

# **NPDES Program and Permit Quality Review (PQR) Standard Operating Procedures**

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## Contents

I. BACKGROUND .....	3
II. PURPOSE .....	3
III. PQR TOOLKIT .....	3
IV. PQR PROCESS OVERVIEW .....	4
V. PQR STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES.....	6
1.0 Planning for the FY2024–2028 PQR Cycle .....	6
1.1 In-person vs. Virtual State Visit.....	6
2.0 Preparing for a PQR .....	6
2.1 Pre-visit Planning .....	6
2.2 State Kick-Off .....	7
3.0 Review of Action Items from the Previous PQR Cycle(s) .....	8
3.1 Materials Needed for Review of Action Items.....	8
3.2 Completing Action Item Review Forms .....	8
3.3 Using Action Item Status Update Information .....	9
4.0 Core Permit Reviews .....	9
4.1 Permit Selection.....	9
4.2 Desktop Core Review .....	10
5.0 Regional Topic Reviews.....	12
6.0 Conducting a PQR State Visit .....	12
6.1 PQR Opening Interview.....	13
6.2 Complete permit file review .....	13
6.3 Compile preliminary findings.....	13
6.4 Conduct closing meeting.....	14
7.0 Report Development.....	16
7.1 Finalizing the Report .....	16
8.0 PQR File Management .....	17
9.0 Action Item Tracking .....	17
Appendix 1: Sample Permit Selection Spreadsheet .....	18

## I. BACKGROUND

A Program and Permit Quality Review (PQR) is an evaluation of a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting authority's permits and permitting practices.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) undertakes this evaluation to determine whether permits are developed in a manner consistent with applicable requirements in the Clean Water Act (CWA) and federal regulations that apply to the NPDES program. PQRs also consider EPA guidance, policies, and other best practices. Through this oversight mechanism, EPA promotes national consistency, recognizes successes in NPDES program implementation, and identifies opportunities for improvement in the development of NPDES permits. PQRs are conducted under EPA's state program oversight and information collection authority on a cycle of approximately five years. The current PQR cycle is fiscal years 2024-2028.

Based on information gathered during a PQR, EPA Regions draft a report using the *PQR Report Template*. The report identifies state program successes, challenges, and action items to address areas for program improvement. It also reviews action items identified during the previous PQR(s), provides the status of each action item, and describes any steps a state has taken to address them. To ensure consistency in the evaluation of findings across permitting authorities, the EPA Region sends Headquarters a draft report for review. After addressing Headquarters' comments, the Region then sends the revised draft report to the state for review. Following the state's review, the Region's subsequent revisions, and EPA Headquarters' final review, EPA Headquarters publishes the report on EPA's [Regional and State NPDES PQR Reports](#) website.<sup>2</sup>

## II. PURPOSE

These *Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)* provide an overview of the process for coordinating and conducting PQRs during the FY2024-FY2028 cycle.

For any clarifications, please contact the PQR coordinator at EPA's Office of Wastewater Management.

## III. PQR TOOLKIT

In addition to this *SOP* document, the following tools are available on the [NPDES PQR Toolkit](#) website to support the PQR process.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> EPA Regions review permits issued by states with NPDES program authorization. EPA Headquarters reviews permits issued by EPA Regions for states without authorization for the NPDES program or particular program components. In the interest of clarity, and because most PQRs are for state-issued permits, this document uses "EPA Region" for the entity conducting the PQR and "state" for the entity being reviewed. Nevertheless, the processes described here apply equally to EPA Headquarters' review of permits issued by EPA Regions.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/npdes/regional-and-state-npdes-program-and-permit-quality-review-pqr-reports>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/npdes/npdes-program-and-permit-quality-review-toolkit>

<b>Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<i>Attachment A: PQR Reference Document</i>	General reference document for EPA and states, outlining the purpose of the PQR and relevant regulatory information for permitting elements reviewed during a PQR.
<i>Attachment B: PQR Planner</i>	Planning document for scheduling each PQR during the FY2024-FY2028 cycle (may be revised as needed). Also identifies potential regional topics and requests for contractor support in the PQR process.
<i>Attachment C: Sample State Informational Letter</i>	Example letter and agenda to kick off the PQR process with the state.
<i>Attachment D: PQR Questionnaire (Questionnaire)</i>	Questions on the state's permitting program; should be started by state before state visit and completed during the opening interview.
<i>Attachment E: Action Item Review Forms</i>	Forms for the state to provide updates on the status of previously identified action items. To be completed by state before and/or during state visit.
<i>Attachment F: Core Permit Review Checklist (Checklist)</i>	Checklist used by EPA reviewers to evaluate permits selected for the core permit review.
<i>Attachment G: Core Review Checklist Companion</i>	Detailed background information, including regulatory, policy, and guidance references, to help EPA reviewers answer questions in the <i>NPDES Core Review Checklist</i> .
<i>Attachment H: PQR Report Template</i>	Template with instructions and guidance for drafting the PQR report.

## IV. PQR PROCESS OVERVIEW

This section outlines the basic steps in the PQR process as a quick reference for EPA Regions. Section V describes the PQR process and flexibilities in more detail.

### Planning (at least three months prior to state visit)

- Identify the Region's PQR lead, and any additional staff or contractor resources needed to conduct all elements of the PQR.
- Walk through the PQR process and schedule with all EPA participants.
- Coordinate with EPA staff and state participants to identify dates for the state visit.
- Select one or more regional topics to review and determine review process.
- Select permits for review.
  - Minimum of 10 permits for the core review.
  - Additional permits for regional topic review(s).

- Send *Sample State Informational Letter* (or equivalent communication such as formal meeting or conference call) to the state to kick off the PQR process.
- Send the *Questionnaire* to the state and ask for responses to be provided with enough time to review prior to the state visit.
- Send *Action Item Review Forms* to the state to collect information on progress toward completing action items identified in previous PQR(s).
- Request permits, fact sheets, administrative records, and other relevant documents such as state policies, guidance, tools, and templates from the state.

## Desktop reviews

- Complete the *Checklist* by reviewing permits, fact sheets, and any other available materials from the administrative record.
- Conduct regional topic review(s).

## State visit (in-person or virtual)

- Conduct opening interview (using the *Questionnaire*).
- Review additional files in order to complete any outstanding *Checklist* questions; may review files for regional topic permits if needed.
- Meet with technical permitting staff to discuss permit-specific or other follow-up questions from the permit file review.
- Prepare an informal summary of preliminary findings to discuss at the closing meeting.
- Conduct closing meeting.

## Report

- Establish a report development timeline to ensure sufficient time for drafting and review. Inform any reviewers (including EPA Headquarters) of anticipated review dates to ensure expedient reviews.
- Draft report using the *PQR Report Template*.
- **Send EPA Headquarters** the draft report. The report must be reviewed by EPA Headquarters prior to sending to the state for review.
- EPA Headquarters reviews draft report and provides comments to the Region (within approximately 2-3 weeks).
- Address edits/comments from EPA Headquarters.
  - If suggested edits/comments are significant, EPA Headquarters may request to review the draft again before it is sent to the state.
- Send the updated draft report to the state for review and correction of factual inaccuracies.
- Address state comments to produce draft final report.

- **Send EPA Headquarters** the draft final report for format and copy review. This typically results in the final PQR report.
- Provide final report to the state.
- **EPA Headquarters posts** the final PQR report on the [Regional and State NPDES PQR Reports](#) website.

## V. PQR STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

### 1.0 Planning for the FY2024–2028 PQR Cycle

Each EPA Region is expected to conduct a review of each of its NPDES authorized states within the five-year review cycle. EPA Headquarters will review programs in jurisdictions in which EPA Regions implement the NPDES program.

The *PQR Planner* assists Regions in planning their review cycle. Populating and updating the *PQR Planner* also helps EPA Headquarters track Regions' PQR schedules, as well as requests for contractor support and selections for regional topics. EPA Regions should initiate communication with their states about planning for a PQR as early as possible to accommodate both Regional and state needs.

#### 1.1 In-person vs. Virtual State Visit

For this cycle, in-person state visits are encouraged, but PQRs may be conducted virtually if necessitated by factors such as on-site availability of staff, scheduling constraints, or travel/budget constraints. If the state does not have all necessary files (e.g., permit, application, correspondence, administrative record) electronically available to remote reviewers (either through a public portal or to be provided directly by the state), then an in-person state visit would be the most suitable option to obtain access to hard copy files for a complete permit review.

### 2.0 Preparing for a PQR

#### 2.1 Pre-visit Planning

Preparing for a PQR should begin by identifying the participating EPA staff. A PQR team generally consists of a team lead and NPDES permitting program experts who review permits for the core review and regional topic reviews. Staff reviewing regional topics typically have expertise in those topics.

At least three months prior to the PQR state visit (whether in-person or virtual), the Region's team lead should arrange internal meetings with the Regional PQR team staff to discuss the process and schedule. If Headquarters staff or contracting staff will be assisting Regional staff on the PQR, the Region should communicate frequently with the Headquarters PQR coordinator to facilitate the additional support.

## 2.2 State Kick-Off

Once the state visit is scheduled, the Region should formally initiate the PQR process with the state by sending the *State Informational Letter* or by engaging in equivalent communication (such as a meeting or conference call).

At this time or shortly thereafter, the Region should:

- Send the state the *Questionnaire*.
  - The Region should ask the state to review and complete the *Questionnaire* in sufficient time for the Region to review responses (generally 1-2 weeks before the state visit opening interview). The state should complete as much of the *Questionnaire* as possible and plan to address the rest during the opening interview.
- Send the state the *Action Item Review Forms*.
  - The Region should ask the state to review and complete the forms in sufficient time for the Region to review responses (generally 1-2 weeks before the opening interview). If the state does not fully complete the forms, the Region should set up additional time during the state visit or during the report drafting period to discuss its progress on resolving the previous action items.
- Share additional PQR tools (e.g., *Checklist*, *PQR Reference Document*) with the state to provide insight on the PQR process.
- Identify the permits that will be reviewed under the core review and regional topic portions of the PQR.
- Ask the state to send the Region the permits and supporting documentation for those permits selected for the core review and the regional topic review(s).
- Ask the state to send the Region any additional files that will inform the PQR, such as the organizational chart for the permitting office, state policies, internal guidance documents, and any tools or templates used in the permit development process.
- Provide the state with an agenda for the visit and request availability to meet with appropriate state permitting staff and management during the visit.
  - Consider the amount of time that should be allotted to the opening interview (e.g., three hours) and closing meeting (e.g., one hour) so appropriate personnel can plan their availability.
  - For an in-person visit, the Region should request a conference room or other space to use for the interview and permit review portions of the visit.

### 3.0 Review of Action Items from the Previous PQR Cycle(s)

The EPA Region should request a status update on action items from previous PQRs ahead of the state visit. The action item review is intended to provide continuity between PQR cycles and document actions the state has taken to improve its NPDES program based on findings identified in a previous PQR report.

During the state visit, time should be set aside to discuss the state's progress toward resolving action items and ensure status updates are as clear and accurate as possible for the report. The review should include an update of action items identified during the previous PQR cycle(s), particularly whether any action items have been resolved and the state's progress towards resolving any remaining items.

#### 3.1 Materials Needed for Review of Action Items

- *Action Item Review Forms*: Regions may use these forms to gather and organize the information needed to complete the PQR report. Regions are free to use other methods, provided that the information gathered is sufficient to prepare the PQR report.
- *Action Item Report from Database*: The Action Items Database<sup>4</sup> can be used to generate detailed reports of historical status updates for each essential action item identified during a PQR. This report should be obtained from the database by the Region or EPA Headquarters and shared with the state for reference. The database includes action items identified through previous PQR reports and other oversight processes; however, the only action items that need to be included in this review are those identified in the reports from the FY2012–2017 and FY2018-FY2022 PQR cycles.
- *Previous PQR Reports*: Regions should have on record the previous PQR reports from the FY2012-FY2017 and FY2018-FY2022 PQR cycles.

#### 3.2 Completing Action Item Review Forms

The Region should complete the appropriate sections in the *Action Item Review Forms* or use other methods to gather the information requested in the forms.

Form 1 is used to gather information on the status of all essential<sup>5</sup> Action Items identified during the previous PQR cycles. This information can most easily be obtained from the Action Item Database. The Region should populate the form with the Action Item ID, the Action Item Title, and an indication as to whether the action item had previously been resolved. The state should provide status updates on any action items that are still unresolved. If any action items have been resolved, the state should describe how the item was addressed.

<sup>4</sup> The Action Item Database is an internal EPA tool for tracking progress on resolving Essential Action Items. Through the database, EPA Headquarters and Regions can export reports that summarize the status of action items, to share with states for review and discussion.

<sup>5</sup> During the 2012-2017 PQR cycle, essential action items were known as "Category 1" and addressed inconsistencies with respect to federal regulations. In addition, "Category 2" or "Category 3" action items are now consolidated into a single category: recommended.



Form 2 is used to gather information on the status of all recommended action items identified during the previous PQR cycles. The Region should refer to the previous PQR report(s) and list all recommended action items on Form 2, indicating if any had previously been reported as resolved. The Region should then request that the state provide status updates on the resolution status of those action items. It is important to note that recommended action items are addressed at the discretion of the state and the options on Form 2 are intended to reflect that point. While EPA believes these action items are valuable and would strengthen the state's program, the state is not obligated to address them.

NOTE: In few cases, an essential action item from a previous PQR report may not appear in the Action Item Report from the database as a result of recategorizing the item as recommended upon further review. Similarly, the Action Item Report may contain action items that were previously identified as recommended but have been recategorized as essential. The Region can verify any such discrepancies with the EPA Headquarters Action Item Manager or PQR lead. If any action item was recategorized after report publication, the most recent categorization should be used in the *Action Item Review Form* and subsequent PQR report, with a footnote to explain the category change.

### ***3.3 Using Action Item Status Update Information***

The Region should evaluate the information provided by the state and ask for clarification as necessary. The Region should also refer to the action item status information while conducting permit reviews and throughout the state visit. Reviewers should note if the updates provided by the state are reflected in the permit files, particularly if resolved action items are still recurring. If resolved action items are recurring in permit reviews, they should be reopened and discussed further with the state.

The Region should use the fully completed *Action Item Review Forms* (or equivalent information) to complete the action items status update tables in the PQR report.

## **4.0 Core Permit Reviews**

Permit reviews are an essential component of a PQR. The core review evaluates selected permits and supporting materials using standard PQR tools that focus on the regulatory requirements of the NPDES program and are intended to evaluate similar issues and types of permits in all states. The review is supplemented with discussion of the permit development process with the state's permit writers. The core review assesses each of the following NPDES core elements: basic facility information and permit application, effluent limitations (including TBELs, RP and WQBELs, and final effluent limitations and documentation), monitoring and reporting requirements, standard and special conditions, administrative process, and administrative record and fact sheet.

### ***4.1 Permit Selection***

For each PQR, the EPA Region will select and review permits issued by the state. Permits should be selected because they are representative of permitting practices in the state, not because

they are exceptional cases (positively or negatively). The following guidelines apply to permit selection for the core review portion of the PQR:

1. **Number of permits for review:** The Region should select a sufficient number of permits (minimum 10) to yield an adequate representation of the state's permitting practices. If a state has regional offices with permitting responsibilities, the Region should try to review some permits from those offices. It is not necessary to review permits from all regional offices in each PQR cycle, nor is it necessary to review 10 permits from each office.
2. **Major and Non-major permits:** Most permits reviewed should be for major facilities. For example, if 10 permits are reviewed, seven or eight should be for major facilities.
3. **Types of Permittees:** The number of POTW and non-POTW permits reviewed should approximately reflect the ratio for major permits issued in that state (e.g., if 60% of major permits issued in the state are POTWs, then review six POTWs and four non-POTWs if the total number of permits selected for review is 10).
4. **Permit Dates:** To capture current permitting practices, the permits reviewed should have been issued no more than two years before the state visit, when possible. If an insufficient number of permits meet this criterion, this time period may be extended by one to two years.

Identifying the pool of permits to review can be done in several ways. The Region can use EPA's Integrated Compliance Information System–National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (ICIS–NPDES) to conduct a search for recently issued permits. If a state provides the Region with its permitting universe in an alternative form, that may be used as well. Where possible, the Region should review the same permits in both the core review and regional topic area review(s) to reduce the number of files that must be obtained and reviewed. Use of a permit selection spreadsheet, such as the sample provided in Appendix 1, can aid this process.

NOTE: When selecting permits for review, especially if using ICIS–NPDES, the Region should be careful to ensure that permits are appropriately categorized as a POTW or non-POTW and reviewed using the appropriate portions of the *Checklist*. Sewerage systems that are actually privately owned, and commercial facilities that discharge only nonprocess wastewater (e.g., nursing homes, campgrounds, casinos), should be reviewed using the non-POTW portions of the *Checklist*.

#### ***4.2 Desktop Core Review***

This portion of the review is commonly conducted prior to any state visit. The desktop core permit review provides preliminary findings and observations. Additionally, observations can inform the discussion during the opening interview and prompt the Region to ask additional, more focused questions about certain areas of interest (e.g., additional detail regarding reasonable potential procedures).

#### ***Tools for the Desktop Core Review***

The following tools should be used for the desktop review:

- *Core Review Checklist.*
- *Core Review Checklist Companion.*

During the desktop review, the reviewer should evaluate selected permits and any supporting documentation using the *Checklist*, consulting the *Checklist Companion* for assistance. The reviewer should complete as much of the *Checklist* as possible prior to the state visit and will complete the remainder during discussions with state permit writers and review of any additional documents from the on-site file review, if applicable.

The *Checklist* is EPA's standard tool for assessing and documenting whether the permit and administrative record meet NPDES regulatory requirements. It is intended to guide a PQR reviewer through a comprehensive evaluation of the NPDES permit and permit development process.

The final page of the *Checklist* provides space to summarize key findings for each permit and its administrative record. This summary enables staff who may not have reviewed the permit to have an "at a glance" understanding of the permit terms and conditions and highlight potential topics for further discussion during the state visit, and therefore should include as much detail as possible. This is also an appropriate place to note where the state has done a particularly good job addressing a particular issue.

### ***Permit Files for Desktop Core Review***

At a minimum, the Region should request the following permit files from the state for review:

- Current permit and fact sheet.
- Previous permit and fact sheet.
- Most recent permit application.
- Reasonable potential (RP) and limit calculations (if not in fact sheet).
- Administrative record information.
  - Public notice.
  - Response to comments.
  - Other correspondence.

### ***Other Helpful Materials for the Desktop Core Review***

Reviewers should locate the state's permitting regulations and policies, such as:

- Water quality standards (WQS), including:
  - Receiving water classification.
  - Designated uses.
  - Mixing zone guidelines.

- Implementation policies and guidance, specifically with attention to procedures and methodologies for assessing reasonable potential.
- 303(d) list and TMDLs.

These documents will help reviewers complete certain sections of the *Checklist* and determine if permits are being developed consistent with state policy.

### ***Summarizing Findings to Prepare for the State Visit***

Preliminary findings, specifically those that are consistent among the permits reviewed, may inform the discussion during the opening interview and guide EPA to ask additional, more focused questions about certain areas. Therefore, reviewers should summarize overall observations such as potential issues (e.g., omission of effluent limits implementing secondary treatment standards or effluent limitations guidelines), unclear permit conditions or rationale, or the use of a unique permitting approach, so that reviewers can ask focused questions during the state visit.

## **5.0 Regional Topic Reviews**

Regional topic reviews evaluate issues of regional or state importance and are identified by EPA Regions on a case-by-case basis. Regional topics may be unique to each state PQR and there is no standard list from which to select a topic. Examples of regional topic reviews conducted over the last two PQR cycles are whole effluent toxicity (WET), CWA section 316(b), mining permits, compliance schedules, reasonable potential analysis (RPA), implementation of total maximum daily loads (TMDLs), and antidegradation. In selecting a regional topic, the Region should consider challenges the state program is facing as well as factors such as:

- significant levels of activity in the state or Region for that topic area;
- any new federal or state regulatory requirements;
- inadequate state requirements or program implementation processes;
- activities in the state or Region that pose a potential or significant environmental impact; or
- topics that have significant public interest.

The Region should select at least one regional topic. Regional topic reviews should focus on permits and supporting documentation specific to the selected topic(s). The Region should review a sufficient number of permits to yield an adequate representation of permitting practices. Permits reviewed should have been issued within the last two years, when possible.

## **6.0 Conducting a PQR State Visit**

The purpose of the state visit is to discuss the state NPDES permitting program with state staff to better understand how the state implements the program requirements. While much information can be gleaned from the desktop permit review, information from state staff and in

any paper files of a permit's administrative record allows the EPA Region to more fully understand the state's permit development process. It also allows for improved relations with the state through face-to-face discussions of strengths and challenges within a state program. Where a state has regional offices with substantial permitting responsibilities, the Region should consider visiting multiple offices as part of the PQR. Typically, at least two Regional staff attend the state visit.

### ***6.1 PQR Opening Interview***

After introductions, the state visit generally begins with the opening interview. The purpose of the opening interview is to walk through the state's permit development process and discuss any unanswered or follow-up questions from the *Questionnaire*. The opening interview should involve the EPA review team, two or three senior state permit writers, and state permit program managers. State TMDL and water quality modeling staff may also attend. It is important to include state staff in the opening interview and not restrict the interview to management-level participation.

The EPA Region representative(s) will start the opening interview with an explanation of the PQR process and the role the state is expected to play in the state visit and report review. After this, the opening interview should generally follow the *Questionnaire*, asking any unanswered or follow-up questions. These questions address permit program background information and NPDES permit development.

Even though EPA staff may have an existing understanding of the state's NPDES program, it is important to use the *Questionnaire* during the opening interview to ensure EPA firmly understands the state's current processes and practices. However, EPA staff should also feel free to ask supplemental questions based on the state's answers to the *Questionnaire*. EPA personnel should take careful notes to use in preparing the PQR report.

### ***6.2 Complete permit file review***

During the state visit, the state should make available any additional hard copy permit files that were not electronically available during the desktop review.

With this additional documentation, if applicable, reviewers should complete any remaining portions of the *Checklist*, or address any questions flagged for follow-up.

### ***6.3 Compile preliminary findings***

Reviewers should take time to summarize their findings and to note highlights and areas for improvement, develop conclusions, and propose action items. Once the reviewers have completed their reviews, they should jointly discuss their notes to identify trends and preliminary findings. The team should also identify any remaining questions to address in the closing meeting.

### ***6.4 Conduct closing meeting***

To conclude the state visit, the review team should reconvene with state staff and management to discuss preliminary findings. The closing meeting presents observed strengths of the NPDES program as well as areas for improvement. Since the closing meeting is a discussion, the Region should offer the state the opportunity to respond to the Region's findings and offer clarifications, if necessary. During the closing meeting, the Region also presents the timeline for next steps.

When presenting the preliminary findings, it is helpful to follow the core review categories or themes:

- Basic Facility Information and Permit Application.
- Developing Effluent Limitations (TBELs, RP and WQBELs, Final Effluent Limitations).
- Monitoring and Reporting.
- Standard and Special Conditions.
- Administrative Process.
- Documentation (Fact Sheet and Record).

The Region might also choose to discuss any preliminary findings for the Regional topic(s), if review of the topic is already underway. For each of these areas, summarizing program strengths and critical findings is helpful in organizing review findings for the final report.

### ***Tips for conducting the closing meeting***

The following is a suggested outline to follow to ensure EPA reviewers communicate the major findings of the permit reviews and critical information about the review process.

- Discuss the estimated timing to generate the PQR report, including when and how the draft will be sent to the state.
- Discuss the process for the state review of the draft PQR report.
- Provide high-level findings. Things to keep in mind when presenting the findings:
  - Caveat the discussion by indicating that the findings presented are “preliminary” and that the PQR report may differ based upon further examination of the information gathered and as a result of EPA Headquarters, Region, and state review of the draft report.
  - The level of detail provided in the closing meeting may vary widely depending on the nature and sensitivity of the findings. For example, issues necessitating consultation with EPA management may be highlighted for follow-up but generally should not be discussed in detail during the closing meeting.
  - Findings should be general in nature, but the PQR team may provide examples observed during file reviews or opening interview.

- Positive findings of the state's program should be presented first (e.g., robust technical analyses, high quality permits or fact sheets, good documentation, well-organized files, dedicated staff, excellent electronic tools and templates).
- Present the program or permit areas for improvement found during the PQR in a constructive manner. The PQR team may also offer a suggested path forward to resolve issues acknowledged by the state representatives.
- Ask the state representatives if they have additional questions or comments.
  - Provide EPA contact information so the state can follow up with any additional questions.
  - Confirm the process and schedule to obtain any additional information or records that the PQR team and state identify during the discussion.

## 7.0 Report Development

Once permit reviews and the state visit are complete, the PQR team lead will be responsible for developing a report summarizing the findings. The report should be developed using the *PQR Report Template*. Any information provided by the state (such as from the *Questionnaire*) should be prefaced by language such as “the state reports” or “the state indicated that,” unless EPA has independently confirmed the statement’s accuracy.

For any areas for improvement, the report should identify appropriate action items:

- **Essential Action Items:** Address inconsistencies with a federal regulation, which EPA cites for each essential action item.
- **Recommended Action Items:** Make recommendations based on guidance, policies, or other best practices.

Additionally, while different portions of the report may be drafted by different Regional staff, the Regional PQR team lead is responsible for ensuring that the report is consistent in style and format across all sections.

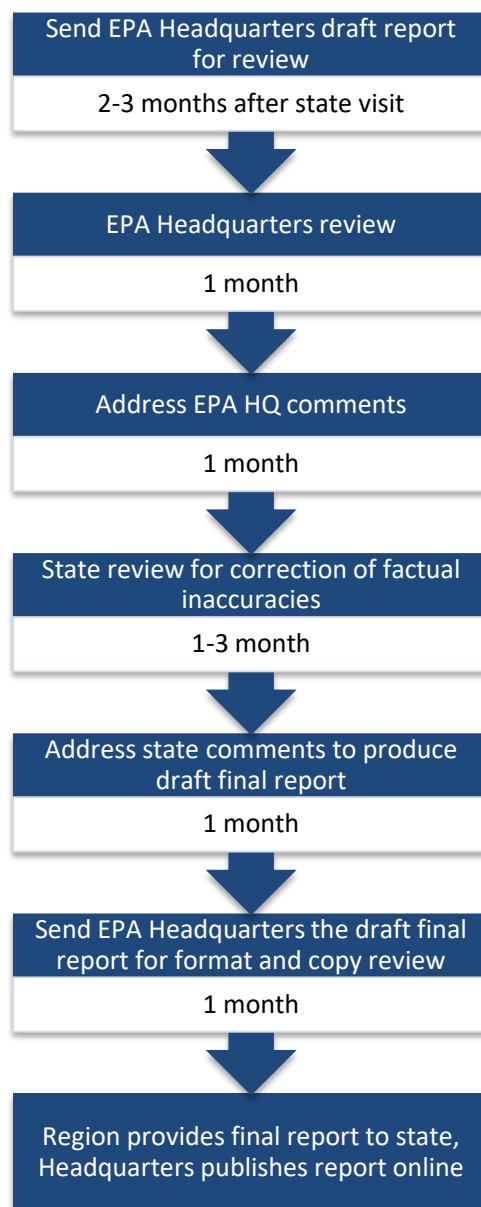
If the Region uses contractor support for report development, such support typically is limited to drafting the state program information and core review sections of the report. The Region is responsible for reviewing the contractor’s draft and providing additional notes or findings. The Region is also responsible for drafting the regional topic review(s) and completing the action item status portion of the report.

### 7.1 Finalizing the Report

When the complete report has been drafted, the Region submits the draft report to EPA Headquarters for review. Headquarters will review the draft to ensure national consistency in categorization of issues across all states and territories. If Headquarters’ comments are substantial, they may request a second review prior to state review.

The Region should make edits necessary to address Headquarters’ comments before providing the draft report to the state. The state should review the report for accuracy and provide comments or clarification if needed. Depending on how significant the comments are, the

**Figure 1. PQR Report Finalization Process and Recommended Timeline**





Region may need to meet with the state to discuss and resolve the comments. After the state's review and any resulting revisions made by the Region, the draft final report will be submitted to Headquarters for a format and copy review.

Once EPA Headquarters has completed the format and copy review, the Region should decide, with the state, whether to 1) publish the final report on the PQR website, then share the final report and link with the state; or 2) share the final report with the state first, then publish the final report to the PQR website. EPA Headquarters is responsible for publishing the final report to the PQR website.

**Important!** Keep in mind that the report summarizes findings at the time of the review. If the state has taken corrective action on any issues between the review period and report finalization, the Region should note it in the report but not remove the finding from the report. If it was an observed finding at the time of the review, the report should reflect that.

## 8.0 PQR File Management

For each PQR conducted, the EPA Region should maintain a shared file system (e.g., SharePoint, OneDrive, Teams) to house all files associated with the PQR review. Files should include:

- All state materials reviewed (permits, permit records, and copies or links to any state policies or implementation procedures).
- Completed permit review checklist for each permit.
- Completed *Action Item Review Form*.
- *PQR Questionnaire* responses submitted by the state.
- Notes taken during PQR meetings with the state (e.g., opening interviews, follow-up with permit writing staff, closing meeting).
- Any other notes or documents used to develop the PQR report.

These files will serve as useful reference materials for any information not included directly in the PQR report. EPA Headquarters may request access to the PQR files to help expedite review of the draft report.

## 9.0 Action Item Tracking

Action items are the key link between the PQRs and continual improvement of the NPDES program. After the PQR report is completed, Regions should develop a plan with the state to follow up on progress toward resolving the action items identified in the PQR report.

The NPDES Action Item Database is an internal tool used by EPA to track areas for improvement and their resolution, and is primarily used to track the essential action items identified in PQR reports. EPA Headquarters adds action items to the database after each PQR is finalized, and the Region should update the status of each routinely (at least annually), based on check-ins or other conversations with the state on action item progress. From the database, EPA can generate progress reports summarizing the status of action items for each Region or state.

## Appendix 1: Sample Permit Selection Spreadsheet

[illegible]