

Inter-Agency Infrastructure Task Force (ITF)
Federal Partners Steering Committee
Sustainable Infrastructure Goal and Concept
(Final November 30, 2011)

Background/Purpose

The Inter-agency Infrastructure Task Force (ITF), a steering committee consisting of managerial representatives from the Indian Health Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, presented recent accomplishments in the “Meeting the Access Goal, Progress to Date” report in December 2010. The federal partners recognize that addressing the remaining homes in Indian country without access to sanitation can only be successful by maximizing the limited resources available for new infrastructure. A key part of that effort is to help ensure that infrastructure replacement does not unnecessarily compete for the available funds. As part of providing access for those that do not have it, as well as to ensure that existing access is sustainable, the ITF proposes to refocus program goals to explicitly include maintaining access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation in Indian country.

ITF Proposed Focus: “Access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation shall be provided through entities that are sustainable and implemented through integrated agency planning that links the development goals of the tribe with the need for such services and infrastructure.”

The ITF Federal partners recognize there continues to be a significant need for water infrastructure funding in Indian Country. A list of the most common barriers that limit access to safe water and wastewater along with a series of proposed solutions were published by the ITF Access Subgroup in the March 2008 report entitled “Strategies for Increasing Access to Safe Drinking Water and Wastewater Treatment to American Indian and Alaskan Native Homes.” The Subgroup recognized that funding was at the top of the list of barriers. The October 2009 Federal Partner Response to the Subgroup’s report states “The ITF recognizes that the Access Goal is unlikely to be met at the current federal funding levels, especially if the efforts are limited to construction of new infrastructure.” (These documents are online at www.epa.gov/indian/trprograms/infra-water.htm .)

First time access is one of the main targets of the ITF; however, with a proposed decrease in Federal funding levels it is now more important than ever to ensure the appropriate operation and maintenance of capital water infrastructure through its design life. The proposed refocus intends to build on the ongoing ITF efforts. One way to ensure funding in the future is to build on the progress achieved to date.

The new focus on sustainability acknowledges that access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation in Indian country can be short-lived if infrastructure is not maintained. The focus statement also recognizes two primary factors that interfere with infrastructure maintenance: 1) the infrastructure design does not meet the Tribal needs and/or is not appropriate, and 2) the management entity responsible for the water and waste disposal infrastructure assets is itself not sustainable and lacks appropriate authority, structure, and/or technical, managerial, or financial capacity. The proposed new ITF focus statement will guide the coordinated federal efforts to achieve greater sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Sustainable Management Entity & Appropriate Infrastructure

To support the ITF proposed focus, and in recognition of the two factors listed above that may interfere with maintaining water and waste disposal infrastructure, the federal steering committee has detailed essential elements for both appropriate infrastructure and sustainable management entities operating water infrastructure.

Appropriate Infrastructure

By developing infrastructure appropriate for the purpose, site and goals, Tribes may find that infrastructure easier to maintain in the long-term. Reducing the burdens and complexity of maintenance can make significant contributions to ensuring sustainable access to water and waste disposal.

Appropriate infrastructure is characterized by the following elements:

1. Infrastructure provides optimized service at an affordable cost the community can support.
2. A sustainable management entity supports and maintains the infrastructure
3. Infrastructure development plans are coordinated with other existing and planned infrastructure in the community and neighboring communities
4. Infrastructure design considers environmental and geographic conditions; financial, operational, and maintenance capabilities of the management entity and community; and reasonably available technical and material resources
5. Infrastructure meets all environmental and public health regulations and considers reasonably foreseeable future regulation development

Sustainable Management Entity

The operation of water and waste infrastructure by a sustainable management entity helps to maintain services over the long-term. A management entity can fulfill the below elements in a number of different ways and may wish to seek assistance from the ITF federal partners as well as tribal governments. A sustainable management entity is characterized by the following elements

1. Distinct and Stable Organizational Structure

In order to effectively provide water and waste disposal services sustainably over the long-term, a management entity must have a well-defined mission, the authority to conduct that mission, and a stable organizational structure. In addition, a management entity must have independence and autonomy in governing its own organizational and operational decision-making so that changes in community and tribal leadership do not unduly influence that decision-making. The management entity must have an operating budget supported by the tribal community and sufficient to fulfill its purpose and mission. The budget should also allow the management entity to provide optimal service with consistency even amid local financial and political changes.

Summary

- Well-defined and stable management entity structure
- Independence and autonomy in governing organizational and operational decision-making
- Community supported budget sufficient to fulfill the management entity's purpose

2. Integrated Coordination and Planning

In order to meet the water and waste disposal needs of the Tribal community, a management entity must integrate short and long-term planning with the local community, the Tribal government, other public service providers, private businesses, and other stakeholders. By synchronizing planning for services and development with the community and other stakeholders, the management entity can fulfill its mission in concert with the larger community. To ensure coordination, the management entity should conduct regular stakeholder outreach and consultation on policy and decision-making in context with community planning efforts. In addition, large scale planning should include coordination with neighboring communities to share expertise, realize cost efficiencies, and ensure the viability and sustainability of capital investments.

Summary

- Integrated short and long-term planning with the local community and stakeholders
- Open communication and participation in policy and decision-making
- Coordination with neighboring communities to share expertise, realize cost efficiencies, and ensure the viability and sustainability of capital investments

3. Effective Financial and Infrastructure Asset Management Strategies

A sustainable management entity will effectively manage its finances and infrastructure assets. This includes operating and maintaining existing financial and infrastructure assets and planning for future financial and infrastructure needs. A sustainable management entity will use transparent and reliable accounting practices that are in compliance with laws, regulations, and Generally Accepted Accounting Principles.

Summary

- Strategies to operate and maintain existing financial and infrastructure assets
- Strategies for planning and support of long-term water and waste disposal needs
- Transparent and reliable accounting practices compliant with financial laws and regulations

4. Long-term Water and Waste Disposal Planning

Sustainable management entities will recognize current and future demand for their services. The management entity will plan for infrastructure and financial needs and also consider the environmental, economic, and public health impacts of its operation. For example, consideration of impacts to drinking water sources when planning for waste disposal.

Summary

- Recognition of current and future demand for water and waste disposal services
- Consideration of environmental, economic, and public health impacts of operation

Sustainable Management Entity & Appropriate Infrastructure

5. Adept Workforce

Sustainable management entities support a qualified and adaptable workforce. An adept workforce can allow the entity to consistently fulfill the other elements described here and can respond to changing circumstances such as emergencies, new regulations, climate change, and changes in community finances and development. A sustainable management entity maintains the skill of their work force and develops the workforce to meet future needs.

Summary

- Qualified and adaptable workforce
- Workforce skill maintained and developed to meet future needs

6. Delivery of Quality Service

A sustainable management entity consistently delivers high quality water and waste disposal services both now and in the long-term. Water and waste disposal service that meets all environmental and public health standards protects the community's environmental, economic, and public health viability. Consistent delivery of a high quality product also preserves community financial support and trust for the entity's day-to-day operations and long-term plans.

Summary

- Consistent delivery of high quality water and waste water disposal services
- Delivery of services in compliance with applicable environmental and public health standards

Next Steps

In the coming year, the ITF partners look forward to working with our Tribal ITF members in exploring further sustainable infrastructure concepts and implementing their recommendations. The ITF will lead a series of calls to hear about on-the-ground working examples of successful sustainable infrastructure projects in Indian Country, as well as challenges faced by tribal utilities that are struggling to achieve sustainability. The ITF is looking not only to improve how the Federal partners may best assist tribal communities to achieve access but also to understand how best to support self sustaining water infrastructure in Indian Country. The ITF aims to refine these goals and concepts and to identify further actions that can be taken by the ITF to achieve these goals.