

March 11, 2010
Open Government Stakeholder Meeting

Representatives from:

OMB Watch
Online Townhalls
URS/NORA/AAR/AIA
Environmental Working Group
American Petroleum Institute
Coalition for Effective Environmental Information
Advocates for Environmental Human Rights
HRI

Deputy CIO Linda Travers welcomed participants. Participants introduced themselves.

Lisa Schlosser, Office of Environmental Information and lead EPA representative on Open Gov activities, summarized key agency activities including, developing an Open Gov Plan and a Data Quality Plan. To date, EPA has provided hundreds of data sets to Data.gov for public access, convened a cross-agency workgroup, developed an Open Gov web page, and identified major milestones.

The Open Gov web page includes public outreach and tools to enable public engagement and is collecting valuable public feedback which will feed into the Open Government Plan. EPA has identified the top 10 public ideas, based on user voting. The Open Gov web page will be collecting input and will remain open until March 19th. EPA encouraged participants to use the site and provide their ideas. EPA will post a version 1.0 of the Open Gov Plan on April 7th. This first version will be just a beginning of the Agency's Open Government activities and EPA will continue to collect input and provide an update on its activities on a regular basis.

Questions posed by participants followed by summary of EPA responses:

What outreach has there been for the environmental justice community? It was noted that this is a useful process and tool, but the people who could really use it are not here – how can EPA do more outreach to the environmental justice community? – EPA replied that it sent information to 132,000 addresses and a link to its Open Gov web page is available on EPA's home page.. EPA will continue to look for specific opportunities for environmental justice engagement and to do more outreach.

When the Agency set this up was the intent to be more of a dialogue on open gov or was the Agency expecting to set lots of programmatic and policy questions? As we see it now, there are a lot of issue related entries on the site – EPA noted that the senior leadership of its Program Offices (e.g., Office of Water, Office of Air and Radiation) get input on their programs and there will be a feedback loop from the Open Gov web page to the Program Office through the current workgroup and perhaps other routes as well.

What's the best way for non-governmental organization's to communicate? Through the website? – EPA replied that non-governmental organizations can provide input to EPA through its Open Government web page public feedback tool. Meetings will continue and the plan will be updated on a regular basis.

It was noted that this is a good effort, a good website, but the challenge is, is this really a dialogue? Are people getting responses and replies? As noted above not all who might like to participate are aware of it including other EPA offices – is there a way to reach out to other offices – they are having public meetings are they putting in a plug for this process? EPA replied that the cross agency workgroup should be fulfilling that responsibility. Program Offices were asked to notify their stakeholders of the lists – purpose of plan to institutionalize the open gov plan across the agency not just OEI.

It is difficult to see this comment mechanism as a process – someone within EPA will have to put specifics in a plan – will the plan have concrete actions or just a plan for future activities? EPA replied that the plan will identify a flagship initiative and other projects which further Open Gov. EPA noted that additional projects which further Open Gov will be identified over time.

Open gov seems to place more emphasis on data not decision making process – seems to be focusing mostly about data not decision making – will you be getting into decisions making transparency? EPA noted that participants are encouraged to make that comment on EPA's Open Gov web page. This effort also is about increasing participation and collaboration. The view that Open Gov is only about data may have emerged since the initial emphasis was on data.gov, one of the first major deliverables. Clearly participation and collaboration components will and are expanding. It is the Agency's intent to address all aspects of transparency. It was suggested that even if you have an idea that seems oblique, please put it in the Open Gov web page's public input tool.

Is there going to be a mechanism across all the agency open.gov plans? Will there be some effort to build conformity across agencies? – EPA replied that OEI is participating in cross agency group. There is no specific roadmap for a process to integrate across the federal agencies but it is another good idea to raise.

Partnership/collaboration workshops – the effort of culture change – how do we change culture? What is that culture that needs to change? – EPA replied that the Agency has been transparent, more so than many agencies – more downloads more data sets available on Data.gov. How we go about having additional collaboration and participation is something we will have to do together. There are regulatory processes, under the Administrative Procedures Act (APA) which dates to the 1940s, which govern how the Agency promulgates rulemakings. There may be things that we can do in addition to or prior to when APA processes take place. For instance, pesticide labels, fuel efficiency standards, etc these types of collaboration tools could be used to open up processes.

How does EPA instill Open Gov into collaborative processes into the agency? How does the younger staff get this as a part of their job description? – EPA replied that these efforts are the Agency’s first steps and that we have a strong example with the Administrator is setting the pace and policy. For instance, she is using Twitter, we have blogs attached to the EPA webpage and other mechanisms.

Regarding data.gov released databases, it is good that they are going up, however it is well known that there are fundamental problems with some of these, quality, accuracy, timeliness. How to we improve them, fill data gaps? How to create real measures by improving the data holdings? EPA replied that these types of collaboration processes work by exposing the data. Sunshine and use helps with data quality every time. These processes help find the next steps for improvement. It is an iterative process. EPA noted that departments and agencies have formed Open Gov subgroups ie a green group and a health group. EPA replied that we are not too far away from citizens providing more information to data bases through their own observations or non-governmental organizations organizing data and providing it.

Can we see a place in this plan that identifies a way for data improvement, identification of gaps and other useful data collections can happen? EPA noted that the Open Gov Plan will begin the process to address data improvement and initiate a dialogue on this point. The first version of the Plan will address this issue with more to come in subsequent Plan iterations.

How can we improve the usefulness of this exercise by helping people understand what a database contains, how can the notion of provenance and pedigree be expressed and improved so that people understand what a database can or can not do? The existing summaries in data.gov are all over the map. There are those for which the template does not work very well – integrated databases are not well served by the template, for example. - EPA responded noting that the whole community is aware of this issue. There is an advisory group coming from the statistical community. The agencies are looking to a consistent metadata template that could be used to improve understanding of what the databases represent.

For communities there are often instances where information is requested through the FOIA process, asking EPA and ATSDR for data for instance. Communities get caught in a gap where no one wants to take ownership of the data – shows source of the issue – community are asking to take processes like this to the next level where some action needs to be taken. What will EPA do when this type of integrated data is available and requested by communities in need of action to improve health and environment? – EPA noted that in any specific process or situation where there is a need for environmental protection or public health protection, there are other established processes for those action to be taken, the full array of government actions that could be taken. The discussion of how to move this data and information driven process to improved public policy through transparency and collaboration is what this is all about. Some of the first steps in a full improvement of how government functions.

Agree that we need to work on this effort together. How can EPA address the need to be linked in this process – because most community environment and health issues are multi-agency, with multiple origins? This needs to be made more useful by this type of agency

integration. Need to insure that this process does not just have transparency for its own sake – needs to look ahead and the kind of policy activities might be served by this process?
– EPA noted that this first step, raising this in the current forum, is a good way to start.

How will this process get to the need to go beyond the data? Some ideas may not be an easy fit. It is important for EPA and other agencies to track these challenges and hurdles to transparency either bureaucratic or procedural. If there are multiple agencies that identify the same problem, then action needs to be taken. – EPA noted that the larger federal community is addressing this, that a section on challenges should be included.

Participants noted again that knowing about the challenges raised will help create a way to solve them – either from inside or outside the government there is a real advantage to making these known.

Are people getting their questions answered? The agency itself should prompt issues and ask questions – ask questions about big issues. They have an opinion, so perhaps prompt some questions. The voting process is very helpful but EPA should look at the late ideas carefully because they may not have the time to get the votes. – EPA noted that the determination of what will be included in the plan will not be based on votes, it will not be the final determinate of whether an issue will be included. The Agency noted that we are very much in learning mode about these processes. For instance, one area of success across the government has been on-line competitions, video contests. We are experimenting and learning.

Are we learning from history? Rulemaking seemed more open 20 years ago, The system today is much more closed with less posted than once was. Try to open the process with large documents. The public needs to request longer comment periods. How can these processes make Agency actions more transparent at the beginning? - EPA replied that this point would be addressed by issuing iterations of the plan.

How often is it envisioned that the plan will be updated? – EPA noted that revisions will probably be less than the two year timeline described in the Open Gov Directive, perhaps 6 months apart, but this is not fully determined.

How are you going to deal with non-governmental organizations and others with databases that might be of use? Is there a thought about how to deal with these? - EPA replied that there are statutory issues the Agency would need to address, of course. Citizen contributions would be something to consider.

Non-governmental organizations might be able to provide new mixtures of data. For instance, enforcement uses some data to do other analysis. How will that be expanded or improved? – EPA noted that we now point to outside groups on the webpage now and we have a couple of instances where formal agreements are in place. There needs to be more exploration of this idea but resources will be a determining factor.

How is EPA including states in implementing these efforts? - EPA noted that this will be a topic area at an upcoming ECOS meeting and there is a place in data.gov where states are connecting. Four states are involved, to date.