

Changing the Regulatory Culture

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In the past, regulatory agencies – including the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) – have often operated paternalistically toward the constituencies they serve: determining the course of action, announcing their decisions and defending themselves from opposition.

In situations involving a spectrum of environmental concerns, MDE and outside groups have failed to adequately communicate their concerns and intentions to one another. These miscommunications have sometimes fostered relationships based on misperceptions. Altering this condition can often require changing an organization's culture and working to improve communication with stakeholder groups.

Agencies mandated with the duty of protecting and restoring the state's land, air and water resources, such as MDE, cannot possibly achieve these monumental tasks alone; our mission requires a full partnership with Maryland's citizens. Environmental protection requires an interdependent relationship in which MDE provides the public meaningful opportunities to participate in regulatory processes and where citizens' concerns are reflected in agency decisions.

MDE's interactions with the public are improving. Our organizational culture is evolving to incorporate the voices of groups and individuals who should be more involved in environmental policy decisions.

For example, we developed Maryland's Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategies with the broad-based participation of environmental groups, business organizations and community associations. Last year, MDE divided the Bay watershed into ten crucial tributary areas and assigned pollution reduction targets to each. To reach these targets, we have been working with communities to choose the best options for their particular watershed. Recently, Maryland's county governments signed an historic agreement to work together with us to reach the designated goals.

Other examples of negotiated environmental policy are the 1992 Maryland Solid Waste Planning Accord and 1993 legislative changes that expand the public's role in sensitive permit decisions. For the Accord, MDE brought representatives of citizen groups, local governments, the legislature and industry together and reached consensus on more than fifty specific solid waste issues. Since the Accord, new legislation guarantees opportunities for public participation in the earliest stages of our major permit review processes.

MDE's organizational culture is changing. The public has a tremendous stake in environmental governance; providing all groups with a voice has never been more important.