

Environmental Review 101 – for Local Governments

What is Environmental Review?

The Environmental Review (ER) Program is required by [Minnesota Statute 116D](#) and [Minnesota Rules 4410](#). When a proposed development project has the *potential for significant environmental impacts*, the ER process takes place prior to the permitting processes so that ER may provide decision makers with usable information concerning the primary environmental effects of the proposed project.



Glossary of Terms

Acronym	Meaning
EQB	Environmental Quality Board. Formed by Minnesota Statute 116C in 1973.
RGU	Responsible Governmental Unit. This is assigned to the governmental unit with the most permitting authority.
MEPA	Minnesota Environmental Policy Act established in 1973. See “ER.”
ER	Environmental Review. In Minnesota, this falls under Minnesota Statute 116D and includes EAWs, EISs, AUARs, Citizen Petitions, and other environmental review documents.
EAW	Environmental Assessment Worksheet. A document with approximately 20 questions designed to review the potential environmental impacts of a proposed project.
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement. An EAW with substantially more analysis.
AUAR	Alternative Urban Areawide Review. A hybrid of the EAW and EIS to understand multiple planning scenarios and the effects each may have on the community.
LGU	Local Government Unit (counties, cities, townships, etc.)

What does Environmental Review look like?

Environmental Review documents are presented in various forms.

- **Environmental Assessment Worksheet-** Provides a brief analysis and overview of the potential environmental impacts of a specific project and to help the RGU determine if an EIS is necessary. Of the three environmental review documents, EAWs are usually the shortest at 15-50 pages. The EAW consists of a list of 20 questions and is meant to set out the basic facts of the project's environmental impacts. The EAW is not meant to approve or deny a project, but is a source of information to guide other approvals and permitting decisions.
- **Citizen Petition:** The opportunity for a group of citizens to petition the need for an EAW if a project does not meet a mandatory category threshold and is not exempt.
- **Environmental Impact Statement-** A detailed analysis of the key environmental, social, and economic issues that are likely to result from the project. The initial steps of the EIS process, the scoping EAW and draft decision document, start with a questionnaire much like an EAW and identifies the concepts in an EIS. The EIS also examines if there are alternative project designs or locations that would result in fewer environmental impacts.
- **Alternative Urban Areawide Review-** The AUAR is a planning tool that local governments can use to understand how different development scenarios will affect the environment of their community. It is a way of performing an environmental analysis in advance, before major development occurs in an area. It also is a way to use the information from the analysis to guide local planning and zoning decisions.



When is Environmental Review necessary?

Environmental Review documents can be required per [Minnesota Rules 4410](#), discretionally required by a governmental unit, or voluntarily completed by the project proposer. Note that there are exemptions for certain projects that cannot undergo environmental review.

- **Mandatory category-** A threshold triggered by Minnesota Rules [4410.1100](#) (for EAWs) or [4410.2000](#) (for EISs).
- **Discretionary Review-** Even if a project does not fall under a mandatory category, an RGU may require a discretionary review if the RGU determines that the project may have the potential for significant environmental effects.
- **Exemptions-** Specific exemptions for projects based on size or type of project as indicated in Minnesota Rules 4410.4600. Exempt projects do not go through environmental review.

Who is responsible for Environmental Review?

The Environmental Review Program involves the Environmental Quality Board, local/state/tribal governments, the project proposer, and Minnesota citizens. Each play a unique role in throughout the process.

EQB	RGU	Project Proposer	Citizens
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Keeper of the Rules•Continuous Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Decision Maker•Applies the Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Provides project specific details	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Provides local knowledge•Participates in decision-making

Environmental Quality Board (EQB)- Draws together a representative from the governor’s office (the Chair), the heads of the nine state agencies that play a vital role in Minnesota’s environment and development, and eight appointed citizen members. The EQB develops policy, creates long-range plans, facilitates interagency teams and initiatives, and provides oversight for the environmental review process.

Responsible Government Unit (RGU)- In the environmental review process, an RGU is the governmental organization that must oversee the preparation and analysis of environmental review documents. The RGU can be any state agency or any local (county, city, township) or special purpose unit (watershed district, SWCD, etc.) of government in the state. The RGU is the governmental unit determined to have the greatest authority to approve or disapprove a project.

How does a local government learn more about Environmental Review?

There are a number of resources for local governments when:

- Deciding if a proposed project should undergo environmental review
- Reviewing an environmental review document
- Understanding the process and working with the EQB to request changes
- Knowing when a nearby project may affect your community and how to comment
- Engaging citizens and project proposers

Resources:

- [EQB Staff](#) – Staff are available to walk local governments through the Environmental Review process. Staff are also available to work with project proposers and citizens. Contact us at the Environmental Review Hotline at 651.757.2873 or by email at env.review@state.mn.us.
- [EQB Website](#) – Visit the website for additional information on the EQB and Environmental Review Program. You will find guidance documents and videos, examples, and more. www.egb.state.mn.us
- [Guidance Documents](#) – Guidance specific to local governments, project proposers, and citizens is available. Additionally, you will find guidance specific to the different types of environmental review documents and videos to explain the process.
- [EQB Monitor](#) – The weekly electronic publication by the EQB serves as the official notice of environmental review documents and starts comment periods. The RGUs submit notices via the online submission form. Sign up for weekly notifications to see proposed projects around the state.