Exchange Network Forum

Thursday, November 9, 2023
1:00 to 2:00 PM ET

Speakers

Moderator: [Alex O'Neill](#) (US EPA)
Panelists: [Jennie Campbell](#) (US EPA), [Dwane Young](#) (US EPA), [Eric Cleckler](#) (Alabama Department of Environmental Management), [Frank Harjo](#) (Muscogee (Creek) Nation), [Kurt Rakouskas](#), (Environmental Council of States (ECOS))

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Alex O'Neill, EPA Office of Information Management (OIM), Office of Mission Support (OMS)

- The Exchange Network (EN) is committed to improving data sharing and decision-making to protect human health and the environment.
- The EN is driven by the partnership of EPA, States, Tribes, and US territories.
- The monthly EN Forum is a place for open dialogue to discuss EN improvements. Participants are encouraged to actively participate in the meetings and provide feedback. EPA will do its best to act on what they hear.
- The goal is for the calls to be as collaborative as possible.
  - The team is still experimenting with the format of the calls, and the structure of the calls may change from meeting to meeting to encourage discussion and collaboration.
  - Meeting participants will include both technical and non-technical staff so if the discussion becomes too technical, the topic may be put in the parking lot for follow-up.
- The EN Forums will be held on the second Thursday of each month moving forward.

Setting the Stage for the Exchange Network Forum

Jennie Campbell, Director of EPA Office of Information Management (OIM), Office of Mission Support (OMS)

- The Exchange Network is within EPA's OMS/OIM.
- OIM has gone through a lot of changes over the past few years in a short amount of time, including changes in leadership, COVID, and a reorganization.
- OIM's strategic plan emphasizes being better partners and improving engagement. Engaging on the EN, which has been around for 20 years, is important to the office. Over the past few years, the program hasn't had a lot of direct interaction with States, Tribes, and US territories and Jennie hopes this meeting is the first of many engagements with the EN community.
- OIM manages the EN Grants Program, which over the past 20 years has provided approximately $260 million in grants to all 50 states and the District of Columbia, 86 Tribes and five territories.
- OIM also manages the Central Data Exchange (CDX) which is the technology that supports data collection and data publishing and allows EPA, states, and Tribes to share information.

- OIM wants to increase direct interaction with States, Tribes, and US territories and to meet people where they are.
- OIM acknowledges that the work doesn't end with data collection—they want to explore supporting the full data lifecycle, including how to use and integrate the data.

Reinvigorating Exchange Network Partnerships
Dwane Young, Deputy Office Director, EPA's Office of Information Management, Office of Mission Support

- EPA wants to reinvigorate the EN and build on the EN's successes as a community with states, Tribes, and EPA to solve challenging problems.
- In June EPA hosted an in-person meeting in North Carolina (NC) with the purpose of discussing how EPA, States, Tribes, and US territories can reinvigorate the EN's communication pathways and outline the roles and responsibilities between the different parties. The group also discussed what the future of the EN looks like.
- The meeting started with a discussion of the shared vision for EN partners. The EN's vision is to "enable data sharing leading to better decision-making to protect people and the environment."
  - In thinking about the future of data sharing, the group also discussed whether data sharing should be broader to encompass the full data lifecycle of collecting, sharing, and using data, and the EN's role in making data usable and findable for analytics.
- The EN has a number of guiding principles:
  - Build relationships and facilitate engagements.
    - This is not just about technology. It's about the people and partnerships.
  - Empower Tribes and US territories to build capacity.
    - We need to build capacity for technology to solve programmatic challenges.
  - Embrace the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles.
    - The FAIR principles are built upon the same ideas as the EN. Data standards and common terminologies drive the FAIR principles.
  - Meet States, Tribes, and US territories where they are.
    - Technology is a high lift, and this is an opportunity for the EN to evaluate where partners are with technologies and how the EN can bring the technologies to organizations where they are.
  - Maintain and optimize current resources.
    - The EN needs to maintain the current EN legacy while looking to the future.
  - Leverage shared services.
    - Shared services have been a principle since the inception of EN. Any capabilities that are developed by a state or Tribe can be reused.
  - Leave a positive legacy.
    - As EN thinks to the future, the idea is to build the community and reach out to the next generation to build on the EN for the next 20 years.
- The following are reflections from the meeting in NC:
  - Reinvigoration starts with broader engagement. The EN needs to do direct engagement with the partners in the states, Tribes, and EPA programs. EPA is committed to having these discussions.

- o Distinguish the what from the how, which is a challenge with technology. Scientists speak a different language than IT staff and the two groups aren't often brought together. The EN needs to meld together the programmatic pieces and technology to accomplish its goals.
- o Meaningful engagement with Tribes is critical to success. The EN needs to determine how to bridge the gap with communicating and engaging all the Tribes to ensure they are part of the process.
- o Upfront conversations are needed around the strategic direction of the EN. This can't be just a small group who develops it—there needs to be a broad discussion.

Kurt Rakouskas, Environmental Council of States
- ECOs is the membership association for all the commissioners and directors for state environmental protection agencies. ECOS helps support partner agency engagement in the EN through a cooperative agreement with EPA/OMS.
- It is important that EPA, states, and Tribes are able to come together to have discussions. The EN is a platform to share information in a standard way. The data underlies everything that powers the programs to protect human health and the environment. Data in the hands of decision makers and the public is very important. It requires technology and a healthy dose of collaboration, partnership, and building trust on how the data will be used.
- The EN has shined as a framework for partnership so agencies can make decisions. The EN meetings over the summer were about renewing the commitment to get on a path to recharge the partnership of the network. The conversations in June in NC were honest and frank.
  - o The meeting allowed progress to be made quickly with concrete proposals to help the EN move forward.
  - o From the state perspective, the conversations were a key turning point for the next generation of the EN.
  - o There's a lot of work ahead with no shortage of opportunity for the groups to get engaged.
  - o The series of forums will support engagement and help get the community to move forward. There's a lot of work ahead that ECOS and the states look forward to supporting.

Frank Harjo, Co-Chair of the Tribal Exchange Group (TXG) and GIS Manager with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation
- There was meaningful engagement at the EN meeting in NC.
- Over the years the Tribes have felt that the Tribal needs weren't always taken into consideration. During the meeting in NC, it was great to hear feedback and receive support from the participants.
- The group discussed some of the issues and hurdles unique to Tribes. Tribes are at different levels when it comes to technology. The EN needs to consider how to meet Tribes where they are. If something is built, not everyone can use it. Over the years Tribes have seen how important data sharing is, but the lack of resources for Tribal programs is impactful.

- These monthly forums are a great opportunity to share information needs. TXG and ITEP are looking forward to more Tribes hearing about the EN forum and bringing issues and concerns to the meetings. The EN forum is a great opportunity to have their voices heard.

E-Enterprise Digital Strategy
Dwane Young, Deputy Office Director, OMS/OIM
- The E-Enterprise Digital Strategy was released as interim in 2019. The strategy is a shared vision for how to build and develop IT systems and services across the network. The strategy includes three core principles:
    - Customer-centric
    - Information-centric
    - Shared platforms
- The Digital Strategy has helped with guiding modernizations.
- A small EN workgroup met this summer to review the strategy and agreed the strategy could be finalized with some small changes. At the last EELC meeting, they agreed to call it final.
- The EN recognizes there are opportunities for improvements to the Digital Strategy. An agile team will be formed to review the plan and ensure it is still relevant to States, Tribes, and US territories. They will develop a new iteration of the plan and continue to evaluate the plan moving forward.

Tribal Engagement Roundtable
Frank Harjo, Co-Chair of the Tribal Exchange Group (TXG) and GIS Manager with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation
- During the Collaborative Exchange in NC, the group proposed hosting a Tribal Engagement Roundtable to build a shared understanding of Tribal experiences in EN and identify actionable steps the EN can take to engage tribes in a more structured way.
    - The roundtable will be November 28-30, 2023, at the Penobscot Nation, Maine.
    - Participants understand that not just one engagement will fix the problem-it will be a process that will take time. The group will work together in partnership to find solutions and actionable next steps.
- The roundtable goals include:
    - Understand how Tribes are currently engaged by the Exchange Network;
    - Document what is working well for Tribes as well as challenges encountered;
    - Clarify the role of the Tribal Exchange Group (TXG) in the Exchange Network and its relationship to other Exchange Network-affiliated programs; and,
    - Identify strategies and solutions to improve Tribal engagement, including potential State and Tribal synergies.

Improving Data Flows
Eric Cleckler, Chief of Information Technology for Alabama's Department of Environmental Management
- The EN needs to understand where we are today so we can plan for an improved future.

- In the late 1990s, environmental agencies started talking about a shared platform. By early 2000s there was a blueprint for the shared platform, which has been remarkably durable, but business needs and expectations have changed so the EN needs to evolve and change as well.
- The EN is a framework to share program needs and adopt technology solutions to meet those needs. It is time to evolve the EN to meet the various needs of partners. The EN needs new standards and tools, like Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), and new approaches to address the FAIR principles.
- As a first step to plan the reinvigoration, the EN needs to understand how partners currently use the data flows and how and why the use of these data flows has changed over time. We also need to understand how the data flows met or do not meet their needs.
- The EN will assemble sprint teams for the core legacy EN data flows, such as WQX and RCRA Info.
  - The group will work with the CDX team and the data flow owners in the program offices. They will also reach out to States, Tribes, and US territories who are using the data flows to share information and gain insights into how data flows are meeting their needs and where there's opportunity to develop new approaches.
  - The information from this analysis will inform future agile teams to develop and migrate to a future state.
  - OMS will be reaching out to States, Tribes, and US territories for volunteers for these sprint teams.

Polls and Brainstorming
Alex O'Neill, EPA Office of Information Management
Polls, brainstorming will be explored during future calls.

Q&A
The following are questions from the chat that were answered during the meeting. EPA will review the additional questions that were received and will address them during the next EN Forum meeting or via email.

Do EN Grants discriminate between Tribal lands classed as "fee land" versus "trust land?"

An EN grant application determination will not be impacted by the different categories of tribal lands. The EN Grants are not regulatory in nature and there is no language in the EN Grants Solicitation Notice that restricts or designates a required category of tribal lands. It is important to note that a tribal applicant must be federally recognized to apply for an individual EN grant or as the lead entity in an EN partnership grant.

Can monitoring sites be established as an applicable project goal for EN Grants?

We do not have any restrictions or specific language pertaining to monitoring locations during project implementation (other than a requirement that it does not take place outside of the US). However, the

applicant tribe would be responsible for ensuring they have the ability or approval (if needed) from the appropriate entity to monitor at the proposed site, if the monitoring location is outside of tribal boundaries. The applicant tribe should also be sure to specify in their submitted project narrative (workplan) that the 'place of performance' extends outside their boundaries, and provide general details as to the location and relevance of these location(s).

Does the Exchange Network have any examples of data sharing agreements?

The Exchange Network developed some resources around [Trading Partner Agreements](#) (TPAs). Much of this information is from the early 2000s and is dated; though, some organizations may find parts helpful. Initially, these TPAs were considered an important, though were never broadly adopted within the Exchange Network.

Are there plans to extend to the EN solicitation notice to include local air agencies?

Air agencies are sometimes eligible under our current eligibility language, if they have status as an instrumentality of the state (or tribe):

> **Instrumentality of the State or Tribe:** An instrumentality is an organization created by or pursuant to state or tribal statute and operated for public purposes. Generally, an instrumentality performs governmental functions, but does not have the full powers of a government, such as police authority, taxation, and eminent domain.

If an applicant is applying with this status, there is an attachment that must be included in their application package:

> **Additional Attachment F: Documentation Certifying Applicants Status as an Instrumentality of the State or Tribe**
> This is _mandatory_ for applicants applying as an instrumentality of the state or tribe.
> - States and Territories: Provide a signed attorney general letter certifying this status.
> - Tribes: Provide a certification and supporting documentation from the tribal council or other appropriate tribal government official certifying this status.

However, most local governments implementing EPA programs are not agencies or instrumentalities of the state and therefore not eligible to apply. Such entities are encouraged to partner with an eligible lead applicant (e.g., a state applicant) to allow their data to be reported and shared through the EN. Please see the rules and restrictions on EN partnership in Sections III-D and IV-B of the Solicitation Notice. There are no immediate plans to open current eligibility, though this may change with future grant cycles.

Are there best practices for tracking and managing all the data for permits, licenses, inspections, violations, etc.?

This seems to be a challenge that everyone is facing and there could be some best practices that are software agnostic that everyone could use. EPA will plan to explore this question in future calls.