CERP Guidance Memorandum

South Florida Water Management District – Jacksonville District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

CGM NUMBER-REVISION: 027.00

EFFECTIVE DATE: 12/18/2003

CATEGORY: RECOVER

SUBJECT: Independent Peer Review of RECOVER Documents

DESCRIPTION:

This memorandum provides guidance to both Jacksonville District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) staff for conducting external, independent peer review of technical and scientific documents and other products of the RESToration COOrdination and VERification (RECOVER) team. The USACE and SFWMD fully endorse the practice of independent peer review, and expect that all technical and scientific documents and reports produced by RECOVER be considered for peer review.

GUIDANCE:

What is independent peer review?

Peer review is a structured and independent (external to RECOVER) critical review of the content of scientific and technical documents, which is conducted before those documents are finalized. It is a process designed to provide independent endorsement of a method or conclusion, uncover technical problems, identify unresolved issues, and provide guidance using independent experts. It provides a process for independent experts to provide constructive criticism, advice, and guidance for the purpose of strengthening the overall credibility and relevance of a scientific or technical document. Peer review can be conducted by separate reviewers or by a panel of experts.

What is not scientific peer review?

Scientific Peer Review excludes any form of expression regarding the content, methods, assumptions, scientific understandings, and conclusions in a scientific or technical document that is provided by anyone participating in the development of that document, by other RECOVER members, or provided by sources outside the relevant technical or scientific disciplines.
Peer input versus independent peer review.

Peer input, public comment, and stakeholder involvement, while important in the development of scientific and technical reports, are not independent peer review. Peer input provides ongoing, and often informal, discussions and written comments during the development of the product. RECOVER editorial and ad-hoc teams, as well as internal reviews by other RECOVER members and teams, are forms of peer input. Public comment is an opportunity for the public to express their views on technical and management issues related to a product. Stakeholder involvement provides a mechanism for a consensus approach for technical and non-technical issues and occurs during product development.

Why independent peer review?

Peer review provides a process for both enhancing the credibility and maximizing the strength of the contribution of scientific and technical reports and products. As such, it is a process that increases confidence in the scientific and technical basis for management and policy decisions. Though peer review does not guarantee that a product or conclusion will not be challenged, it can help to ensure that the product is technically sound, thus enhancing the acceptance, and potential application, of that product.

Peer review and RECOVER.

RECOVER has a commitment to provide the best available scientific and technical opinion and information in support of the design and implementation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). The inclusion of peer review into RECOVER protocols is a way to ensure a strong scientific and technical basis for CERP. In addition, peer review is identified as a key feature in the authorization for RECOVER in the Design Agreement executed May 12, 2000 between the Department of the Army and the SFWMD. Peer review is also identified as a specific task of RECOVER teams in the RECOVER Program Management Plan.
What should be peer reviewed?

Each RECOVER team should have a process for deciding which of the documents it produces should be peer reviewed. Following are guidelines for determining which documents should be recommended for peer review.

Generally included for peer review are any documents that present new scientific and technical findings, new assumptions, interpretations and conclusions, new technical protocols, or present scientifically and technically controversial issues and recommendations. This includes all data, materials and even software required to reproduce or verify new findings. Assembly, tracking, and return of all required data and material for peer review is the responsibility of the RECOVER team. Generally excluded from peer review are procedural documents dealing with planning and organizational protocols, as well as review or synthesis documents that do not present new interpretations or conclusions or deal with controversial topics. If a RECOVER team is uncertain about the need for peer review, the question should be brought before the RECOVER Leadership Group (RLG).

The following list provides criteria that have been adapted from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Peer Review Handbook (EPA 2000) or the SFWMD Water Resources Evaluation Department (Redfield and Urban 1996) to determine if a product should undergo Peer Review. If one or more of the following conditions are met for a RECOVER product, peer review should be considered.

1. The product establishes a significant precedent, model, or methodology.
2. The product considers an innovative approach for a previously defined problem, process, or methodology.
3. Expert guidance by professional staff has been identified as a requirement for completion of a product, due to technical uncertainties or lack of specialized expertise.
4. The product addresses significant controversial or emerging issues or has significant interagency implications.
5. The product satisfies a statutory or other legal mandate for peer review.
6. The review is requested by upper-level management (in relation to critical technical or positional issues of importance), has a high profile.
Levels of RECOVER peer review.

RECOVER documents can be reviewed at several levels. Draft versions of all RECOVER documents will be reviewed internally by the full RECOVER team as part of a routine process for internal quality control. Although internal review is an essential step in the production of RECOVER documents, it is not part of the independent peer review process.

Internal review, in the context of RECOVER, is any review conducted either individually or collectively by members of RECOVER teams who have not participated in the development of the document. In RECOVER, internal review is used to improve the quality of a document before it is prepared as a final draft, released to the public and agencies for more formal review, and before external peer review occurs. Internal review also serves to improve internal communication among RECOVER teams, and to create a sense of “ownership” or approval for all documents produced by the teams. The team that has the sole or lead responsibility for producing the document is responsible for conducting internal reviews.

True independent peer review includes any category of peer review that is conducted by any person(s) who is (are) not a member or participant in RECOVER. Peer review can be conducted at different levels of effort, in part determined by the role of the document in supporting management decisions, and in part by the nature and complexity of the scientific issues and topics that are addressed.

The chairs of the lead technical team, in consultation with the members of the team(s) that prepared the document, make decisions regarding submittal of RECOVER documents for external peer review. The decision about the level of peer review is made jointly between the team chairs and the RECOVER Leadership Group, usually based on a recommendation from the team chairs.

External peer review can be done by individual experts or by a review panel. For both individual and panel reviews, the reviewers must be provided with a clear...
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Who in RECOVER is responsible for coordination of peer review?

Within RECOVER, the team chairs will have the responsibility for selecting a team member to serve as team manager for each peer review task (see Appendix A). Often the peer review manager will be a person who also participated on the editorial team that prepared the document. The peer review manager has the responsibility to see that the peer review is conducted according to a pre-determined scope and schedule, and that reviewer comments are addressed. The RECOVER team chairs have the responsibility to budget adequate funds to cover the expense of peer reviews. Budgeting for independent peer review should take into consideration cost share requirements associated with appropriate design agreements or other controlling guidance. The peer review manager will keep the team chairs informed on the progress of the review, organize the review, and maintain all records of the review.

A general checklist for tracking a peer review process, modified from EPA’s Peer Review Handbook (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2000) is provided as Appendix A. RECOVER peer review managers should use this checklist as a guide for organizing and documenting each peer review process.

Incorporation of peer review comments

Once the peer review comments are received it will be the responsibility of the chairs of the RECOVER team that has the lead responsibility for that document to ensure that the reviewer’s comments are appropriately addressed. This will include the preparation of a written record outlining which comments have been accepted and incorporated into the final product and which have not.

The cost of peer review

Peer review requires an investment of time, effort, and money. It is critical to identify the level of resources required early in the development of a product and appropriately incorporate these resources into the schedule and budget. Clear goals of the review process and the reviewer’s roles must be spelled out at the onset, as well as a commitment to conduct the review in a structured, documented manner. Depending on the nature of the review, the cost in time for planning may range from days to weeks and the cost in dollars from several thousand to more than one hundred thousand dollars. In addition, there will be costs of staff time needed to prepare the appropriate background materials for
the reviewers. While the costs of peer review may seem high, the benefits should justify the cost. In general, conducting peer reviews as a routine process and identifying technical issues in a timely fashion should always be an essential component of complex resource management and restoration programs.

References


APPLICATION:

Effective the date of this memorandum, the provisions of this CGM shall provide guidance and govern the process for internal and external, independent peer review of technical and scientific documents and other products of the RECOVER Team.
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Checklist for Conducting a Peer Review

Title of Document______________________________________________________________

Description___________________________________________________________________

Document Produced by (Team, Contact, email, phone)______________________________

Date Produced________________________________________________________________

Peer Review Manager__________________________________________________________

Planning

____ Peer review proposal brought before RLG.
____ Key questions and issues have been identified to include in the charge to
   the Peer Reviewers.
____ Procedures for documenting review process including the creation,
   maintenance, and retention of electronic and paper files and correspondence
   have been established.  The location of Peer Review
   Records will be__________________________________
____ Cost estimate for the review has been made. Cost estimate $___________
____ Adequate funds are available for the Peer Review.
   Funding will be provided, in the following amounts, by
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
____ Appropriate funding mechanisms are in place for the Peer Review.
   Funding mechanism________________________________________
____ Amount of time necessary for the review has been estimated.
   Estimated time needed______________________________________

Peer Review Charge and Mechanism

____ A clear, focused charge has been formulated that identifies issues, asks
   specific questions, and invites comments or assistance.
____ The charge has been included in the Peer Review record.
   File name_________________________________________________
____ A Peer Review mechanism (individual experts or panel) has been selected.
   Mechanism______________________________________________
Timeline

___ A start date for the review has been set. Start Date____________________
___ The amount of time the Peer Reviewers will be given to conduct the review has been determined. Number of Day for Review ________________
___ A due date for comments from the reviewers has been set. Due date________
___ The amount of time necessary to incorporate comments from the reviewers into the product has been determined. Number of days for revision_______
___ A deadline for final completion of the product has been determined. Due Date__________________

Selection of Peer Reviewers

___ The expertise required for the Peer Review has been determined.
___ Advice was sought in developing a list of potential Peer Reviewer candidates who are independent of the work product and have appropriate scientific and technical expertise.
___ In reviewing the candidates, a balance and broad spectrum was considered.
___ In reviewing the candidates, any potential conflicts of interest were considered.
___ The Peer Reviewers have been selected and the process has been documented and included in the Peer Review record.

Obtain and Transmit Materials for Peer Review

___ Instructions have been given to the Peer Reviewers which ask for written comments in a specified format by the specified deadline.
___ The Peer Reviewers have been provided with the essential documents, data and information to conduct their review. Date Peer Reviewers given charge and material__________________
___ The Peer Reviewers have been instructed not to disclose draft work products to the public.
___ The Peer Review record/file contains all the materials given to the Peer Reviewers.

Conduct the Peer Review

___ Written comments have been received from all Peer Reviewers Date all comments received by____________________
___ All clarification or additional information necessary from the Peer Reviewers are received.
___ The validity and objectivity of the comments have been evaluated.
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___ Tri-chairs have been informed of the potential impacts of the comments on the deadline for the final product.
___ The Peer Review comments have been included in the Peer Review record/file.

Addressing Peer Review Comments

___ Decisions have been made regarding which comments are accepted and will be incorporated into the final product, and which comments will not be incorporated.
___ A written record has been prepared which responds to the Peer Review comments and specifies acceptance, or where appropriate, rebuttal and non-acceptance.
___ Tri-chairs are informed on how comments will be responded to.
___ Product is revised to incorporate comments.
___ The Peer Review performed during the process of product development has been included in the final product.
___ All documents regarding review, acceptance, or non-acceptance of comments and consultation with tri-chairs have been filed in the Peer Review record.

Finalize Product and Close Out Peer Review

___ The product has been completed.
___ The tri-chairs approve the product.
___ The final product and record of tri-chair approval is included in the Peer Review record.
___ The Peer Review record is appropriately filed.
___ All materials used for the Peer review have been returned.
___ The final product is released.