

Online Network Helps Agencies Keep Tabs on the Environment

By John Flesher

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. -- It sounds positively medieval in the computer age: submitting handwritten reports to the government.

Yet that was how hundreds of businesses and agencies in Michigan prepared monthly wastewater discharge reports -- until the state began using a new online system designed to rescue environmental data collection from the technological Dark Ages.

"It was very cumbersome," said Bruce Merchant, wastewater superintendent for the city of Kalamazoo. "We had to write the numbers onto old computer forms that made four or five copies, so you had to press real hard."

Michigan has joined the National Environmental Information Exchange Network, a newly formed system that makes it easier for government workers to compile, submit and swap data collected under federal air and water pollution laws.

Fifteen states are members, and the total is expected to reach 35 this year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says. Federal and local agencies and Indian tribes also can take part. Eventually, the network will be a vast reservoir of information accessible not only to government officials but also to scientists, environmentalists and other interests.

"It does for environmental data reporting what the Internet does for the general public," said Kimberly Nelson, assistant EPA administrator.

The network will provide regulators with more accurate and timely information and will be especially helpful during emergencies such as floods, oil spills, even a terrorist attack, when officials need rapid, up-to-the-minute facts and the crisis cuts across different government jurisdictions, Nelson said.

New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection is plugging into the network to relay data about bacteria levels at its beaches to the EPA. New Jersey, New York and Delaware plan to exchange instant air quality information.

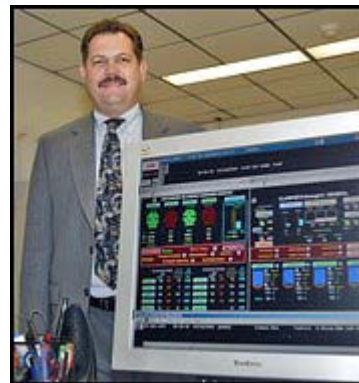
In the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington are using the network to streamline collection and reporting of water quality data needed for salmon restoration projects.

Antiquated reporting systems have been a problem for environmental regulators across the country. Industries such as banking and airlines have built computer networks with common languages. But government computers were not

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Bruce Merchant, wastewater superintendent for Kalamazoo, Mich., shows off the new computer network that allows agencies to swap environmental data. (Shawano Cleary -- AP)

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programmed to talk to computers at the businesses and agencies they were regulating, nor to their counterparts in other states and at the EPA.

"It was like someone who speaks Japanese having a message for someone who speaks Greek having a message for someone who speaks Russian," said Mike Beaulac, assistant administrator with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

When Merchant and his Kalamazoo crew prepared monthly reports required by their federal wastewater discharge permit, they had to retrieve numbers from in-house computers and write them down on forms, which were then mailed to the DEQ.

DEQ workers punched the numbers into their database, a tedious process with error rates as high as 10 percent and backlogs of up to three years. Then they reentered the data into the federal computer databank for the EPA's use.

"We basically had to do things twice," Beaulac said. "Really dumb. We were thinking there just had to be a better way."

The EPA worked with technicians from Michigan and several other states for five years to develop the network. The biggest challenge was creating a uniform computer vocabulary that would not require participants to buy new systems.

In Michigan, Beaulac estimates the change will save the DEQ \$250,000 to \$500,000 a year, mostly in reduced staff time. It is already paying off in Kalamazoo, where Merchant said the monthly reporting chore now takes about half a day of staff time instead of two or three days.

The average citizen cannot log on to the network. But membership will be granted to some private interests such as academics and environmental organizations. And much of the information will end up on Web sites that anyone can view.

"Letting people have the raw data so they can crunch the numbers themselves and take off any spin that an agency might put on it is an important check and balance in the system," said James Clift, policy director for the Michigan Environmental Council.

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