

The National Environmental Policy Act and the Reservoir Operations Study

The purpose of the study is to determine if changes in TVA's reservoir system operating policies would produce greater overall public value.

Reflecting the public's values

The key to a successful outcome for the Reservoir Operations Study is public participation. Valley citizens will provide input on what they value with regard to the Tennessee River and how it's operated. Along with expert opinions and technical analyses, these views will help establish priorities among all the benefit areas for which the river system is managed. The final result will reflect the things that are really important to the people of the Tennessee Valley.

Looking to the law

There's a valuable statutory tool which will help guide TVA during this entire process. The purpose of NEPA—the National Environmental Policy Act—is to make sure that federal agencies consider the potential environmental impacts of their actions. They must share information and ask members of the public for their views on pertinent issues before certain decisions are made and actions taken.

TVA will be following the NEPA process every step of the way as it conducts the Reservoir Operations Study, providing information on potential environmental impacts and getting input from the public on any proposed changes. NEPA requirements will serve as important check-points throughout the decision-making process.

Careful review

According to NEPA, federal agencies must formally assess the environmental impacts of any proposed actions, and must consider all reasonable alternatives presented by other agencies or members of the public.

This assessment is a carefully thought-out and well-defined process—the end product of which is a detailed document known as an “Environmental Impact Statement” (EIS). An EIS is prepared using

- scientific methodologies and technical data
- input and guidance from other agencies—federal, state, and local, as well as Native American tribes
- contributions and comments made by many members of the general public

Here's an important fact to remember: NEPA makes sure that potential impacts from any proposed action are considered together. Instead of just looking at possible environmental consequences, effects on the economy of the region and the people of the Valley are also carefully evaluated. This is accomplished through the efforts of an inter-disciplinary team of experts working together to conduct the study.

Steps in the process

TVA is interested in soliciting extensive input from the public, in the belief that this information will become the basis for sound decision-making. As part of the effort to provide ample opportunity for public comment, here are the steps TVA will follow in the EIS process:

1 First, TVA has filed a “Notice of Intent” in the Federal Register—a repository of information describing proposed and on-going federal activities. The Notice of Intent describes the proposed action TVA is considering—namely, determining if making changes in the way the river system is operated could provide greater overall public value. It also gives background information on the action, including preliminary issues and alternatives identified by TVA staff and members of other agencies.

2. Now we’re entering the “scoping” process. That term refers to the time during which the public can provide comments on the range of issues, alternatives, and environmental impacts to be addressed in the EIS. Scoping will involve a wide variety of avenues for expression of public opinion, including public meetings, written comments (which can be faxed, emailed or sent via the website), and telephone calls to a toll-free 1-800 number.

3. TVA will then develop a scoping document which records the results of the public involvement process, defines the relevant issues and alternatives, outlines the preliminary content of the EIS, and provides a timeline/schedule for completing the EIS process. This document will be distributed to everyone who participates in the public meetings—as well as those who share their names and addresses when submitting comments by mail, fax, e-mail, or phone.

4. The Draft EIS analyzes the issues and alternatives identified in the scoping document. It compares the environmental impacts of a proposed action and its alternatives, as well as identifying potential strategies to avoid or reduce any environmental consequences. It also discusses the methods that were used to analyze information. If one or more preferred alternatives exists at this stage, they will be identified in the Draft EIS.

5. Following the publication of the Draft EIS, TVA will set aside a period of at least 45 days to receive public comments for consideration in the Final EIS.

6. TVA’s preferred alternative is identified in the Final EIS. By the time it is published, this comprehensive document will have been revised to include all the comments received regarding the Draft EIS that were submitted during the public comment period. It will also address issues raised in the form of responses to those comments.

7. After a minimum of 30 days from the publication of the Final EIS, TVA will notify the public with regard to which decision was made, and the rationale for that decision. This final step in the NEPA process is called the “Record of Decision.”