

How to Comment

Comments may be the most important contribution from citizens. Accordingly, comments should be clear, concise, and relevant to the analysis of the proposed action. Take the time to organize thoughts and edit the document submitted.⁵⁶ As a general rule, the tone of the comments should be polite and respectful. Those reviewing comments are public servants tasked with a job, and they deserve the same respect and professional treatment that you and other citizens expect in return. Comments that are solution oriented and provide specific examples will be more effective than those that simply oppose the proposed project. Comments that contribute to developing alternatives that address the purpose and need for the action are also effective. They are particularly helpful early in the NEPA process and should be made, if at all possible, during scoping, to ensure that reasonable alternatives can be analyzed and considered early in the process.

In drafting comments, try to focus on the purpose and need of the proposed action, the proposed alternatives, the assessment of the environmental impacts of those alternatives, and the proposed mitigation. It also helps to be aware of what other types of issues the decisionmaker is considering in relationship to the proposed action.

Commenting is not a form of "voting" on an alternative. The number of negative comments an agency receives does not prevent an action from moving forward. Numerous comments that repeat the same basic message of support or opposition will typically be responded to collectively. In addition, general comments that state an action will have "significant environmental effects" will not help an agency make a better decision unless the relevant causes and environmental effects are explained.

Finally, remember that decisionmakers also receive other information and data such as operational and technical information related to implementing an action that they will have to consider when making a final decision.

⁵⁶ There are many reference books for how to research issues, review documents, and write comments. One in particular is "The Art of Commenting" by Elizabeth Mullin from the Environmental Law Institute (Mullin, Elizabeth D. 2000. *The Art of Commenting: How to Influence Environmental Decisionmaking with Effective Comments*, Environmental Law Institute. Washington, DC). Another useful reference for those involved in commenting on transportation projects is the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Practitioner's Handbook 05-Utilizing Community Advisory Committees for NEPA Studies, December, 2006, available at <http://environment.transportation.org> or available through AASHTO's Center for Environmental Excellence by calling (202) 624-3635.