

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT USUALLY LEADS TO BETTER ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION MAKING;
REPORT OFFERS GUIDANCE TO FEDERAL AGENCIES ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

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By Andy McGlashen, ESPP

Public input, when handled correctly, can lead to better decisions about the environment, a new report from the National Research Council says.

The panel that issued the report was chaired by Thomas Dietz, a professor of sociology and crop and soil sciences at Michigan State University, and director of MSU's Environmental Science and Policy Program.

Federal agencies have increasingly involved the public in recent decades when deciding, for example, how to manage public forests or Superfund sites, Dietz said.

But critics claim that including people with limited scientific knowledge can slow the process and lead to poor decisions.

Dietz said such claims "have logical validity in that they could be a problem. But our assessment is that if you run the process right, none of those things happen."

Indeed, with their intimate knowledge of local environments, ordinary citizens can help agencies "get the science right, and get the right science," Dietz said.

By listening to affected parties and considering their personal values, he added, agencies can reach more legitimate decisions with less likelihood of protests or lawsuits.

Furthermore, people involved in decision making are likely to learn more about environmental science, and therefore become better participants in future decisions.

Dietz said decision making should be inclusive, and that agencies should commit adequate resources to the process and make clear exactly how public input will be used.

But the panel "can't provide a cookbook," he said. Instead, agencies must adjust their process to the decision at hand.

Dietz said public participation is a relatively new field for research, but one in which Michigan State is highly involved.

"I think this is an area where MSU could be a leader," he said.

The report was sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Energy, Food and Drug Administration, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

It is available online at <http://national-academies.org>.