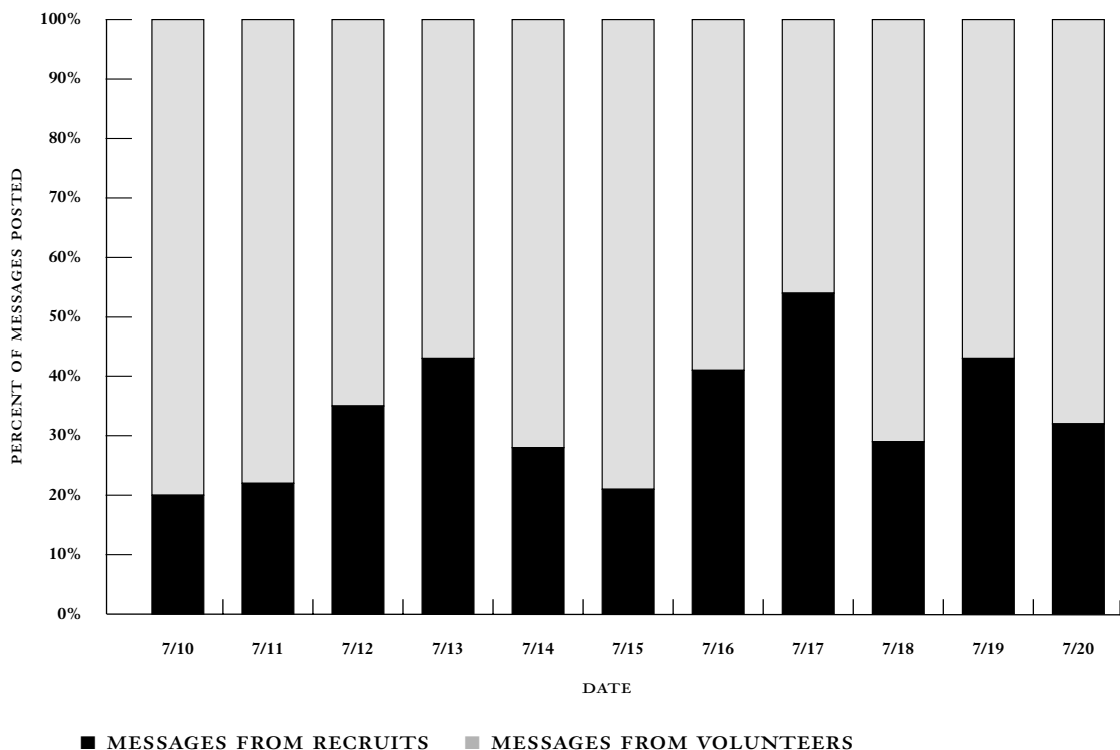
In the outer circle were those who posted only one or two messages to the Dialogue. They numbered 201 (63% of the total) and accounted for 20% of the Dialogue’s messages, many of which were introductions posted during the first two days.

Beyond the outer circle were the observers—those who read messages rather than posting any. Some observers visited the site frequently and read many of the messages, but they did not contribute to the content of the Dialogue and remained largely invisible to other participants.

The survey provided some insights into why people ended up in one circle or another. As shown in Figure 8 (see previous page), the most frequent motivation for posting a message was interest in the topic, followed by feeling a sense of responsibility to actively participate. Somewhat less motivating were needing to respond to a previous post and having sufficient time to participate. For the inner circle, having participated in a previous on-line dialogue also seemed to motivate participation: 8 of the 32 had done so.

The most frequent reason cited for not posting a message was being too busy, followed by a recognition that others had already made the point, as shown in Figure 9 (see previous page). Fewer people cited a preference for reading or lack of interest as motivations for not posting messages.

*Figure 10.*  
**Percentage of Daily Messages from “Recruits” and “Volunteers”**



## *The Roles of “Recruits” and “Volunteers”*

An additional factor that determined how much different people participated was their membership in one of two groups, referred to here as recruits and volunteers. The recruits were the daily panelists, EPA hosts, and project partners (such as staff at Information Renaissance, EPA, and Resources for the Future). Recruits kept the Dialogue moving along by initiating the day’s theme, keeping the discussion on topic, and answering questions. The remaining participants were the volunteers.

Over the course of the Dialogue, 59 recruits posted messages: 17 were very frequent contributors and therefore part of the inner circle, 27 contributed less and were part of the middle circle, and 15 contributed only one or two messages and were part of the outer circle. Another 13 recruits posted no messages and were thus in the observers’ circle.

Recruits contributed 33% of all messages. Day to day, the percentage of messages authored by recruits ranged from 20% to 54%, as shown in Figure 10. The recruits’ most active day was July 17—a day devoted to public participation in permits and rules—when they contributed more than half the messages.

■ ■ ■

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Evaluation*

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This chapter evaluates the Dialogue in five sections. The first section deals with participants' satisfaction with the process and whether they thought EPA should conduct such dialogues in the future. The second section asks whether the Dialogue introduced new and different voices into the policy process. The third section looks at a range of indicators regarding the quality of communication in the Dialogue, such as balance, respect, reciprocity, and the ease of participating via the Dialogue format. The fourth section examines what participants got out of the Dialogue in terms of influence, education, and networking. The fifth section asks what EPA got out of the Dialogue in terms of greater input, more formal comments, greater levels of communication, and the generation of goodwill. Because it was the broadest question—and responses touched on many of the themes addressed in the rest of the evaluation—we begin with the issue of participant satisfaction.

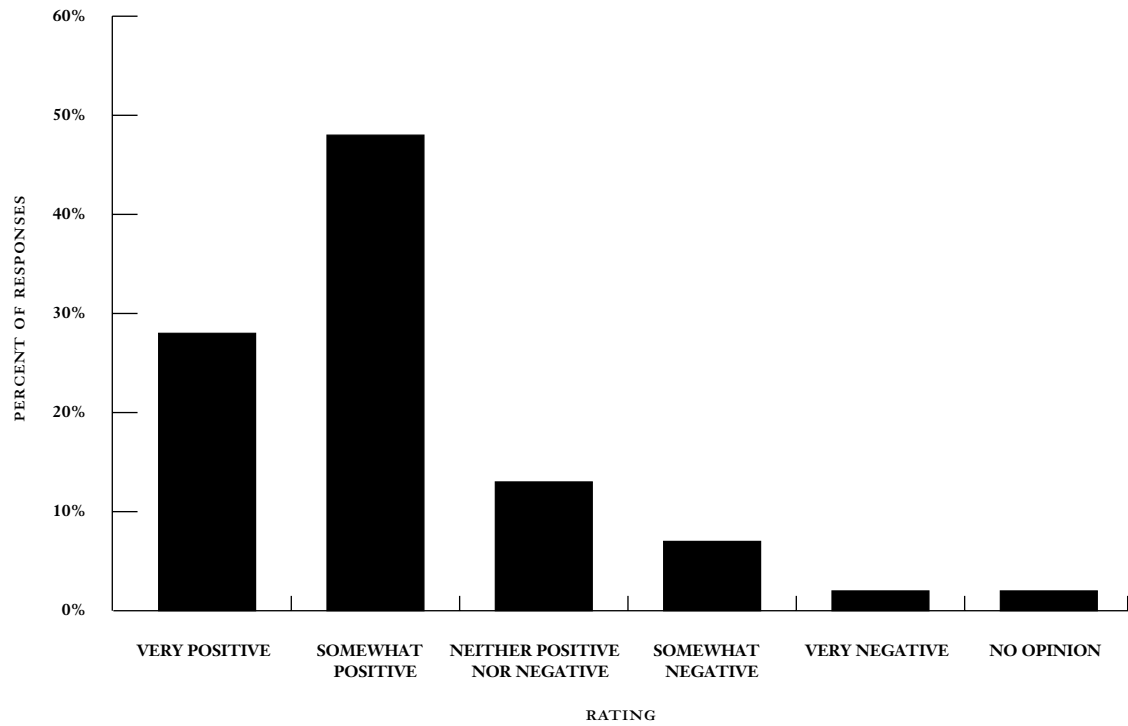
### *Satisfaction*

Asking participants how satisfied they were with the Dialogue allows them to evaluate it against their own expectations and goals rather than those of the evaluator. We posed two survey questions about satisfaction. The first asked participants to rate their experience with the process generally. The second asked whether they thought EPA should conduct similar electronic dialogues on important policy topics in the future. Both questions included space for respondents' comments. Overall, the responses were quite positive.

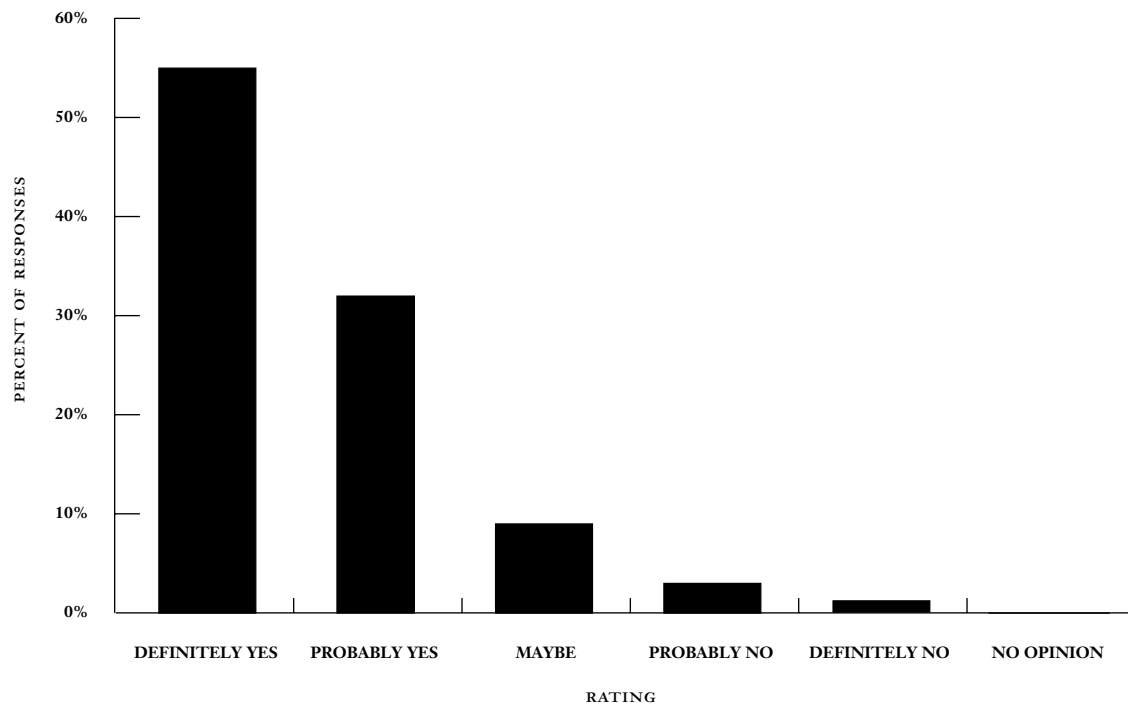
When asked how satisfied they were with the Dialogue overall, 28% of respondents rated the experience as very positive and 48% as somewhat positive, as shown in Figure 11. Only 9% rated it as somewhat negative or very negative (15% had no opinion or said they were neither positive nor negative about the Dialogue).

When asked whether EPA should use similar on-line dialogues on other policy topics in the future, 55% of respondents said definitely yes and 32% said probably yes, as shown in Figure 12. Only 4% said definitely or probably no, and 9% responded maybe. In their comments, respondents listed a number of areas where they thought dialogues could be effectively used—development of regulations, permitting, technical issues, Superfund, and others—with quite a few respondents favoring specific, targeted decisions rather than broad policy decisions.





*Figure 11.*  
**How would You Rate Your Experience in This Dialogue?**



*Figure 12.*  
**Do You Think EPA Should Use Similar Dialogues in the Future?**

Participants' written comments offered a more nuanced view of their satisfaction, serving up roughly even portions of compliments and criticisms. The issues and tensions raised in the comments foreshadow many of the themes discussed throughout the rest of this chapter:

- Some respondents lauded the number and diversity of participants; others cited various ways in which participation was unbalanced or biased.

- Roughly the same number of people praised the expertise of the participants as criticized the Dialogue for being dominated by experts.
- Many participants criticized the large volume of messages, the time demanded to keep up with the process, and various difficulties with participating via computer. Some felt ignored or left out. Other respondents, however, thought the on-line format was conducive to good discussion and increased the number and diversity of participants.
- Many people praised the content of the messages contributed to the Dialogue (and especially the daily summaries), but some said the topics didn't address issues they were interested in. Others criticized the lack of resolution on difficult issues.
- Many praised EPA for its willingness to host such a forum, but for some the Dialogue raised suspicion about the agency's motives.

Broad support for future use of on-line dialogues at EPA came with an important condition: that they be used only in conjunction with traditional approaches to participation. According to respondents, too many people lack computer access for EPA to replace traditional public participation with on-line dialogues. Some respondents also said that the dynamics of on-line interaction were simply not as rich and productive as face-to-face participation. Many people said they would support future on-line dialogues only if EPA demonstrated real responsiveness to public input—starting with feedback on how the agency used input from this particular Dialogue.

### *Introducing New Voices into the Policy Process*

One of the principal promises of moving participation on-line is reaching a much larger and more diverse population. Geography, daily commitments of work and family, social and psychological barriers, lack of information, and a variety of other factors conspire to keep people from participating in public decisions that affect their lives. Moving the participation process on-line can break down some of these barriers, allowing people to participate where they live, on their own time, and with adequate information resources. There is no need to travel to a public hearing or fly to Washington, D.C., to stand up in front of a crowd, or to adhere to a strict schedule. People can participate at home at 3 in the morning.

Reaching a broader set of participants was one of EPA's principal motivations for undertaking the Dialogue. To a large extent, the number of participants, their locations throughout the country, the variety of times they posted messages, and their varied ways of hearing about the Dialogue all speak to the Internet's ability to reach a much broader cross-section of the public than traditional participation processes. An off-line participation process could never hope to involve 1,166 people from all 50 states, two U.S. territories, and six other countries, all talking and listening to one another. Travel costs would be astronomical, scheduling would be insurmountable, and the logistics of running such a meeting would be extremely challenging. A number of survey comments noted the unique nature of the event:

***Broad support for future use of on-line dialogues at EPA came with an important condition: that they be used only in conjunction with traditional approaches to participation.***

*This on-line dialogue allowed me to participate whereas I likely would not have participated in face-to-face dialogue unless it took place in my city.*

*Great opportunity to meet and dialogue with such a large a group, which would never have been able to meet in one place.*

As EPA had hoped, the Dialogue clearly supported a dramatic improvement in the number and variety of voices they could hear from, compared with the formal public comment process. Formal comments on the PIP had largely come from state governments and a few large environmental groups, with little input from average citizens or local community groups. The dramatic expansion of the number and variety of people engaged in the process is an achievement that should not be underestimated.

Beyond the sheer number and variety of participants, however, there is a more subtle issue to address. That is whether EPA was hearing from the same people it usually hears from—just more of them, and in a different forum. We discuss two dimensions of that issue here. First is whether EPA was hearing from literally the same people it usually hears from—the “experts” who frequently interact with EPA, are highly informed about agency activities, and are most vocal in any kind of participatory forum. The second dimension is whether EPA was hearing from the same *kinds* of people—those whose socioeconomic and demographic profiles are typically associated with active political involvement and historical interaction with the agency.

### **Hearing from the Experts?**

At various points, participants charged that the Dialogue was simply another opportunity for the experts to talk to each other:

*More plain citizen involvement needed. Too many experts.*

*Many of those citizens I have worked with would never be comfortable to serve . . . on big-issue [community advisory groups] (or make comments in fora like this!).*

*I hope the agency realizes that those on the dialogue were members of the vocal minority and represent one side of the “organized public” not the population at large.*

If we define an expert as a person with considerable experience interacting with EPA (or other agencies) and knowledgeable about public participation policies, then the charges of an inordinate amount of expertise in this Dialogue are probably justified. Excluding those who work at EPA, 41% of survey respondents said they were involved with EPA at least once a month, and 21% interacted with EPA at least once a year. Only 12% had not been involved with EPA in some way over the past five years.

Participants were also very familiar with EPA public involvement policies. Of the non-EPA survey respondents, 76% said they were either very or somewhat familiar with EPA public involvement policies, 48% knew that an EPA public involvement plan had been released for comment before the Dialogue, and 14% had already commented on it.

***The number of participants, their locations throughout the country, the variety of times they posted messages, and their varied ways of hearing about the Dialogue all speak to the Internet’s ability to reach a much broader cross-section of the public than traditional participation processes.***

Taken as a whole, then, the participants could be considered expert in EPA public participation programs. And there is reason to suspect that the most expert among these experts participated the most. As noted above, around 43% of the messages in the Dialogue came from the inner circle of 32 people, and 33% of the messages came from recruits (the categories overlap somewhat; grouped together, they account for 54% of all messages). The recruits were by definition experts—that is why they were recruited. The volunteers in the inner circle also had considerable experience with EPA and other federal agencies, certainly enough to fall under our definition of experts. Excluding the inner circle and recruits, we are left with 246 volunteers who posted messages and carried the torch for the nonexperts (or at least the less expert). This group contributed an average of fewer than 2.5 messages each and accounted for less than half the messages overall.

Although complaints that the Dialogue had rounded up the usual experts are to some extent justifiable, there are three good reasons not to worry overmuch about them. First, even though a relatively small number of the most-expert participants posted a large percentage of the messages, they did not necessarily dominate the conversation. Most of the threads were initiated by the middle circle (45% of threads), not the inner circle (34% of threads). Even the outer circle gave a respectable showing, generating 21% of threads. A dialogue such as this is not a numbers game. One or two thoughtful or well-timed posts can start a conversation that lasts for days. Likewise, a frequent poster may be adding little to the overall flow of a dialogue. In the survey, 48% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Dialogue wasn't dominated by a few participants, 19% thought that a few participants did dominate, and 33% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Second, it is strange to criticize expertise as we've defined it here. Experts in this context care enough, know enough, and have been affected enough to get involved. These are exactly the people we would want to hear from in designing a public participation policy. Indeed, it would be highly unlikely to hear from anyone else. Why would they want to participate? How would the PIP be expected to affect their lives? It would be quite surprising to find someone participating who had no experience with EPA, no personal experience with environmental problems, and no knowledge of public participation policies.

Finally, there were some such surprises—self-identified average citizens with little direct experience with EPA who contributed significantly to the Dialogue. Here we tell the story of one of them.

She introduced herself as a concerned citizen, who admitted to feeling “a little out of place here.” She wrote, “My reason for being here is to sort of remind the EPA that there are a lot of us out here.” On the first day, she said she was more likely to sit “back and be more observant than verbal.” But she ended up posting 17 messages overall, a few on nearly every day of the Dialogue. She was an encouraging and supportive voice for others who were participating. She drew on her own experiences with local pollution to highlight problems others were facing. She was a constant reminder that government needs to think of “the public” as people like her—interested, active, and not necessarily part of an organized group. In her closing remark she noted being more active than she had planned, and also that there had not been many more people like her participating:

*This has been a fascinating few days! I really became more of a participant than I felt like I was planning on being . . . I just wish there were this kind of [forum] for the “common (wo)man.”*

## Technological Barriers and the Digital Divide

Criticisms that EPA was just hearing from the usual kinds of politically active people bring up the digital divide: those who don't have access to a computer or can't use one effectively are simply locked out of participating on-line. The issue of access to environmental information on-line was a common theme on the first day of the Dialogue, and the nature of the on-line Dialogue itself came under scrutiny as well:

*I come to this dialogue with a bit of skepticism—a computer dialogue itself does not by its nature include “the hardest to reach” public.*

*EPA needs . . . to figure out how to get information about a dialogue into the hands of and from people who don't have computers.*

*This is a great forum, but I agree, not everyone can access the Internet, and often those who can't need to have their voices heard.*

The Dialogue engaged—almost exclusively—people who frequently use the Internet: 86% of survey respondents said they use the Internet at least ten times a week, and another 13% use it at least five times a week. By contrast, only 44% of the U.S. population uses the Internet at all.<sup>15</sup> Two-thirds of the survey respondents (65%) used a computer at work to participate, and 32% participated from home.<sup>16</sup> Nobody reported participating from a library or from the computer of family or friends.

The high level of participants' Internet access may also explain some of the demographic differences between participants and the U.S. population as a whole. In the U.S. population, Internet usage is higher among those with more education (around 75% for those with a college degree or higher). It is also higher for whites (50.3%) than for African Americans (29.3%) or Hispanics (23.7%). Those with Internet access are also more likely to have higher incomes. In short, the fact that the Dialogue attracted people who were, by and large, frequent users of the Internet at least helped put the process on the wrong side of the digital divide, with attendant discrepancies in education, race, and probably income (our survey did not collect income data).

EPA has belatedly recognized that it has not done a good job of engaging the poor and minorities and is giving significant attention in its public participation activities to reaching such “environmental justice” communities. If we can point to an unfortunate silence in the electronic Dialogue, it is from exactly the stakeholders whom EPA has had problems reaching in the past.

Although the demographics of participants may not have mirrored the broader public, representatives of environmental justice organizations and tribal governments did participate in the Dialogue. Indeed, discussions about environmental justice, access of low-income citizens to environmental information, and the particular issues for tribal governments all played prominent roles on various days of the Dialogue.

*If we can point to an  
unfortunate silence in the  
electronic Dialogue, it is from  
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reaching in the past.*

## *Quality of Communication*

The Dialogue was an information exchange process that involved a much more dynamic interaction among participants than is typical in off-line processes, such as public hearings. By fostering discussion, it promised to be a much more effective mode of communication. At the same time, moving from face-to-face verbal interaction to written, and somewhat anonymous, interaction may create some new challenges. This section examines how the Dialogue fared in terms of various elements of good communication.

### **Informed Participation**

An educated citizenry has long been acknowledged as crucial to a well-functioning democracy: if the people are governing themselves, they should know what they are talking about. As discussed above, the majority of the participants in the Dialogue were familiar with EPA and with public participation at the agency. The inner circle and recruits brought an added level of informed participation. To a large extent, the benefits of informed participation are the flip side of the criticisms of participation by experts.

For those without a great deal of knowledge about EPA and public participation, the main education tool was the briefing book. Participants could access the briefing book from the Dialogue home page. It contained a variety of materials (or links to materials) about the Public Involvement Policy and public participation at the agency. In all the pre-Dialogue emails, registrants were encouraged to read the briefing book and familiarize themselves with the issues to be discussed.

In the survey, 51% of respondents said the briefing book added much or very much to the quality of the Dialogue, and 21% said that it added little or nothing. Interestingly, when compared with the daily summaries, daily panelists, and EPA hosts, the briefing book was rated as adding the least to the overall quality of the Dialogue. Some participants suggested that a concise two- or three-page background document would have been very helpful.

### **Reciprocity**

Reciprocity is the back-and-forth in a conversation. You say something, I respond, you question, I answer, and so forth. Public comment processes are low in reciprocity; deliberative processes—such as policy dialogues, negotiations, or mediations—are generally high. Turning a static commenting process into a reciprocal discussion is the essence of an on-line dialogue.

Overall, there was a great deal of reciprocity in the Dialogue. One insight into reciprocity comes from looking at the extent to which participants assisted each other in finding information and getting answers to questions. An exchange regarding where to find a federal advisory committee report provides a simple illustration:

*PARTICIPANT A: For anyone who is not familiar with it, I recommend you get a copy of the final report of the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (FFERDC) report . . . You can find the report on EPA's Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/swerfffrr/partners.htm>.*

*PARTICIPANT B: Thank you for referring us to the . . . report . . . Unfortunately, once I attempted to access that document using the URL which you provided, I received a notification from the EPA Web site that it was unavailable.*

PARTICIPANT A: *It's possible I don't have the most current URL for the report, too. I've got a hard copy and don't access it on the Web. Suggest the EPA folks in this dialogue check out the latest Web address and let us know what it is. I could have made a typo, also.*

PARTICIPANT C (FROM EPA): *<http://www.epa.gov/swerffrr/partner.htm> is the site, not /partners.*

PARTICIPANT A: *I think you're right. Sorry for the typo!*

The overall amount of reciprocity in the Dialogue can be understood with some rough summary measures. After the first day, when most people were simply introducing themselves rather than replying to earlier messages, the volume of messages that were replies to previous messages leveled off to 50% to 75% of messages each day. This means that at least half of all messages posted each day were demonstrating some form of reciprocity. As noted above, 83% of all messages in the Dialogue were part of threads (i.e., a series of replies) that were at least two messages long.<sup>17</sup>

## **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness refers to whether and how EPA personnel responded to questions, comments, and criticisms. Simply providing responses is a crucial part of legitimizing a dialogue process. It demonstrates that agency participants are attentive and interested. The nature of the responses provides more insight into how willingly an agency accepts new ideas and information, reflects on its own performance, and grants the public some influence over agency activity.

In the Dialogue, lead EPA staff members were determined to reply quickly to all messages that they thought required an EPA response. Often they responded personally, posting followup messages to the Dialogue with a rapidity that was noticed by participants:

*I was impressed with the attention some EPA staff were obviously paying to the dialogue ... Today I was impressed that processing of all the information is well underway.*

When lead staff could not answer a question directly—or when messages were critical of particular EPA offices or other regulatory agencies—lead EPA staff members forwarded messages to their contacts in appropriate EPA offices or even other state and federal agencies. Although lead EPA staff could not guarantee that every forwarded message received a reply, they could cite several cases where followup had occurred. In some cases the followup took place off-line or through direct email messages rather than through messages posted to the Dialogue. Although one can certainly point to messages that should have been followed up on-line, the energy that the lead staff put into responding to messages and distributing messages to other government staff was exemplary.

The nature of responses from EPA hosts as they helped guide daily discussions ranged from open and informal to the overly bureaucratic language typical of public hearings and other traditional participation processes. In one good example of open and informal communication, an EPA staff member sought greater detail about why a participant was dissatisfied with some aspects of the agency's Technical Outreach Service for Communities program. In another exchange, participants and EPA staff traded a series of messages concerning what EPA is doing to regulate the use and disposal of wood treated with chromated copper arsenate.

The Dialogue was not, however, immune from evasive responses or stilted and legalistic replies—what one participant called “nonresponse responses.” At various points, some EPA staff appeared to be more comfortable citing regulations, guidance documents, and official informa-

*Clearly, the constraints that can make communication between agency staff and the public stilted and frustrating off-line do not necessarily go away on-line.*

tion than directly answering questions or engaging participants in a more individual and informal manner. At other points, staff redirected the conversation, seemingly treating inconvenient messages from the public as “off-topic.”

Clearly, the constraints that can make communication between agency staff and the public stilted and frustrating off-line do not necessarily go away on-line. Most of the EPA staff participating in the Dialogue did not have enough decisionmaking authority to be able to “make policy” via the Dialogue. Hence, they had to try to be responsive without officially committing the agency to do much. Frontline staff members are often reluctant to comment on sensitive decisions being made at higher levels in the agency. They also often avoid commenting on policies under another office’s jurisdiction. Few EPA staff members are willing to be openly critical of the agency in any forum, and they certainly don’t want their criticisms enshrined in a lasting archive on the Internet.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that EPA staff would resort to vague, noncommittal, and legalistic responses in some exchanges. But it is also not surprising that members of the public would find such responses extremely frustrating. Following one particularly formal EPA response, a participant wrote,

*I nominate this response for inclusion as part of the “worst practices” section on public communication and involvement that we’re building through this dialogue. Though maybe it was written by a lawyer who insisted that it needed to be written in the most highly opaque and insulting bafflegab possible.*

## **Respect**

In the popular imagination, flame wars, iconoclastic rants, and potty humor dominate on-line communication. This Dialogue, however, demonstrated an impressive amount of respect among participants. In the survey, 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communication was respectful, and only 1% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Respect emerged in both its large and small manifestations. At the most basic level was a high degree of politeness. For example, a quick search of the Dialogue message archive returned 191 items containing “thank you” or “thanks.”

Respect characterized even the Dialogue’s more heated exchanges. When one participant took a stand on the volatile issue of the legal status of American Indian tribes—charging that such a policy was racist because it gave tribes special rights—another participant took the opportunity to explain the relationship between federal and tribal governments:

*PARTICIPANT A: I was quite surprised and offended that our government would use such a racist policy in dealing with nonfederal agencies. I feel that all citizens should be treated equally under the law, and not segregate American Indians for special treatment.*

*PARTICIPANT B: [Participant A] needs Indian law 101. As the Supreme Court said in 1974 in Morton v. Mancari, being an Indian is not a racial classification, it is a political classification . . . It’s too bad, I suppose, that*



*some non-Indians take offense at this and regard it as racist. I wish that they would learn to appreciate that it is this special relationship that has made it possible for tribes to survive as distinct, self-governing cultures.*

PARTICIPANT C: *Bravo to [Participant B]! I so much wanted to respond to that message but knew I might say some things I would later, more or less, regret . . . you did that with an elegance and restraint that is commendable.*

The thread continued with eight more messages, most further explicating the relationship between the federal government and tribes, and some debating whether Participant A was typical in needing to be better informed. Some parts of the exchange were heated, but messages were always thoughtful, constructive, and not disrespectful.

## **Critical Voices**

The risk of too much politeness or too much respect is that dissatisfied people are ignored because they are insufficiently civil. The disgruntled don't want to compliment, thank, and placate; they want to be provocative, shake things up, and complain about wrongs. Public participation processes of any sort have a particular responsibility to support and encourage critical voices, and this on-line Dialogue was no different.

Some participants charged that criticisms were being ignored in the summaries and in the Dialogue itself:

*Genuine complaints . . . generally do not get responses, and tend to get glossed over or omitted in the summaries. So, it doesn't appear to me that these voices are getting heard.*

*Serious complaints about the EPA's behavior were raised during the Dialogue which never got included in the summaries.*

Criticisms of EPA were not unexpected or even unwanted in the Dialogue. When asked prior to the Dialogue what they hoped to get out of it, EPA staff said that they were explicitly looking for information on what they were doing wrong. EPA collected criticisms and posted them to the site as followup to the Dialogue. But how were dissenting voices treated in the Dialogue itself? Did they get a fair hearing in the summaries and in the Dialogue?

Charges that the daily summaries were sanitized of criticism are probably unjustified. Summaries contained criticisms of EPA—couched both in terms of constructive advice for the agency and in more explicit descriptions of agency misdeeds and “worst practices.” Daily summaries routinely received follow-on replies that commented on their content, and none of these messages accused the summarizers of glossing over remarks critical of EPA.

How dissenting voices were treated in the Dialogue itself is perhaps a different story. Specifically, messages expressing anger, frustration, and a deep distrust in EPA regarding the agency's actions at particular sites often stood alone with no replies, lost in the jumble of conversation. A few examples:

*I am a stakeholder in the Coeur d'Alene Basin . . . I am perplexed, frustrated, angry about EPA's refusal to discuss openly all the facets and implications of the . . . process. I want the truth, and I find it absolutely astounding that I . . . have absolutely no voice in the decisions made about my land and the surrounding environment . . . Why does EPA REFUSE to answer us?*

*Ever since EPA came here in the 1970's, they have put on dog and pony shows making it look like we had community involvement. But they always then do what they want, no matter the danger to human health or the environment here . . . The entire ordeal made me so I will never believe government, let alone trust them.*

The important point is not whether EPA followed up on such messages. In fact, lead EPA staff forwarded all complaints to appropriate EPA offices or other state and federal agencies for responses. In many cases, the authors of the messages then heard from regulatory agency staff off-line.

More important is the seeming reluctance of all participants to respond to these messages and pull them more deeply into the Dialogue's discussions. The criticisms offered an opportunity to delve into what went wrong with public participation at a particular site. These comments could have acted as a pinprick of reality to help deflate some of the more idealistic claims about public participation. After all, combining idealism and reality is the essence of implementing the PIP:

*I liked the honesty of activists in describing how EPA [public involvement] had not been worth the effort. I hope the [public involvement] advocates within EPA will not get defensive about this, but will find ways to translate this true perception to those whose actions resulted in the cynicism.*

### **Control over Agenda and Evolution of the Dialogue**

There is always a tension in public participation processes over who controls the agenda. On the one hand, agencies have an interest in addressing particular topics, and they are most likely to act on public input that addresses those topics. On the other hand, public participants have an interest in addressing issues about which they are most concerned, and they may feel constrained by a narrow, top-down agenda. Some balance between the two is probably most appropriate: an agenda that gives clear direction to the process and lays out agency expectations, but with flexibility for participants to add issues or change emphasis.

In its design, the Dialogue was well suited to find a middle ground between control and flexibility in the agenda. The Dialogue came with a formal agenda developed by Information Renaissance and EPA, which hosts and panelists were expected to follow. However, participants did not have to follow the agenda. They could post messages—perhaps thereby starting a thread—on whatever topic they desired. Legal restrictions prevented any active moderation to control the topics discussed in the Dialogue. The weight of any particular topic of discussion was largely determined by how many other participants were interested in it.

In practice, the Dialogue achieved a reasonable balance between following the agenda and providing flexibility. A certain momentum pushed the agenda forward throughout the Dialogue. On most days, more than 60% of the new messages dealt with the theme for that day, with the remainder addressing posts from previous days and previous agenda topics. Most of the threads and posts stayed relatively on-topic. Off-topics posts usually garnered no responses.

EPA hosts and panelists played a large role in setting the agenda. They initiated 41% of all threads, often in the morning to introduce agenda topics for the day. But participants seemed to appreciate this role rather than feel stifled by it: 67% of the survey respondents said the panelists added much or very much to the quality of the Dialogue, and only 7% said they added little or nothing; 59% said the EPA hosts added much or very much to the quality of the Dialogue, and 9% said they added little or nothing.

## Constructive Engagement

Constructive engagement—whether the conversation “went somewhere”—relates to the issue of agenda setting. As expressed in other literature on public involvement, did the Dialogue “advance people in their thinking in group conversations from personal opinion to public judgment”?<sup>18</sup> Put another way, is the collected content of the Dialogue best seen as 1,261 separate messages or as a relatively concise set of instructions for EPA to follow?

Moving to “public judgment” was never the intent of this Dialogue. The process was designed to facilitate information exchange, not to make recommendations, build consensus, or reach agreement. Indeed, restrictions on active moderation made it very difficult for anyone to steer the Dialogue in any way. Nevertheless, some kind of convergence would certainly make the process more effective in influencing EPA’s actions, an expectation embodied in criticisms from some of the participants:

*I thought it was chaotic—a lot of individuals firing single ideas from a lot of different directions—no way to carry on any kind of meaningful dialogue. From the start it felt futile, like just going through motions of being “involved.” Maybe I gave up on it too early.*

*I believe that the Dialogue would have been a lot more interesting if more of the participants had bothered to read more of the posted messages before they wrote something. Time and time again, I saw new posts say the same damn thing as an old post.*

Those comments notwithstanding, 80% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communication in the Dialogue was “constructive and useful for examining questions and ideas;” 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of course, people may have had very different definitions for “constructive” and “useful,” and the result may not imply “going somewhere” or converging on a set of ideas. Ultimately, our understanding of whether the Dialogue allowed constructive engagement will come from the extent to which EPA can distill lessons from the Dialogue and act on them.

## Ease of Participating

Moving public participation on-line clearly creates new challenges as people learn to use a new set of communication tools. The skills required in some ways hearken back to the art of letter writing—written, asynchronous, considered communication—but it is letter writing in Internet Age volume with unfamiliar tools. Simply reading all the messages, not to mention understanding how they fit into a cohesive whole, was very taxing for many participants.

Difficulties in reading all the messages, following the conversations, and finding time to post messages all appeared to have hampered effective communication to varying degrees. The challenge of participating in the Dialogue was one of the dominant themes that emerged from survey comments:

*I guess I’m feeling that we were paddling like salmon in an upstream of messages.*

*Difficulties in reading all the messages, following the conversations, and finding time to post messages all appeared to have hampered effective communication to varying degrees.*

*I probably expected too much from the “threaded” discussion. I quickly became tired of trying to “follow” the discussion and simply put in my 2-cents worth . . . this was a lot different from a discussion around a table, in which there is one person speaking at a time . . . Here I felt there were lots of conversations going on at one time.*

Except for those who did little else during the two weeks of the Dialogue, the volume of message traffic was too high to read every message. In the survey, 71% of respondents said they participated for less than an hour on the days when they participated at all; 45% said they read less than a quarter of the messages, and another 24% read between one quarter and one half.

Built into the Dialogue interface were various features for sorting, filtering, and searching messages to help people organize the conversation and target their involvement. However, the sorting, filtering, and searching options were difficult for some people to use. Some wrote to Information Renaissance staff that they couldn't figure out what the daily topic was, couldn't figure out how to send a message, or couldn't even find the Dialogue itself. Others may have been turned off by difficulties with typing, spelling, or using computers generally.

Daily summaries were vital for many people trying to keep up with the Dialogue. The summaries reduced the previous day's content to two or three pages of text. In the survey, 76% of respondents said the daily summaries added much or very much to the quality of the Dialogue (8% said they added little or nothing). The summaries received nearly universal praise in the survey comments.

Beyond enhancing the role of summaries, the final chapter of this report provides advice, much of it from participants' comments, on how to make participation in on-line dialogues easier in the future.

### ***What Participants Got Out of the Dialogue***

On the first day of the Dialogue, participants were asked to introduce themselves and mention their motivations for participating. The motivations fell into two broad categories: influencing EPA and learning from others. This section deals with both of these issues. It also discusses a possible benefit mentioned in a few comments: networking.

#### **Influencing Public Participation Policy and Practice at EPA**

How much influence the Dialogue will have on the PIP and on the practice of public participation at EPA was clearly an important issue to participants:

*What do EPA staff envision as the potential types of impacts that this dialogue will have on their actions? What makes this dialogue different than just going through the motions so that some staffers somewhere can simply put this effort out there as proof they did public participation even though it created no real changes in anyone's actions within the agency?*

*EPA should definitely [do this again]: As long as the results of this effort are published, distributed and include an action plan that is followed, and that we can see that it is being followed. Otherwise, it was just another exercise in futility.*

In interviews, EPA staff agreed that the true test of the quality of the Dialogue will lie in how EPA follows up with concrete actions based on participants' input. But the amount of

influence the public can, or even should, have in a forum like this is a tricky matter. Ultimately, EPA is solely responsible and accountable for its decisions regarding the PIP.

Nonetheless, by initiating public participation, agencies implicitly promise some degree of public influence on policy. According to best practices in the field of public participation, agencies should make very clear up front just what kind of influence the public will have. When a process is over, agencies should provide feedback on how public input was actually used.<sup>19</sup> Without knowing what ultimately happens in the final PIP and its implementation, we can evaluate only the expectations and feedback—and then only partially.

Through communications before and during the Dialogue, EPA set expectations for the amount of influence the public would have. All the language in the Dialogue announcement, the introductory materials on the Web site, and opening emails from EPA staff promised no more than that EPA was interested in, and would listen to, what people had to say. Participation in the Dialogue was expressed almost exclusively in terms of “sharing,” “seeking,” or “learning about” participants’ thoughts, ideas, and concerns. At various points, participants were directed toward the formal comment process as “the official way to offer the Agency your thoughts,” as distinct from the “conversations” going on in the Dialogue.

There was also information available about how much influence the PIP would have on public participation at EPA, although participants had to dig a bit to find it in the content of the PIP itself. The PIP says it will provide guidance for all EPA programs, including Superfund, significant permitting and licensing, significant rulemaking, decisions about delegated programs, and some other policy decisions. But it is quite explicit that it is not a rule, is not legally enforceable, and is not binding on states, tribes, or local governments that implement federal programs overseen by EPA. Although the PIP is clear, participants can certainly be forgiven for not knowing (or understanding) the limits of its application. This issue was certainly given little attention during the Dialogue.

EPA’s feedback to participants on how their input would be used came largely through a closing email from the lead project staff member at EPA, in which she thanked participants for “all the information and suggestions you gave us.” She let people know that EPA would be posting feedback tables to the Dialogue Web site, and she asked them to keep an eye out for the draft implementation plan.

Interestingly, the actual followup on the Dialogue is somewhat more intensive than what was expressed to participants in that closing message. The “tables” to which the closing email referred represent EPA’s first effort at digesting the content of the messages by categorizing them into three categories—“Ideas for EPA,” “Problems,” and “Special Issues”—each with a variety of topical subcategories. The searchable tables are available on the Dialogue Web site. Very soon after the Dialogue, lead EPA staff members forwarded similar tables to each of the EPA workgroups involved in PIP implementation. Lead EPA staff members also held internal briefings for higher-level EPA officials. Various EPA offices will continue to “mine” the Dialogue for information.

Many participants were optimistic that their input would influence both the content and the implementation of the PIP as well as the practice of public participation at the agency. In the survey, 51% of respondents said the Dialogue would have some influence on the content and implementation of the PIP, and 8% thought it would have a great deal of influence; 21% said it would have little influence (and 20% didn’t know). The responses were nearly identical when

participants were asked how much influence they thought the PIP would have on the practice of public participation by the agency.

### **Education and Learning**

The survey asked participants how much they learned from participating in the Dialogue. The responses are summarized in Figure 13.

Participants learned the most about each other: 76% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they learned a great deal about how other participants (including EPA staff) viewed public participation. Only 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

To a lesser extent, participants reported learning about public participation resources: 53% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they learned a great deal about people, organizations, or information sources that are resources for public participation; 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Indeed, throughout the Dialogue, participants shared information on organizations, research, Web sites, and other resources. One participant suggested that project organizers compile a “list of participant references” as a repository of all resources shared by participants.

Interestingly, participants reported learning the least about how public participation is conducted by EPA. Fewer than half of survey respondents—46%—agreed or strongly agreed that they learned a great deal about how public participation is conducted by EPA; 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, survey respondents who were less familiar with EPA reported a slightly higher level of learning about how public participation is conducted at the agency.

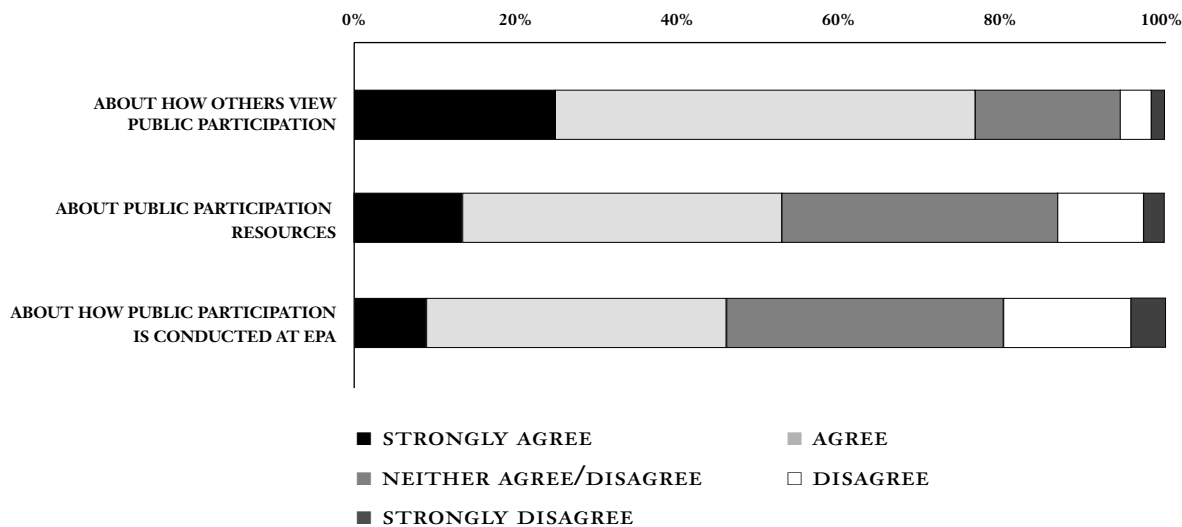
### **Networking**

Mentioned in a few survey comments was a collateral benefit of bringing people together on-line: putting them in touch with others who share their views and interests. This is the Internet’s networking function—creating new contacts, new relationships, and perhaps new organizations to catalyze action off-line. The fact that participants reported learning a great deal about each other would suggest that networking might follow. Indeed, one participant said she was using the Dialogue to,

*Do what I do at EPA meetings: connect with the other environmentalists. I have carefully taken the e-mail addresses of people whose comments move me.*

However, only 2% of respondents said they had followed up on, or planned to follow up on, personal contacts made during the Dialogue; 25% of survey respondents said that they had made a few personal contacts; fully 73% said they had made no such contacts.

Without a baseline, it is hard to say whether this amount of networking is high or low compared with other public participation processes. We cannot know what came of relationships formed during the Dialogue without further research. We can, however, identify various points in the Dialogue where participants considered mobilizing and taking actions off-line. For example, participants encouraged each other to fight the proposed elimination of EPA’s EMPACT program, help develop plain-English regulatory and scientific guides, and develop a directory of public participation experts and a bibliography of public participation literature. Time will tell whether any of these efforts are realized.



**Figure 13.**  
**Answers to  
 “To what Extent  
 Would You Agree  
 that You Learned a  
 Great Deal About  
 the Following?”**

### *What EPA Got Out of the Dialogue*

Beyond experimenting with an innovative form of public participation, EPA staff primarily sought input and ideas for the content and implementation of the PIP. Other benefits that emerged from the process (but were never explicitly stated by EPA) included broad agency learning and the generation of public goodwill toward EPA.

#### **New Information and Ideas**

First and foremost, EPA saw the Dialogue as an opportunity to get new information and ideas for the PIP and its implementation. EPA staff were not expecting any sort of recommendations, consensus, or even a “sense of the group.” Specifically, they were seeking,

- a large and diverse amount of input on the PIP and plans for implementation;
- thoughtful ideas, particularly ideas for best practices, that could assist with PIP implementation training, information, and evaluation; and
- information on what EPA was doing wrong.

There is no question that the Dialogue gave EPA more input on the PIP and its implementation. Formal comments on the PIP prior to the Dialogue were heavily weighted toward state submissions, with little from citizens or local community groups; only a few submissions came from large environmental groups. The Dialogue clearly opened up channels of communication with a much larger and more diverse group.

It is more challenging to gauge whether EPA got what it wanted in terms of thoughtful ideas for improving the PIP and its implementation. As discussed above, the Dialogue was not designed to reach “public judgment” on practical advice for EPA.

The nature of the ideas generated in the Dialogue fell into three broad categories. First were explicit instructions for what participants thought EPA should do on particular topics, such as the appropriate goals for the PIP, the design of a facility registry system, reform of public participation in permitting, and others. Participants—particularly those with a lot of experience

in certain aspects of participation—often expressed their input on these topics as multipoint “action items” that EPA could easily turn into clear goals and objectives.

Second were personal stories—many of them negative. People described instances where public participation had broken down, such as complaints about particular sites (as discussed above), problems with information repositories, and problems with getting information about Superfund sites. Such stories constituted something of a reality check that the high ideals of public involvement were often not being met.

Third was information on what EPA’s “public” needs and wants to know. Here we can think of the Dialogue as something of a focus group, identifying for the agency the public’s most frequent complaints, concerns, and questions.

Making sense of the input is a difficult and labor-intensive task, since technologies for summarizing content are fairly rudimentary and time-consuming. The challenge facing the agency was summed up by one survey comment:

*I found the comments generally clearly stated, but over-all the dialogue brought home to me the hugeness of the task of formulating ANY kind of policy about any topic because of the sheer number of people who must be involved. Committee work is something I am familiar with . . . about 10–12 people coming up with opinions and ideas. This is a whole other “ball game” and is a task that can quickly become overwhelming.*

Lead EPA staff members characterize what they got out of the Dialogue as follows. First, they were able to demonstrate that an on-line dialogue with a large number of people—both citizens and government staff—could work. Not only did it work, it also showed that such a process could be flexible and innovative. It could encourage people to say things they wouldn’t say in formal meetings, and it could engage people whom the agency has had trouble reaching in the past (EPA cited Native Americans as an example). It could create new connections and relationships among people inside and outside the agency. The whole intent of the PIP is to encourage the agency to engage in more effective public participation, and the Dialogue itself helped meet that goal.

Second, EPA staff learned some specific best practices, principally from the detailed lists cited above. These can stand as solid information resources as the plan for PIP implementation proceeds.

Finally, lead EPA staff members felt they better understood how the public sees EPA’s role and what people expect from the agency. Particularly surprising was the extent to which the public expected EPA to intervene and fix problems. Much of the Dialogue’s discussion concerned the cleanup of military bases and Department of Energy sites—federal facilities where EPA has much more limited jurisdiction than it has over private companies. Agency staff also saw that people expect EPA to be a line of defense against recalcitrant state agencies.

EPA’s wish for information was fulfilled best in learning what it was doing wrong. No doubt little of the criticism was new, but some staff reported being surprised by the sheer magnitude of the horror stories.

### **Formal Public Comments**

Because messages in the Dialogue were not considered formal comments, the Dialogue Web page provided an email address (and instructions) for those who wanted to comment on the policy formally. EPA staff hoped this would generate additional formal comments on the PIP.



The Dialogue's ability to generate formal comments was limited. Prior to the Dialogue, EPA had received 85 formal comments. From the beginning of the Dialogue until the comment period closed on July 31, the agency received another 62 comments (plus 56 postcard comments from an action alert run by the National Wildlife Federation). Ten or 15 of the formal comments received can probably be attributed—at least in part—to the Dialogue itself.

Interestingly, more than 10 or 15 participants in the Dialogue said they would formally comment. In the survey, 40 respondents (14%) said they intended to comment on the PIP before the July 31 deadline. It is not known why some never did. In the survey, 72% of the respondents said they had not formally commented on the PIP and did not intend to comment; 14% had already done so.

Throughout the Dialogue, participants appeared to be less interested in the PIP per se than in how policies were actually carried out by EPA on the ground. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that relatively few participants commented on the PIP itself. At least one participant found the PIP so general that he couldn't figure out where to make specific comments despite his many years of interaction with the agency. That same participant, however, made many suggestions throughout the Dialogue about how to implement the PIP.

### **Broader Learning at EPA**

In most public participation processes, a lead agency has a handful of staff members who keep track of the process and act as lines of communication back to the agency. This Dialogue was unique in that there were far more lines of communication into EPA than is typical. Fully 118 staff members at EPA registered for the Dialogue—far more than the number acting as daily hosts. As an opportunity for members of the public to be heard by (and to hear from) a large number of EPA staff, the Dialogue was probably unprecedented.

What did EPA staff learn from the public? In the survey, responses from EPA staff differed little from those of other respondents. EPA staff reported learning the most about how other participants viewed public participation, and (not surprisingly) least about how EPA conducts public participation. In followup interviews, some of the EPA hosts said they liked the Dialogue but found little in the content of the messages that was new or surprising. Of course, most of the EPA staff acting as hosts were deeply involved in public participation and were already familiar with the agency's successes and failures, as well as the range of opinions the public holds about the agency. The results would likely be different if EPA staff less familiar with public participation had been more involved. One survey respondent pointed out that this problem applies to the PIP in a larger sense as well:

*My problem is that those who do public involvement for EPA already have the vision . . . Instead of helping those who already do good work feel justified in that work (this is what I see the policy doing, and I think it's laudable), I would place more value on a policy that pushed those who do little to no community involvement to do more.*

EPA staff did take information away from the Dialogue. Nearly every staff member interviewed had assigned someone to review the archived messages of the Dialogue and pull out those relevant to that office's activities. Some said it was good to hear from people directly or to have things they'd already heard reinforced. In at least one case, interest expressed in the Dialogue brought a policy issue off the back burner. Many of the personnel interviewed will continue to

be involved in workgroups tasked with developing the PIP implementation plan and will likely use the Dialogue content as a resource.

## Goodwill

In discussions prior to the Dialogue, no EPA staff member ever mentioned that the Dialogue might be a way to generate goodwill toward the agency. But studies of public involvement have shown that processes that give participants legitimate opportunities to be involved can generate new respect, goodwill, and perhaps trust in lead agencies.

And it appears that EPA did, in fact, generate some goodwill. When asked in the survey whether the Dialogue had changed their opinion about EPA and its public involvement processes, 43% of respondents said they felt more positive, and only 6% said they felt more negative; 50% reported no change or no opinion. Respondents were asked to amplify their answers through written comments.

Many people whose opinion of EPA had improved gave credit to the agency for simply providing the forum. It was seen as a good start, although some respondents made their approval contingent on whether EPA follows through with better participation and responsiveness. Respondents even mentioned having a greater understanding of the constraints that EPA is under in implementing public participation efforts and acting on public input. Some examples:

*I believe that the Environmental Protection Agency has done a great service by facilitating this dialogue. Politics what they are, EPA can and should be bolder, and this dialogue represents the desire and capacity for boldness.*

*The process was as important as the product in this effort . . . This process, I believe, helped many people get to the human side of a major government organization. This has value . . . The discussions themselves are important to help the EPA better understand the public perceptions of your actions and decisions—and to keep the pulse of the public. I say the discussion was a great success!*

Of the relatively few respondents whose opinion of EPA worsened as a result of the Dialogue, most wrote that problems with EPA's public involvement practices were worse than they thought. Others were suspicious of EPA's motives in undertaking the Dialogue. At least one person expressed dissatisfaction about a lack of higher-level EPA involvement:

*How come the EPA Administrator never said a word? I bet she did not even know the dialogue was taking place! After a few days when it became apparent that this was becoming rather successful, I would have thought a personal note from Ms. Whitman would have been a nice gesture.*

The remaining 47% of respondents said the Dialogue didn't change what they thought about the agency. For many of these people, the Dialogue confirmed their earlier opinion—whether positive, negative, or in between—or didn't provide any new information with which to make a reassessment. Some said they would need to see real change at EPA or be convinced that they weren't just "preaching to the choir" at the agency before granting the Dialogue any greater significance.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

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One of the challenges of participating in—not to mention evaluating—an on-line dialogue is unfamiliarity with the dynamics of on-line interaction. It is useful to recap the process by imagining what the discussion would look like off-line.

Start by imagining that more than a thousand people find a time to get together, on only about a month's notice. They all pay their own airfare, lodging, and meals—EPA cannot afford it. Those planning to participate come from all over the country (and indeed the world), and they represent a balance of interest groups and other affiliations. Some people can't come because they don't know about it, can't afford it, or are uncomfortable participating in the proposed forum. Most of those who do come have been involved with the agency in the past. Before people arrive, they are sent a suitcase of materials to read.

Participants converge for what we might imagine as a one-day meeting (to approximate the total time most people spent on the Dialogue). The meeting room is large, with a conference table in the middle, ringed in concentric circles by folding chairs, then a bank of bleachers, and beyond that an expanse of space for milling around. The doors are open and people can come and go. First thing in the morning, participants sit wherever they please as they go through a round of introductions. Some remain silent and listen to the others. While the introductions are still going on, project organizers and the initial set of panelists and hosts take a seat at the central table and kick off the agenda.

As the discussion begins, people start to rearrange themselves. Those who talk the most join the hosts and panelists at the central table. Those with less to say gravitate toward the first ring of chairs. Those interested only in listening take seats in the bleachers. A large number of others—too numerous and mobile to be counted—wander in and out, catching bits and pieces of the conversations. As the day proceeds, some people continue to change places, and panelists and hosts take or relinquish seats at the central table as the agenda moves from one topic to another.

Those sitting at the inner table talk the most, although not necessarily to each other. After the hosts and panelists initiate a discussion, others around the table chime in, but they also join in conversation with those behind them. Sometimes the hosts and panelists are simply ignored.

As the group moves through the agenda, discussion shifts to new topics, but many of the previous conversations continue apace. Multiple conversations on multiple topics start to emerge, with groups of speakers converging, splitting up, and converging elsewhere. Many of those listening focus their attention selectively. Some people just sit and talk to themselves, hoping someone will listen and respond.

Many people find the rising din confusing and a bit overwhelming. To make matters more chaotic, most of the participants are also trying to satisfy their other daily responsibilities—taking work-related phone calls, leaving to attend outside meetings, and fulfilling other tasks. Some

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people get fed up and leave. Others take long breaks. Periodically, a recorder hands out a summary of the discussion thus far.

Despite the chaos, people remain respectful and polite. They answer questions when asked. They provide information when they think it will be helpful. For the most part, different viewpoints get a fair hearing (although there are rumblings of discontent). EPA staff are everywhere, soaking it all in. A few of them run from conversation to conversation, answering questions, taking copious notes, and trying to make sense of it all. Microphones record all conversations.

And then it's over; tapes are transcribed, and a printed version is made widely available. As everyone goes home, the real work for EPA personnel begins. Their principal challenge is to make sense of the transcripts and staff notes. Participants want to know that their time was not wasted and their participation will matter.

How can we evaluate the process just described? First of all, it is clear that it could never happen—at least not off-line. The logistics involved in getting people to participate, as well as the dynamics of interaction, are simply too complex to happen anywhere other than on the Internet. What we have here is not just a normal public participation process put on-line—it is a new process altogether.

Like any other process, how we evaluate its success depends on our reference point. If we compare the Dialogue with some sort of participatory ideal, we can identify both shortcomings and achievements.

The principal shortcomings are factors that limit effective participation. First is being on the wrong side of the digital divide. By going on-line, EPA was not able to reach those that it has had the hardest time communicating with in the past. Although the process broke down geographic and other barriers, it erected technological ones. And the technological barriers are not just about who participates. Many people thought the flood of lengthy and detailed messages made it very difficult to participate effectively. Like the World Wide Web itself, the Dialogue presented many participants with information overload.

But there were unique benefits as well. There are no other public participation processes that let such a large number of people select what role they will play, or allow those who are not in the inner circle—public observers at an advisory committee meeting, for example—to shape the agenda, or accommodate such a large number of people's daily schedules.

If we turn from the theoretical critique to a more practical comparison, the Dialogue demonstrates clear benefits as well. The status quo for participation in the PIP was a formal public comment process, in which parties who have something to say send a letter to EPA. A response comes months later, and there is only limited ability to see what other interested parties have to

say. The Dialogue took this static process and turned it into a two-way iterative exchange of information—not just between the public and EPA but among members of the public themselves. It created a level of discussion typically found only in much more intensive small-group participatory processes. And it did so while engaging many more people than had participated in the development of the PIP to date. The long-term benefit of bringing so many people into the process is creating a broad and diffuse constituency for change and accountability as the agency reconfigures its approach to public participation. The effect of developing such a constituency can probably never be measured, but it is real and it is important.

Finally, simply as an experiment in on-line public participation, the process was a great success. An on-line dialogue has rarely been used as part of a formal agency notice-and-comment process, and it is certainly unprecedented to have such a high a level of participation. That so many people could participate and then nearly unanimously say that despite the frustrations, EPA should conduct a similar process again is truly an accomplishment. In short, the Dialogue not only improved public involvement in the immediate context of developing the PIP, it showed that a wholly new approach for public participation was viable.

### *Suggestions for Future Dialogues*

To say that the Dialogue was a success is not to say that there is no room for improvement. Many aspects of dialogues are bound to improve simply as people gain more experience participating in them. And participants of this Dialogue suggested a number of improvements in five areas: dialogue format, software design, participants' behavior, institutional setting, and computer and Internet access.

#### **Dialogue Format**

The format of a dialogue encompasses how long it will last, what the agenda will be, who will participate, and how participants will interact. Participants were clearly frustrated with some aspects of the Dialogue format, but they offered no clear direction for improvement. For example, some people suggested making the process longer (even indefinite) to give people adequate time to participate; others were adamant that dialogues should run no more than three to five days to prevent waning interest.

One option for future dialogues is to limit the quantity of content. Rules could limit the number of messages per person per day, restrict the length of messages, or allow only on-topic messages. Some participants recommended more active moderating to keep the Dialogue focused. Whether presented as “suggestions for participating” or strictly enforced by a moderator, however, such limits could hamstring some of the most appealing features of on-line dialogue—allowing participants to determine how much they want to participate, the flexibility of the agenda, and the rich and detailed content of messages.

A second option would be to tailor the discussion more narrowly to the individual interests of participants, allowing them to focus their limited time on what they care about most. One participant suggested having people sign up in advance for particular top-

*The long-term benefit of bringing so many people into the process is creating a broad and diffuse constituency for change and accountability as the agency reconfigures its approach to public participation.*

ics so that only the most popular subjects would be addressed. Others suggested segmenting the discussion and using daily summaries to help people catch up on what others are talking about. Greater segmentation of the agenda, however, risks partitioning the group as participants coalesce into their own particular interest areas.

A third option, suggested by a few participants, would be to split the dialogue in various ways. Some people suggested breaking up the schedule to give people more time for reflection. Another approach would be to divide participants into smaller groups—by interest group orientations, by experience and interest in certain topics, or randomly, to get a range of perspectives in each small group—and then have the groups interact. One participant suggested that small groups get together off-line—essentially a geographical grouping—and then have groups connect with one another via the Internet. A number of comments indicated that people could more easily follow the dialogue of a small group and feel like a more integral part of the process. Like the tailoring option, of course, breaking into small groups risks the loss of broad interaction.

The best way to address dialogue format issues is through experimentation. Perhaps processes with different intended outcomes will require different formats. A process that is seeking public judgment may benefit from having participants meet in smaller groups, whereas one seeking broad public input—such as the Dialogue evaluated here—may benefit more from tailoring or limits on the volume of messages.

### **Software Design**

Frustrations with the format may be at least partially addressed by software design—the graphics of the dialogue; the ability to search, sort, and filter; and other features that define how people see the site and navigate through it.

One popular suggestion was to allow sorting by author name, a feature that EPA's Office of General Council rejected. Some people suggested better graphical depictions of the threads, including even the simple addition of a space between different threads in their listing on the dialogue's Web page.

Other suggestions would add new functionality to the site. Allowing users to flag their messages with certain icons or keywords to indicate the type of content in the message would enhance the ability to sort, filter, and navigate through the site. Some said the ability to view more than one message in a thread at a time would also help.

More complex software could help participants manage large volumes of messages more effectively. Participants could be notified by email when people replied to their messages. Collaborative filtering software could highlight the messages that other participants found most interesting and useful. Similar filtering approaches could be used to highlight the most active—or interesting, or contentious, or whatever—threads. Participants might even be able to select the most articulate expressions of their views with some sort of index of support and affiliation. As with the various options for dialogue format, these software features would change the nature of dialogues in substantial ways, but they are also fertile areas for experimentation.

### **Participants' Behavior**

Format issues and software design are nothing without norms of behavior. Indeed, strong behavioral norms can probably substitute for some format or software changes. Internet commu-

nication has already created strong behavioral norms, such as not spamming people with unwanted messages and avoiding inflammatory capital letters. Participants could be encouraged to keep their messages short or limit their posts each day. They could be encouraged to probe into other people's messages by asking clarifying questions, or to engage nonexperts. They could be asked to help contribute to the daily summaries with updates and omissions, or with insights from threads in which they've been involved.

Developing norms of behavior requires building capacity to participate. Participants need to have a good understanding of how to use the features available in the dialogue. From the comments, it was clear that some people didn't understand various aspects of the Dialogue, such as how to sort messages by theme, how to add messages to a previous day's topic, or how to maneuver through the site so that already-read messages changed color. A tutorial at the beginning of a dialogue would greatly help.

Some aspects of on-line participation are more long-term learning challenges. Getting comfortable reading on-line is one. One participant suggested mailing out hard copies of all of the postings—a suggestion that would negate many of the advantages of moving discussions on-line. Developing ways to read and manage this on-line communication comes from experience, which may explain why so many members of the inner circle were people who had been involved in Internet dialogues before.

### **Institutional Setting**

Norms of behavior also apply to the agencies that initiate on-line dialogues. The amount of goodwill generated by EPA suggests that this Dialogue would be a model for other agencies to follow. Borrowing liberally from the International Association of Public Participation's list of "core values" to guide public participation, we can posit a few provisional contributions to an agency code of practice for on-line dialogues:

- Electronic participation—even if conducted as an experiment or innovation—includes a promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision under discussion.
- Agencies should provide timely feedback about what they learned from electronic participation processes and what they plan to do with the information.
- Electronic participation processes should seek out people who are interested in or affected by the policies under discussion, with special provisions for those without access to, or ability to use, computers.
- Dialogues should balance the agency's information needs with flexibility that allows participants to define and discuss their own areas of interest; agency staff should be circumspect about regarding posts from the public as "off topic."
- Agency participants should include staff who need to hear what is being said in addition to staff who have the expertise to contribute.
- The agency should provide participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way (the Dialogue's briefing book is an example).

- The format, software, and norms governing dialogues should minimize the barriers to communication that arise from the technology.
- Agencies should be highly responsive and engaged by both answering and asking questions.
- Agencies should strive for personal and informal interaction rather than bureaucratic and legalistic communication.

The code of practice—as well as suggestions about format, software, and norms—may well raise novel legal issues for agencies. Certainly legal concerns affected the design of the PIP Dialogue and certain aspects of this evaluation. Participants’ suggestions for more active moderation and the ability to sort by authors’ names, among other things, run afoul of EPA’s current legal interpretations. Some of the legal restrictions prevent organizers from countering abuse of the forum, from inappropriate language to “hijacking” by a single interest. As dialogues become more prevalent, greater attention will need to be paid to the legal issues. The Office of Management and Budget should provide new guidance to clarify whether and how the Paperwork Reduction Act and Privacy Act apply to on-line dialogues. Settling free speech issues, such as rules for participation and roles for moderators, may require new legislation.

### **Computer and Internet Access**

A continuing challenge for electronic public participation will be reaching those with less access to computers and the Internet. No single agency is going to overcome the digital divide on its own. In the long term, the viability of on-line dialogues will largely depend on societal trends in computer ownership, literacy, and the like. Data on the number of schoolchildren who now have access to computers at home or school are encouraging.

In the short term, agencies may be able to encourage greater participation by soliciting and supporting the participation of those groups who are hardest to reach and who don’t normally participate. Some suggestions from the Dialogue are helpful:

*Partnership with local government could make EPA more approachable; also, local government is certainly familiar with what outreach method works most effectively with its particular constituencies.*

*Churches and libraries are a good place to distribute information, also barber and beauty shops; any place where impacted residents frequent. One of the most effective outreach strategies is to intimately involve impacted community organizations that have been formed to address the environmental assault.*

*Rural populations could be reached through local county extension agent educational programs . . . Urban poor could be reached through educational programs presented through HUD.*

Other possible opportunities are community technology centers (such as those currently run by EPA and the Department of Energy around the country) and greater utilization of idle computers in businesses, training centers, and elsewhere. Established institutional networks, such as library organizations, are vital partners. Up-front training programs and more active encouragement to participate should supplement creative outreach efforts. As the Dialogue participants themselves emphasized, on-line processes should only complement other approaches to participation until these access issues are resolved.



## *Recommendations*

To advance the use of on-line dialogues and develop electronic democracy more generally, the administration and Congress should do the following:

- The president should establish a stakeholder task force on electronic democracy to review experience to-date with electronic democracy initiatives, develop guiding principles for future electronic democracy efforts and draft proposed legislation as appropriate.
- Through an executive order, the president should encourage all federal agencies to conduct pilot on-line public dialogues in conjunction with traditional participation processes for rulemaking and policy formulation activities. The executive order should encourage agencies to consider electronic democracy in their electronic government planning efforts.
- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should issue a bulletin on on-line dialogues, clarifying how they relate to the Paperwork Reduction Act, the Privacy Act, and other relevant legislation.
- Congress should make funding available for a broad research program, perhaps housed in an inter-disciplinary research center, designed to: 1) evaluate agency dialogues, 2) research administrative law issues related to on-line dialogues, 3) develop information technology tools for electronic democracy, and 4) provide training to agency staff.
- Congress should make funding available to expand computer access in poor and minority communities in order to assure equal access to electronic democracy processes. Programs should consider the purchase of hardware and software and the provision of grants for encouraging libraries, community centers, businesses, and other institutions to make better use of existing information technology resources.
- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should develop a process by which electronic government resources related to rulemaking, permitting, and other policy-making activities are reviewed for consistency with principles of electronic democracy and for compatibility with electronic democracy processes such as electronic dialogues.

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## Notes

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1. The Dialogue archive and all related material can be found at: <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/>.
2. 46 Fed. Reg. 5736, January 19, 1981.
3. EPA Innovations Task Force, *Aiming for Excellence: Actions to Encourage Stewardship and Accelerate Environmental Progress* (EPA 100-R-99-006). The recommendation to evaluate the agency's public participation requirements is Task 5 under Action 9: Build Leadership Capacity in Communities to Participate in Local Environmental Problem-Solving.
4. EPA Public Participation Policy Workgroup, *Engaging the American People* (EPA 240-R-00-005; December 2000). The report outlines a framework for a Strategic Plan for Public Participation at EPA, including recommendations to update the 1981 policy.
5. EPA conducted the libraries dialogue in partnership with Information Renaissance and the Environmental Law Institute. The archive of the dialogue can be found at <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa/>.
6. 65 Fed. Reg. 82,335, December 28, 2000.
7. A partial list of those contacted about the Dialogue includes Environmental Council of the States, International City/County Management Association, National Association of City and County Health Officials, National Governors Association, selected mayors, environmental journalists, Sierra Club and other environmental organizations, small business organizations, some Land Grant and Sea Grant colleges, all recognized tribes, all EPA Federal Advisory Committees, library associations, previous participants in EPA's dialogue on libraries as a community resource for environmental information, National Evaluators Association, Attorneys General Association, and various think tanks.
8. Environmental Protection Agency (1998), *Better Decisions through Consultation and Collaboration: A Manual on Consultative Processes and Stakeholder Involvement*, Draft (October 29).
9. Affiliation data derived from the registration form are only approximate because they were extrapolated from organization names provided by registrants.
10. Participants identified in the survey as affiliated with an environmental group or community group or as a citizen in Figure 2 may have been labeled as "unknown" in Figure 1. It was difficult to recognize and categorize community groups and other small organizations reported on the registration form. Also, some people who were participating as citizens may have left blank the space for organization name on the registration form.

11. All the U.S. demographic data come from the 2000 U.S. Census.
12. Three percent of respondents identified themselves as Native American, 2% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4% as other race/ethnicity.
13. The calculation here is somewhat involved. Based on the site visits, we can estimate that participants spent a cumulative 188 hours per day on the Dialogue, on average. Using information from the survey on how much time different percentages of participants participated each day, we can work back to calculate how many people it would take to collectively participate for 188 hours. Low and high estimates range from 150 to 310 individual participants per day (including people posting messages and reading them). With an average of 65 posters per day (excluding the weekend), this works out to around one to four readers for each person posting a message.
14. The estimate is based on the fact that around 70% of pages viewed during a user visit involved reading messages. There were a total of 6,410 user visits, involving 128,200 page views. If 70% (8,940) of these page views involved the reading of messages, that would mean that 71 messages were being read for each of the 1,261 messages posted.
15. All the Internet use data come from U.S. Department of Commerce, *Falling Through the Net: A Report on Americans' Access to Technology and Tools* (October 2000), and are from August 2000.
16. The remaining 2% cited school/university or other.
17. Both the measure of replies and the measure of messages in threads are lower-bound measures of reciprocity. Participants were able to override the addition of the "RE" to their reply messages, and some did so. Also, some participants started new threads that were actually continuations of the "conversation" being held in other threads.
18. Holt, M.E., F. Rees, J.D. Swenson, and P.B. Kleiber. 1997. "Evolution of Evaluation for Critical, Reflective, and Deliberative Discourse: National Issues Forums Online," Paper presented at the Special Interest Group on Assessment and Evaluation of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction, Athens, Greece, August 26–30.
19. The International Association of Public Participation outlines best practices in its list of core values, including "public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision" and "The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision."

## APPENDIX A.

### *Dialogue Data Summary*

Tables A-1 and A-2 summarize data from the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions.

**Table A-1. Daily Statistics**

DATE	7/10	7/11	7/12	7/13	7/14	7/15	7/16	7/17	7/18	7/19	7/20	TOTAL
Messages	171	202	223	129	25	19	93	87	105	115	92	1,261
Site visits	1,038	823	760	586	232	200	577	593	628	531	442	6,410
Distinct authors	120	102	92	59	17	11	54	42	55	55	55	320
New authors	120	63	34	16	2	2	18	19	17	17	12	NA
Messages by recruits	34	45	78	56	7	4	38	47	30	50	29	418
Messages by recruits (%)	20%	22%	35%	43%	28%	21%	41%	54%	29%	43%	32%	33%
Threads	26	33	35	19	4	1	19	18	13	21	11	200
Threads initiated by recruits	9	13	13	7	1	0	10	11	3	12	3	82
Threads initiated by recruits (%)	35%	40%	37%	37%	25%	0%	53%	61%	23%	57%	27%	41%

NA = not applicable.

Note: Threads are two or more linked messages.

**Table A-2.  
Overall Statistics**

	NUMBER	PERCENT
Inner-circle participants	32	10%
Middle-circle participants	87	27%
Outer-circle participants	201	63%
Inner-circle messages	547	43%
Middle-circle messages	457	36%
Outer-circle messages	257	20%
Threads initiated by inner circle	67	34%
Threads initiated by middle circle	90	45%
Threads initiated by outer circle	43	21%
Messages in threads	1,047	83%
Reply messages (containing "RE" in subject line)	704	56%
Messages on day's theme	781	62%

Note: Threads are two or more linked messages.

## APPENDIX B.

### *Survey Results*

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A total of 309 participants took the RFF survey on the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions. Results are presented in three ways. The first column shows raw numbers of responses. The second column contains percentages of all 309 respondents. The third column shows an adjusted percentage, which excludes nonresponses and other irrelevant responses. Adjusted percentages were used in the text of this report. Percentages do not all sum to 100% because of rounding.

#### 1. Overall, how would you rate your experience in this on-line Dialogue?

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very positive	85	28%	28%
Somewhat positive	147	48%	48%
Neither positive nor negative	40	13%	13%
Somewhat negative	23	7%	7%
Very negative	6	2%	2%
No opinion	6	2%	2%
No response	2	1%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 307.*

#### 2. Do you think EPA should use similar on-line dialogues on other policy topics in the future?

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Definitely yes	166	54%	55%
Probably yes	97	31%	32%
Maybe	27	9%	9%
Probably no	10	3%	3%
Definitely no	3	1%	1%
No opinion	1	0%	0%
No response	5	2%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 304.*

**3. Over the course of the Dialogue, which best describes the number of messages you posted?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
I didn't post any messages	128	41%	43%
Less than 5	120	39%	40%
5 to 10	34	11%	11%
10 to 20	14	5%	5%
20 to 40	3	1%	1%
More than 40	1	0%	0%
No response	9	3%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 300.*

**4. Over the course of the Dialogue, which best describes the number of messages you read?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Almost none of the messages	15	5%	5%
Less than a quarter of messages	118	38%	40%
Between ¼ and ½ of the messages	71	23%	24%
Between ½ and ¾ of the messages	49	16%	16%
More than ¾ of the messages	45	15%	15%
No response	11	4%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 298.*

**5. Over the 11 days that the Dialogue was going on (10 days with specific agenda topics and 1 “rest” day), how many days did you visit the site to read and/or post messages as an active participant or an observer?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Less than 3 days	68	22%	23%
3 to 5 days	115	37%	39%
6 to 9 days	77	25%	26%
10 or more days	36	12%	12%
No response	13	4%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 296.*

**6. On the days that you visited the site to read and/or post messages, how much time did you spend each day (on average)?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Less than 15 minutes	41	13%	14%
15 to 30 minutes	77	25%	26%
30 minutes to 1 hour	91	29%	31%
1 to 2 hours	58	19%	20%
More than 2 hours	28	9%	9%
Not applicable: not actively following the Dialogue	6	2%	—
No response	8	3%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 295 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**7. If you posted messages during the Dialogue, how often were you motivated to do so by the following:**

**(a) Interest in the topic.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	69	22%	42%
Frequently	45	15%	28%
Sometimes	44	14%	27%
Never	5	2%	3%
Not applicable: did not post any messages	47	15%	—
No response	99	32%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 163 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(b) A need to respond to a previous post with which I agreed or disagreed.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	27	9%	19%
Frequently	28	9%	19%
Sometimes	59	19%	41%
Never	31	10%	21%
Not applicable: did not post any messages	59	19%	—
No response	105	34%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 145 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(c) A sense of responsibility to actively participate.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	37	12%	22%
Frequently	40	13%	24%
Sometimes	63	20%	38%
Never	25	8%	15%
Not applicable: did not post any messages	45	15%	—
No response	99	32%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 165 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(d) Sufficient time to participate.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	18	6%	13%
Frequently	32	10%	22%
Sometimes	58	19%	41%
Never	35	11%	24%
Not applicable: did not post any messages	57	18%	—
No response	109	35%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 143 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**8. If you were registered as an active participant, how often did the following explain why you did not post a message:**

**(a) Too busy to formulate a message.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	83	27%	40%
Frequently	54	17%	26%
Sometimes	47	15%	23%
Never	24	8%	12%
Not applicable: not registered as an active participant	21	7%	—
No response	80	26%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 208 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(b) Others had already made my point.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	42	14%	21%
Frequently	58	19%	28%
Sometimes	66	21%	32%
Never	38	12%	19%
Not applicable: not registered as an active participant	15	5%	—
No response	90	29%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 204 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(c) The topic did not interest me.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	19	6%	10%
Frequently	30	10%	16%
Sometimes	77	25%	41%
Never	61	20%	33%
Not applicable: not registered as an active participant	25	8%	—
No response	97	31%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 187 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*

**(d) I preferred to read and not send messages.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very frequently	37	12%	19%
Frequently	38	12%	20%
Sometimes	55	18%	29%
Never	62	20%	32%
Not applicable: not registered as an active participant	37	12%	—
No response	80	26%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 192 (excludes “not applicable” and “no response”).*



**9. Regarding the communication you observed among participants in this Dialogue, how would you rate the following statements:**

**(a) It was balanced among different points of view.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	28	9%	10%
Agree	132	43%	48%
Neither agree nor disagree	73	24%	27%
Disagree	33	11%	12%
Strongly disagree	7	2%	3%
No response	36	12%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 273.*

**(b) It was not dominated by a few participants.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	25	8%	9%
Agree	105	34%	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	89	29%	33%
Disagree	49	16%	18%
Strongly disagree	2	1%	1%
No response	39	13%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 270.*

**(c) It was respectful.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	82	27%	30%
Agree	153	50%	56%
Neither agree nor disagree	35	11%	13%
Disagree	4	1%	1%
Strongly disagree	1	0%	0%
No response	34	11%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 275.*

**(d) It was constructive and useful for examining questions and ideas.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	89	29%	32%
Agree	132	43%	48%
Neither agree nor disagree	33	11%	12%
Disagree	17	6%	6%
Strongly disagree	3	1%	1%
No response	35	11%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 274.*

10. Regarding what you may have learned over the course of the Dialogue, how would you rate the following statements:

(a) I learned a great deal about how public participation is conducted by EPA.

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	25	8%	9%
Agree	105	34%	37%
Neither agree nor disagree	97	31%	34%
Disagree	45	15%	16%
Strongly disagree	12	4%	4%
No response	25	8%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 284.*

(b) I learned a great deal about how other participants (including EPA staff) view public participation.

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	72	23%	25%
Agree	145	47%	51%
Neither agree nor disagree	51	17%	18%
Disagree	11	4%	4%
Strongly disagree	4	1%	1%
No response	26	8%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 283.*

(c) I learned a great deal about other public participation resources (e.g., people, organizations, or information sources).

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	39	13%	14%
Agree	111	36%	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	95	31%	34%
Disagree	31	10%	11%
Strongly disagree	7	2%	2%
No response	26	8%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 283.*

11. Prior to the Dialogue, what was your attitude about how EPA conducts public involvement?

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very positive	18	6%	6%
Moderately positive	92	30%	31%
Neither positive nor negative	83	27%	28%
Moderately negative	72	23%	24%
Very negative	20	6%	7%
No opinion	15	5%	5%
No response	9	3%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 300.*

**12. How, if at all, has the Dialogue changed your opinion of EPA and how it conducts public participation?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
More positive	129	42%	43%
No change	141	46%	47%
More negative	18	6%	6%
No opinion	9	3%	3%
No response	12	4%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 297.*

**13. How much influence do you think this Dialogue will have on the content and implementation of EPA's Public Involvement Policy?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
A great deal of influence	23	7%	8%
Some influence	152	49%	51%
Very little influence	62	20%	21%
I don't know	59	19%	20%
No response	13	4%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 296.*

**14. How much influence do you think EPA's Public Involvement Policy will have on the practice of public involvement at the agency?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
A great deal of influence	29	9%	10%
Some influence	143	46%	49%
Very little influence	65	21%	22%
I don't know	56	18%	19%
No response	16	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 293.*

**15. Have you formally commented on EPA's Public Involvement Policy?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Yes	42	14%	14%
No	211	68%	72%
Not yet, but I plan to before the July 30 deadline	40	13%	14%
No response	16	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 293.*

**16. Over the course of the Dialogue, did you make personal contacts that you have followed up on, or plan to follow up on?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Yes, many personal contacts	6	2%	2%
Yes, a few personal contacts	74	24%	25%
No	213	69%	73%
No response	16	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 293.*

**17. Prior to this Dialogue, how much involvement did you have with EPA in the last five years (such as communicating with someone at the agency or attending public meetings)?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
At least once a month	106	34%	41%
At least once a year	54	17%	21%
Some involvement over the last 5 years	68	22%	26%
Haven't been involved with EPA over the last 5 years	30	10%	12%
Don't know	3	1%	1%
I work at EPA	32	10%	—
No response	16	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 259 (excludes "I work at EPA," "no response," and responses from people who, based on answers to question 29, work at EPA; note that two people who identified themselves as working at EPA in question 29 did not identify themselves as working at EPA here).*

**18. Prior to this Dialogue, how would you rate your familiarity with public involvement policies at EPA in general?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very familiar	79	26%	23%
Somewhat familiar	150	49%	53%
Unfamiliar	61	20%	22%
Don't know	4	1%	2%
No response	15	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 260 (excludes "no response" and responses from people who, based on answers to question 29, work at EPA).*

**19. Prior to hearing about this Dialogue, did you know that EPA had a draft Public Involvement Policy available for public comment?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Yes	154	50%	48%
No	137	44%	51%
Don't know	3	1%	1%
No response	15	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 260 (excludes "no response" and responses from people who, based on answers to question 29, work at EPA).*

20. Regarding how much they contributed to the quality of the Dialogue, how would you rate the following:

**(a) Briefing book.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very much	63	20%	25%
Much	66	21%	26%
A fair amount	69	22%	27%
A little	36	12%	14%
Not at all	17	6%	7%
No response	58	19%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 251.*

**(b) Contributions from daily panelists.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very much	63	20%	23%
Much	119	39%	44%
A fair amount	68	22%	25%
A little	19	6%	7%
Not at all	1	0%	0%
No response	39	13%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 270.*

**(c) Contributions from daily EPA hosts.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very much	49	16%	18%
Much	112	36%	41%
A fair amount	84	27%	31%
A little	22	7%	8%
Not at all	3	1%	1%
No response	39	13%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 270.*

**(d) Daily summaries.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Very much	155	50%	56%
Much	57	18%	20%
A fair amount	46	15%	16%
A little	18	6%	7%
Not at all	3	1%	1%
No response	30	10%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 279.*

**21. In your daily life, how frequently do you use the Internet for checking email or using the World Wide Web?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
At least 10 times a week	256	83%	86%
At least 5 times a week	38	12%	13%
At least once a week	3	1%	1%
Less than once a week	2	1%	1%
Never	0	0%	0%
No response	10	3%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 299.*

**22. Where did you most frequently use a computer to participate in this Dialogue?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Work	195	63%	65%
Home	94	30%	32%
School/university	4	1%	1%
Library	1	0%	0%
Family or friends	0	0%	0%
Other	4	1%	1%
No response	11	4%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 298.*

**23. Age.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Under 18	0	0%	0%
18 to 29	17	6%	6%
30 to 39	48	16%	16%
40 to 49	93	30%	32%
50 to 59	102	33%	35%
60 to 69	24	8%	8%
70 to 79	9	3%	3%
80 and older	1	0%	1%
No response	5	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 294.*

**24. Gender.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Male	122	39%	43%
Female	165	53%	57%
No response	22	7%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 287.*

**25. Please check the highest level of education completed or degree received.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
12th grade or less	0	0%	0%
High school graduate	2	1%	1%
Some college	23	7%	8%
College degree	76	25%	26%
Graduate/professional degree	194	63%	66%
No response	14	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 295.*

**26. What is your race/ethnicity?**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
African American	8	3%	3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5	2%	2%
Latino or Hispanic	3	1%	1%
Native American	9	3%	3%
White (non-Latino)	244	79%	87%
Other	11	4%	4%
No response	29	9%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 280.*

**27. State.**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Alabama	1	0%	0%
Alaska	6	2%	2%
Arizona	7	2%	2%
Arkansas	2	1%	1%
California	26	8%	9%
Colorado	7	2%	2%
Connecticut	3	1%	1%
Delaware	0	0%	0%
District of Columbia	11	4%	4%
Florida	10	3%	4%
Georgia	5	2%	2%
Hawaii	2	1%	1%
Idaho	3	1%	1%
Illinois	6	2%	2%
Indiana	3	1%	1%
Iowa	3	1%	1%
Kansas	4	1%	1%
Kentucky	3	1%	1%
Louisiana	3	1%	1%
Maine	3	1%	1%
Maryland	13	4%	5%

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Massachusetts	10	3%	4%
Michigan	8	3%	3%
Minnesota	3	1%	1%
Mississippi	0	0%	0%
Missouri	3	1%	1%
Montana	3	1%	1%
Nebraska	1	0%	0%
Nevada	0	0%	0%
New Hampshire	1	0%	0%
New Jersey	9	3%	3%
New Mexico	5	2%	2%
New York	17	6%	6%
North Carolina	8	3%	3%
North Dakota	1	0%	0%
Ohio	9	3%	3%
Oklahoma	0	0%	0%
Oregon	7	2%	2%
Pennsylvania	12	4%	4%
Puerto Rico	1	0%	0%
Rhode Island	0	0%	0%
South Carolina	2	1%	1%
South Dakota	0	0%	0%
Tennessee	2	1%	1%
Texas	15	5%	5%
Utah	2	1%	1%
Vermont	1	0%	0%
Virgin Islands	0	0%	0%
Virginia	23	7%	8%
Washington	10	3%	4%
West Virginia	0	0%	0%
Wisconsin	5	2%	2%
Wyoming	0	0%	0%
Territories	0	0%	0%
Other countries	5	2%	2%
No response	25	8%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 284.*



**28. If you are from a country other than the United States, please fill in the name of your city and country.**

Other countries: Canada (2), Australia (1), South Africa (2).

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**29. Please select the type of organization with which you are affiliated. (If you are not affiliated with an organization or were participating as an individual citizen, please select “citizen/no affiliation.”)**

RESPONSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF TOTAL	ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE
Environmental organization	43	14%	15%
Community group	16	5%	5%
Tribal organization	2	1%	1%
EPA	36	12%	12%
Federal government agency (non-EPA)	15	5%	5%
State government agency	36	12%	12%
Local government agency	17	6%	6%
Elected official	2	1%	1%
Media	0	0%	0%
Industry or trade association	9	3%	3%
Consulting or law firm	32	10%	11%
Educational institution	35	11%	12%
Citizen/no affiliation	32	10%	11%
Other	20	6%	7%
No response	14	5%	—

*Adjusted number of responses: 295.*

**30. Please offer any other comments or observations you have about the on-line Dialogue.**  
(See Appendix C.)



## APPENDIX C.

### *Sample Survey Comments*

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Below are selected quotes from comments made in response to four items (questions 1, 2, 12, and 30) in the RFF survey on the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions. Responses to each question are grouped by theme, and they were selected to represent the range of responses. Some comments have been edited for style.

#### **1. Overall, how would you rate your experience in this on-line Dialogue?**

##### *Praise for the Dialogue:*

- An amazing wealth of ideas and references and best practices evolved.
- Being new to Community Involvement, I found it a good learning experience. It showed me how much I don't know.
- I do not work directly with EPA or related issues—but did find perspectives on “public involvement; stakeholder communication” somewhat applicable to my work as a fishery resource planner for a state agency.
- I found the dialogue interesting and forthright. Individuals were willing to be frank with their opinions to assist EPA in improving their processes. I gained insight on the EPA “way of doing things” and other methods to try with the public.
- The on-line dialogue provided the opportunity for diverse views to be explored without interruption and at the same time provided an opportunity for information to be posted regardless of opinion, without hesitation.
- I thought this was a very good method to include a large number of people in the discussion.

##### *Criticism of the Dialogue:*

- I found that most of the participants were using the dialogue as a means of “sounding off” rather than offering constructive guidance.
- I read about 75% of the posts and was very disappointed at the lack of dialogue that was generated. It seemed like it was just a bunch of well-informed people speaking their minds.
- I had hoped for more discussion on ways to identify the best opportunities for meaningful public participation, since EPA cannot have the level of participation we all desire.
- Actually, I would use the word “disappointing.” I was hoping for more ideas on public outreach, particularly for rural areas. I was also hoping to see more discussion of public participation in EPA's rule-making.
- I know a bit now about the work of the EPA and I knew absolutely nothing before the Dialogue. But I felt that I asked a very important question about nuclear weapons and energy and I got no response at all. How come??

- I was not knowledgeable enough to contribute to the more detailed questions. It was interesting, however, and I was able to enter my discontent about one of the EPA decisions. No feedback, however, on that.
- I believe that the panelists and observers had definite positions to offer and some seemed rather intransigent and unaccepting of others' views. We are all in a position to offer our opinions for consideration.
- It seemed like the only people that were made aware of this forum were environmental "green" groups. While they are critics of the EPA, there are a lot of other people out there, particularly from rural America, that should have been included.

*Difficulty of participating:*

- I'm feeling that we were paddling like salmon in an upstream of messages.
- My biggest frustration was lack of time to follow the dialogue tracks and respond after thinking.
- I wasn't able to get a word in edgewise because the Web pages seemed to be hidden. I just finally gave up looking. I'd fire the Web master if he worked for me.
- I could not figure out how to comment. However, when I did comment in the wrong place, I received several responses and my comments were moved to the correct place.
- I am still a "book reader" instead of a "computer screen reader."
- It might have been more productive had EPA thought about the time differences for people in the Mountain and Pacific time zones. By the time I got on to the site, all of the East Coast was responding and this made commenting on important issues to Idaho very difficult.
- Unfortunately, I registered for the dialogue and found myself totally unable to participate, due to work and family pressures. I thought it was a great idea and hope further similar programs are organized in the future.

*Praise for EPA:*

- Remarkable openness of EPA staff members to critical comments.
- I was very impressed with the vulnerability of the questions. I felt that EPA staff were genuinely trying to find ways to improve their relationship with activists, community members, and other local or small entities.
- Few, if any agencies have devoted so extensive an effort to asking for broad-based commentary on public participation process. A+ for the effort.

*Criticism of EPA:*

- I, like many others, also don't really believe that the Agency is capable of truly involving the public equally in decisions, so I take the whole dialogue with many grains of salt.
- I was also dismayed by the defensiveness by the EPA when legitimate complaints were raised.

*Praise for the expertise of participants:*

- The panelists and the participants were intelligent and thoughtful people that had a lot of good ideas and insights. Even if it turns out that this dialogue was nothing more than, well, talk, it was worth my time. It felt like being part of a gigantic brainstorm effort inside a chat room.
- The panel members were informed and articulate.

*Praise for the daily summaries:*

- Without the summaries, it would have been difficult to sift through the hundreds of messages to find the day's focus.
- With the system of "recapping and summarizing," I think the EPA did a nice job of reflecting the intent of the participants and showing that the participant comments were received and taken seriously.

## **2. Do you think EPA should use similar on-line dialogues on other policy topics in the future?**

*Benefits of on-line dialogues:*

- A chance to hear from people outside the Beltway.
- This is a great mechanism for people to comment, to listen to other views, and to understand the essence of certain issues.
- This is the 2nd in which I've participated. I think it is always good to bring diverse views together.
- This forum allows interaction among various stakeholders throughout the country and world at one time. A public meeting would never provide that.
- The Internet format seems to take some of the heat out of the debate.
- In some cases the format could reduce some of the rancor in more public sessions (where people are in the same room).

*Suggested topics for future dialogues:*

- It would be neat to see a dialogue specific to my region or state, where there were clear common elements.
- I would like to see on-line dialogues used in resolving technical issues. Issues specifically related to permitting, analytical methodologies, etc.
- The EPA should also set up a dialogue such as this to formulate a model for input of comment to itself and other government agencies on individual projects.
- I think other issues such as the Superfund, etc. would have a good reception by the public.

*Participation on-line will become easier:*

- As more folks get used to on-line dialogue, it will provide a more and more excellent forum for community involvement.
- It is a more cost-effective way to bring people together to share perspectives on a topic, but requires participants to change their world view of conferencing to fit the format.

*On-line dialogues should complement other approaches to participation:*

- This format by no means should replace public meetings, but provides another source for citizen-agency interaction.
- Probably as a supplement to other methods. This is energy efficient. With the "virtual environment neural net," being problemsolving or task oriented lends coherence to the system.

*Problems with the “digital divide”:*

- This should not be the exclusive means to gain public participation, since the digital divide still prohibits many from participating in on-line discussions.
- As long as efforts are made to close the computer access gap, this kind of forum can be very useful.
- Disadvantage: caters to literate, middle-class people who have time to read/submit comments and money to buy/have access to the Web. Misses a large part of population.

*Conditional support for future dialogues:*

- As long as the results of this effort are published, distributed and include an action plan that is followed, and that we can see that it is being followed. Otherwise, it was just another exercise in futility.
- I think on-line dialogues have the potential to be great if (1) the agency genuinely plans to listen to input and has some flexibility; (2) nonnegotiables and resource limitations are laid out up-front so that the comments stick more closely within the realm of possibility; (3) the policy is likely to be implemented on a significant scale; (4) targeted outreach occurs to get “nonexperts” into the conversation.

*EPA should not conduct dialogues in the future:*

- No way, man; I found it useless and a complete waste of time and I truly worked at trying to find my way around. The frustration was mounting so I gave up.
- This is a poor forum for any argument or issue and is unacceptable in my book.

*Usefulness of the summaries:*

- It was difficult to keep up with the amount of dialogue that occurred—the summaries were VERY helpful.
- I especially liked the next-day wrap-up report, summarizing the dialogue of the previous day. I read those and did not send in any comments this time around.

*Suggestions for future dialogues:*

- Would suggest that the discussion topics are more narrowly defined—and guided along the way.
- Make sure you tell everyone, not just the ones you WANT to hear from.
- Be sure and “advertise”—let educational institutions know. I found out through a forwarded/forwarded message!
- But perhaps spread it out over a longer period of time (i.e., one topic per week instead of per day).
- But only with another format . . . shorter time duration, more focused discussion, more heavily moderated.
- It was interesting to try this forum out. I have been in one other where there was actually a moderator to guide the discussion, but then everyone had to be on at one time—it made it more interactive and personable.
- Why not set up a permanent on-line moderated bulletin board (a discussion forum with e-mail sent to all registered “members,” in which each “member” could send a message to the moderator, who would forward it to everybody else on the list, let’s say once a day). The moderator could initiate discussion on any relevant topic.

- Maybe the site should be limited to different targets of constituents—separate addresses for states, local government, industry, small business, other [nongovernmental organizations], etc.
- There's always risk of burnout with these type of things, so you'd want to keep them relatively infrequent.
- Perhaps through keeping the Tribal College entities involved in these dialogues, others will start to gain interest in Tribal issues that need attention.

**12. How, if at all, has the Dialogue changed your opinion of EPA and how it conducts public participation?**

*More positive opinions of EPA:*

- I feel that EPA is making a more concerted effort to encourage the public to participate than any other agency I know.
- The dialogue shifts my perception of EPA as an agency whose public involvement effort concentrates on one-way, reactionary techniques to that of an agency interested in what the public has to say (two-way communication) in a proactive mode. I was very pleased with the dialogue.
- You can't improve anything without asking the users what they think. This is a good step.
- It's always helpful to open a new avenue for dialogue. This is better than just sending a letter, because there was interaction, but MUCH more convenient than going to a meeting.
- It was good that the EPA was willing to try a new tool for public participation. Again, though, this reaches some but not all interested parties.
- I feel that EPA set out to discover improved methods for communicating with the public, so regardless of what current or past outreach to the public has been, there is a sense that the future of communication with EPA will be enhanced.
- I like the fact that EPA is even interested in generating this kind of public dialogue. It makes them less a "big brother is watching" image.
- There seems to be an awareness in EPA there are public voices which have valuable views to offer, which are not the views that are generally available to public comment.
- I was impressed at how much the mid-level EPA people who were posting care.
- I actually read a good bit of EPA's public-participation document and was pleasantly surprised by its thoroughness. I didn't know this was a regular part of how EPA is supposed to function. I still don't know how often it is truly implemented.
- The EPA participants actively and respectfully communicated with others who had very negative assessments of EPA PIPs, and consistently showed a commitment to learning from mistakes as well as incorporating appropriate practices developed elsewhere.

*More negative opinions of EPA:*

- Based on info from nongovernment participants, it is clear EPA needs to reassess its modus of public participation.
- I learned that my views about public participation were not accepted by some; although I didn't express this in the Dialogue, it seemed that perhaps EPA is good to us in the Northeast, but ain't so good in other places.

- I think there is a paradigm/structural/systems change that the EPA needs to make in order to truly implement public participation.
- You're still not listening. Still dodging. Still not acting on wisdom you are freely given. No change so far. Still trying to say enough to calm the Indians down only to then just do what you want. Same old, same old.
- Most at the EPA seem to be waiting [for] the appropriate revolving door, and for that reason and the fact that they socialize more with corporate interests, citizens are viewed as ignorant undesirables and not their true employers.
- I learned both that in some cases the Agency tries harder than I thought to include the public, but also that it is actually less effective than I previously thought.
- By asking only "green" groups to participate, I feel that the EPA slanted this dialogue purposely in order to justify paying less attention than it has to its biggest detractors. An example was all the postings saying that the EPA was industry driven. I am from industry, and I don't believe that at all, I think it is "green" driven. But now, you have ammunition to be even tougher on industry because "the people have spoken." Shame on you.
- A Dialogue like this does *not* in any way ensure that EPA will utilize the feedback to *actually* modify its methods.

*Unchanged opinions of EPA:*

- I was impressed with EPA folks that participated in and organized the dialogue. But I wonder how much influence they have and what the huge iceberg of an agency is doing.
- Essentially it's preaching to the choir. Those who believe public participation is a good that should be incorporated into EPA decisions will continue to do so. I wonder if the dialogue will really reach those in any positions to effect change.
- I still believe that as a public office, it is the responsibility of the EPA to make all efforts to involve the public. In the case of Native peoples, the EPA has to show that they understand what is trust responsibility. Most times, Hawaiian and Alaskan Natives are left out of the loop. Out of sight, out of mind?
- I think that having this Dialogue was a positive effort. I know that EPA values public participation. What EPA was able to learn from the Dialogue and use is an unanswered question for me.
- What EPA does/does not "do" is independent of this dialogue. This dialogue served best to share folks' perspective of EPA.
- EPA is aware of problems in public participation and has done nothing about it for 20 years. There are well-meaning and well-intentioned people at the EPA who seem unable to change things. The question why this is was not answered in the dialogue nor will it be solved by issuing a new policy.
- The most telling thing to me is no matter how much time I spent commenting, how specific the comments were, or how many topics I had thoughts on, EPA's response was always, Hope you make the same comments formally during the comment period. How bureaucratic and unresponsive is that?!
- EPA cannot make itself the federally involved public agency. No matter how hard EPA attempts to incorporate public involvement in its process, there are other providers (state and locals)... who involve people in processes and decisions at least cost, more efficiency and with better results. EPA does not credit states for doing this type of effort and it is a huge mistake. Whether EPA realizes it or not ... most citizens in this State feel "the less intervention by the federal government in the daily lives of its citizens... the better."

- Previously I believed that the EPA collects public comments because it is required by law. But they are essentially ignored. Then it does this weird dance where a very strong rule is proposed. But the rule is eventually watered down because of industry pressure and political autocratic decisions. From the Dialogue, I have no reason to doubt that this is false.
- The event was too long and this does not allow for the average public to participate fully. The process was bogged down in too much information and process—ironic considering the topic.

**30. Please offer any other comments or observations you have about the on-line Dialogue.**

*Compliments for EPA:*

- I appreciate the fact that EPA started this dialogue and hope a true dialogue will continue.
- I was impressed with the attention some EPA staff were obviously paying to the dialogue—people like Patricia Bonner and Betty Winter. Today I was impressed that processing of all the information is well underway.
- I commend the EPA for conducting this exercise; it serves as an innovative example for the public involvement industry.
- I believe that the on-line Dialogue is an excellent starting point. I hope that there is adequate funding available to continue this practice and to use this funding to explore alternative strategies including large-scale live interactive events.
- I think it was a good starting place but the road ahead is long and filled with ruts of distrust. The fact that so many people are not familiar with EPA's public involvement process should be very telling about how well it is working.
- The most important thing for EPA folks to see is that a BALANCE is needed between competing interests and this can only occur with honest dialogue and openness.
- Glad the EPA is soliciting input from the public—keep it up!

*Criticism of EPA:*

- I was concerned that some of the comments from EPA were quite defensive. That does not encourage the public to become involved or to have faith that their involvement will count.
- The only thing I don't understand is why, since this was a Dialogue on the Public Involvement [Policy], we weren't actually presented with the plan and asked to discuss its provisions specifically. Seemed more like a "let's discuss the philosophy of PIP" dialogue.
- EPA hosts could spend more time analyzing "conventional wisdoms," premises offered as if they were truths by some participants, since many were deeply flawed, some foolish. This would not constitute an attack on any individual but it could diminish the negative impact of verbiage by those who seek to distract, to disrupt, and to discourage potential commenters.
- To be honest, the EPA staff participants didn't particularly distinguish themselves here, either—it was obvious that many of the "hosts" signed on for the first time of the day they were hosting.

*Compliments for the process and participants:*

- It was nice to know that other citizens out there are just as concerned, and have wonderful suggestions about agency involvement with the public.



- Great opportunity to meet and dialogue with such a large a group, which would never have been able to meet in one place. The diversity of views was an invigorating experience from a technical perspective.
- How else could one get a “cross-section” with such low energy requirements? Again, with the query being extremely task-oriented and problem-solving, and interactive, I think that this “device” can be effectively used to gather public opinions.
- I was impressed by the level of org[anization] and commitment. Also by the diversity of participants and their insightful comments. Bravo.
- I found helpful the focus on one topic each day.
- Again, I really appreciated the references, and would have liked to been able to read them all (including citations that came up during [the] dialogue) to formulate more thoughtful, contributing comments.
- I appreciated the opportunity to learn about so many things that I was totally unaware of.
- I appreciated getting the daily summaries and read them thoroughly.

*Criticisms of the process and participants:*

- I believe that the Dialogue would have been a lot more interesting if more of the participants had bothered to read more of the posted messages before they wrote something. Time and time again, I saw new posts say the same damn thing as an old post.
- The green community often throws caution and reason aside to make its points and EPA is often the unlucky target. I witnessed this once too often during the Dialogue.
- Facilitators and those that rely upon facilitators appeared to be disproportionately represented, or most vocal. A dialogue for members of the public and the organizations that represent them might be of the most help in the future.
- EPA needs to look at the big picture in policy decisions. This dialogue was very unusual and different; however, it did not, in my opinion, reflect equal opposing views. It was rather one-sided in terms of views, but I really did not expect anything different.
- It was somewhat discouraging to feel that the gist of my comments was not included in the daily summary. I think this played a role in my motivation to participate again. The summaries were good but how many others felt as I did and were all the points of view represented?
- The daily summaries were very superficial. Serious complaints about the EPA's behavior were raised during the Dialogue which never got included in the summaries. I would like to know what the EPA plans to do based on the results of this exercise.

*Criticisms and suggestions relevant to the design of future dialogues:*

- There were too many headings in the subject/thread pages.
- The format didn't take me away from the regular flow of work and allow me (make it possible) to focus on the complexity of the issues presented. I don't know what kind of perk you could offer. Maybe for some, a certificate of participation would be useful or some other kind of professional recognition. A final report summarizing the Dialogue with a list of participants might be welcome by some.
- Add ability to search by author.
- Don't just use sender's subject for posting; Web master should have discretion to sort by topic and thread.

- The Web site worked well. It would be helpful to have the message titles in the Thread Index color-coded to show which messages the user had previously read.
- Also, it's a little strange having hosts, panelists, and a moderator on a dialogue. Sometimes it's confusing regarding where should you focus your comment development. Having hosts describe what they want to hear discussed, then having the panelists and moderator do the same thing seemed unwieldy. It would be better if hosts could only comment and answer questions.
- I noticed that some participants (myself included) identified reports, Web sites, manuals, etc. that address the issues covered in the on-line dialogue. Would it be possible to compile these into something like a "list of participant references" once the exercise is completed?
- Consider holding [dialogues] that are limited to participants or topics of interest to agencies in a certain EPA Region. Consider starting with Region 9 [Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Guam, American Samoa].
- Please remember that there are at least five time zones in existence.
- It may be worthwhile to extend the length of "a day" with regard to comment, in order to include the far-flung Westerners among us. It may also come to be that many will expect a Spanish translation of at least the initial opening comments and outlines of a day's discussion.
- Consider a dialogue which focuses on military federal facilities since the dynamics of environmental remediation are different for them.
- This was a very interesting way to deal with a review. I hope EPA uses this format again for future documents and plans. EPA should consider this a success and implement the process into other comment and review periods.
- I had great intentions about participating when I signed up; however, when the days came up, it was bad timing—I was out of town, and then I was busy at work. Perhaps in the future it should be spread out over several weeks.

*Lasting impact at EPA and elsewhere:*

- But will this kind of activity affect policy? I can only hope so.
- Hopefully, EPA will indeed pay attention and be directly responsive to the collated findings and recommendations of this dialogue.
- I feel the information provided by this Internet Forum will expand beyond the actual participants. I have found that not only the members of the organization I represent, but other friends and family members are interested in hearing just what I have learned from this experience. Thank you.
- I would be interested to hear any further developments that result from this dialogue.

*Comments on the survey and evaluation:*

- Survey might be a little long for average responder.
- What in the world are the relevance of my gender, age, and ethnicity to this process? Do you plan to discard comments from males? the elderly?
- It could be handled much more objectively (although not completely) by using content analysis software, qualitative data packages, etc. I do this for transcribed interviews all the time. It's fast, cheap, reliable, replicable, etc.
- It might be a good idea to budget for a followup to be prepared by RFF staff one year later, summarizing how things changed in the intervening year within the subject area that was discussed.

