

Maryland's State Water Quality Advisory Committee - A model for public participation

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The State Water Quality Advisory Committee (SWQAC) serves to advise Maryland's Department of the Environment and Department of Natural Resources on programs and activities concerned with the improvement and protection of water quality in Maryland. SWQAC was formed in 1980 in response to provisions of the federal Clean Water Act of 1979 that mandated public participation in formulation of water quality policy. The panel is comprised of up to thirty-two members, with a balanced representation sought among private citizens, public interest groups, economic interests, and public officials.

Regular meetings of the full committee, open to the public, provide a forum for discussion and education on water quality issues, and foster open and continuing dialog between the public and policy makers. Issues examined may originate from concerns of SWQAC members, or from the Departments, with the panel seeking to provide a representative though critical and informed gauge of public response at an early stage in policy formulation.

Much of the work of SWQAC is accomplished by subcommittees and special task groups, with participation by the general public welcomed. Subcommittees have been convened to examine policy/procedural issues (Public Participation), to focus on regional problems (Western Maryland, Coastal Bays), or specific water quality issues (Wellhead Protection, Sewage Sludge, Stormwater and Wetlands), and to advise the Departments on draft state or federal regulations (Clean Water Act Reauthorization).

The diversity of concerns, initiative, approach, and products that have characterized the work of SWQAC is illustrated by capsule descriptions of four subcommittees or task groups: the Sludge Subcommittee, the Nontidal Wetlands Subcommittee and Task Force, the Coastal Bays Subcommittee, and the full Committee response to a mandate for public input on regulations pursuant to Section 319 of the Clean Water Act. Whether initiated by SWQAC members or in response to agency requests, whether by regular meetings of interested parties, investigative field trips or by tendering educated opinions on an individual basis, the mutually beneficial interaction between SWQAC and policy makers has influenced legislation and regulatory policy and helped to focus attention on critical issues, both in direct and in intangible ways.