



At a Glance

Why We Did This Project

We conducted this audit to determine whether the Office of Research and Development's (ORD's) support of regional research programs helps accomplish the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) mission. We also examined whether results of regional science initiatives impact the agency's decision-making.

Our audit focused on two regional research programs:

1. Regional Applied Research Effort (RARE).
2. Regional Sustainability and Environmental Sciences (RESES).

ORD has Regional Science Liaisons (RSLs) within each region who participate on Regional Science Councils that help identify RARE and RESES projects. In 2015, ORD's Office of Science Policy developed the Regional Science Program (RSP) Tracker database to monitor RARE projects.

This report addresses the following:

- *Improving EPA research programs.*

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Regional Research Programs Address Agency Needs but Could Benefit from Enhanced Project Tracking

What We Found

For the eight RARE and two RESES projects we sampled, regional staff said that ORD's support helped accomplish the agency's mission by addressing the regions' high-priority, near-term research needs. Additionally, regional and ORD staff described positive impacts that these projects had on agency operations and/or decision-making, as well as other benefits that their offices gained by participating in regional research programs.

Updates to the RSP tracking system would improve how ORD documents and communicates the benefits of regional research programs.

While interviewees expressed overall satisfaction with regional research programs, we found that ORD could better document project progress, outputs and impacts. Specifically, the RSP Tracker neither included RESES projects, nor consistently included start and end dates, project outputs, or significant project events for all RARE projects. The incomplete data stemmed from turnover among RSL staff, as well as the 2015 adoption of the RSP Tracker, which featured additional data fields not present for older projects. According to ORD, in 2018, the office began steps to clarify RSL roles, including revisiting a 2015 memorandum of understanding between ORD and the regions, developing an RSL implementation plan, and updating RARE guidelines. ORD said that it is also updating the RSP Tracker to include RESES projects and RARE project dates.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the Assistant Administrator for Research and Development complete data entry of all RESES projects into the RSP Tracker; verify and update information for RARE projects in the RSP Tracker; and update the RSP Tracker to improve project tracking by documenting timelines, significant outputs and how results were used in agency decision-making. We also recommend that ORD require RSLs to use the RSP Tracker, increase awareness of the RSP Tracker among regional staff and regularly hold events for RSLs to share best practices. ORD concurred with all recommendations. One recommendation is completed. All other recommendations are resolved with corrective actions pending. The agency plans to complete all corrective actions by October 1, 2020.

Noteworthy Achievements

Prior to our audit, ORD launched a program evaluation—which it plans to complete in fiscal year 2019—on RESES project accomplishments and impacts. We also noted several effective practices relating to Regional Science Councils. Lastly, in September 2018, RSLs met to discuss challenges, goals, best practices and successes in their regions. One product resulting from that meeting was the development of an implementation workgroup focused on using the identified lessons learned to improve internal processes.