



# Evaluation of the Regional Geographic Initiatives

July 2009

## Fact Sheet

### Introduction

This evaluation focused on EPA's Regional Geographic Initiatives (RGI). EPA established RGI in 1994 to support EPA Regional offices' place-based approaches to environmental problems that were unique to the Regions and were not addressed through existing national programs. RGI was grounded in a national mission statement and set of national criteria. It received funding ranging from \$8.4 million to \$12.7 million per year until funding was eliminated by Congress in FY2008.

The purpose of this evaluation was to identify RGI's role, practices, and accomplishments, and to use the insights gained from the past to identify what improvements could strengthen any similar future Regional funding source. The evaluation considered information collected from existing reports and resources, interviews with key EPA Regional and Headquarters managers, surveys completed by the Regional RGI Coordinators, and analysis of data contained in EPA's RGI database.

The RGI Program Evaluation audience includes EPA's senior leadership at Headquarters and the ten Regions, and Congress. Others that may have an interest in the results of this evaluation include the Office of Management and Budget, funding recipients and partners, government public affairs personnel, NGOs, and members of the public. The evaluation's key observations are provided below.

### RGI's Role, Accomplishments, and Connectivity to Agency Priorities

Analysis from this evaluation focused on the role RGI played in filling the gap in the Agency's funding for geographically-based needs, Regional high priorities, and, in some cases, general Regional support. The evaluation identified RGI accomplishments including: improved stakeholder and community awareness of key environmental challenges and opportunities; improved Regional ability to support national and Regional goals, priorities, and commitments; improved environmental outcomes such as air and water quality; enhanced ability to test, implement, and educate about innovative technologies, tools, and approaches; and successful reproduction of RGI-funded projects. The evaluators also found that RGI projects supported Agency priorities at both national and Regional levels, though there was a lack of detailed information on how RGI projects supported specific priorities other than those at the highest level of the Agency's Strategic Plan (i.e., Goals 1-5).

The majority of participants in the evaluation thought that RGI played an important role in the Regions' ability to address local environmental problems. Some participants, however, were skeptical that RGI played an important role in the Agency's work, citing that they

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thought that the work funded through RGI either was not sufficiently reflective of the Agency's priorities, did not demonstrate identifiable results, and/or that RGI-funded work could be funded through EPA's national programs.

The evaluators found that there was misunderstanding about the discretionary use of RGI funds which, as a result, may have undermined support for RGI. The role of the "Environmental Priority Projects/ EPP" portion of RGI<sup>1</sup> – particularly that some portion of EPP could be used by the Regions to fund "general Regional support" needs – fueled confusion and skepticism. The evaluation found that of the 453 RGI projects awarded during FY2005-FY2007, approximately 13 percent of the projects (\$2.2 million) could be reasonably considered to fall in a "general Regional support" category.

Evaluation findings also reflected that despite the use of multiple methods of communication about RGI and RGI projects, communication was insufficient to convey RGI's role or accomplishments, or to address concerns about how RGI funds were spent. Another factor that appears to have also influenced the understanding of and communication about RGI, was the confusion about whether RGI was a "program" or a "funding source."

## Options for the Future

The evaluation findings led to identification of **five hypothetical options** for future Regional funding support. These options are simply *ideas* that would need substantial discussion, review and, likely revision, before becoming truly viable. They are also some of the many options that would be available to the Agency.

**Option 1: A Reinstated RGI with no Major Changes.** Most participants thought that the former RGI approach would be a non-starter because of past concerns.

**Option 2: A Revamped Regional Flexible Funding Source.** This option could include eliminating the option of funding general Regional support; improving decision making transparency and accountability; better tying projects and their results to Agency priorities; improving communication; and otherwise maintaining Regional decision-making flexibility (e.g., on projects funded).

**Option 3: A National Funding Source for the Regions that is Co-led by Headquarters and the Regions, and Implemented and Managed by the Regions.** A third option would be a Regional flexible funding source that is co-directed by the Regions and Headquarters, but implemented and managed by the Regions. There may be precedents within the Agency for this kind of approach.

**Option 4: A National Program for Regional Projects that is Directed by Headquarters and Competed and Implemented by the Regions.** This option would create a program that would involve substantially more input, management, and direction from EPA Headquarters, but would continue to be implemented by the Regions.

**Option 5: All Funding through National Programs (i.e., the Current Status Quo).** This option is the same as the current status quo for FY 2009 and FY 2010; that is, there is no RGI, and funding for Regional environmental projects is accessed exclusively through EPA's national programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Each Region had the flexibility to use up to 35 percent of their RGI funds to support management priorities outside of the scope of the national RGI criteria. This 35 percent was commonly referred to as Environmental Priorities Projects or "EPP." Some Regions did not differentiate between RGI and EPP funds or related decisions; other Regions had two separate processes for RGI and EPP funds.