

EPA Fiscal Years 2026 – 2030

Learning Agenda Overview

October 2026



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Introduction 4

Context 4

Learning Agenda Priority Topic Areas 5

Stakeholder and Partner Engagement..... 7

Next Steps..... 8

Appendix A: Closeout of FY 2022 – FY 2026 Learning Agenda 9

Introduction

In accordance with the [*Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018*](#) [Public Law 115-435] (Evidence Act), which requires that agencies create “a systematic plan for identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency,” EPA published its Fiscal Year 2027 Evidence Plan in October 2026 in tandem with the FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan. This systematic plan (“Learning Agenda”) identifies objectives for evidence-building activities while seeking answers to priority questions related to agency programs and policies. In addition to the FY 2027 Evidence Plan, the Evidence Act requires that agencies develop an evaluation plan describing “key questions for each significant evaluation study” and “key information collections or acquisitions” that the agency plans to begin in the next fiscal year. In the 2025 update to the Office of Management and Budget Circular A-11, “Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget,” agencies were directed to combine both plans into a single “Annual Evidence Plan.”

As a companion to the statutorily required FY 2027 Evidence Plan, this document outlines:

1. Additional context regarding the Evidence Plan/Learning Agenda.
2. Additional information on the priority topic areas of the current Learning Agenda, including preliminary evidence-building activities conducted in FY 2026.
3. A summary of statutorily required external stakeholder and partner engagement conducted on the FY 2027 Evidence Plan which also documents the agency’s Learning Agenda.
4. Next steps with respect to developing future Annual Evidence Plans and reporting on activities.
5. An Appendix which summarizes the closeout of all activities and reporting requirements for the FY 2022-2026 Learning Agenda.

Context

Title I of the Evidence Act directs agencies to:

1. Incorporate evidence and evaluation into decision-making and reporting.
2. Advance the rigorous use of evidence as a routine part of planning and budget development.
3. Use data to improve day-to-day operations.

The purpose of the Learning Agenda is to identify and address policy questions using high-quality evaluation, data, statistics, research and analysis that can ultimately improve the design and implementation of future policies, procedures and programs at EPA. The Learning Agenda is developed and published alongside the EPA Strategic Plan every four years. EPA’s current Learning Agenda seeks to answer questions in support of President Trump’s priorities (e.g., see the

[President's Management Agenda](#)), Administrator Zeldin's "[Powering the Great American Comeback](#)" Initiative, and the goals and objectives of EPA's Fiscal Years 2026-2030 Strategic Plan.

The Fiscal Year 2027 Evidence Plan, which documents the agency's Learning Agenda, is not a policymaking, policy-setting or decision-making document. Policy, regulatory and implementation actions of any form occur through other official agency mechanisms. EPA's evidence-building activities (including program evaluations) intend to answer priority questions that can inform agency decision-making. However, these activities do not presume a pre-determined outcome. Appendix B ("Federal Program Evaluation Standards") of the March 2020 [OMB Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies to Executives \(20-12\)](#), "[Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices](#)" states that,

"Federal evaluation must be transparent in the planning, implementation, and completion phases to enable accountability and help ensure that aspects of an evaluation are not tailored to generate specific findings."

Furthermore, EPA's "[Policy for Evaluations and Other Evidence-Building Activities](#)" (Evaluation Policy, updated February 2025) declares,

"Agency evaluation and other evidence-building staff and managers will strive for objectivity in the planning and conduct of evaluations and evidence-building activities, and in the interpretation and dissemination of findings. Objectivity in evaluations and other evidence-building activities supports agency decision-making informed by facts, and unbiased research and information."

Overall, through the FY 2026 – FY 2030 Learning Agenda, EPA will collect, assess and synthesize key data across three priority areas, including conducting program evaluations where needed. Evidence gathered will answer key questions about the design, implementation, outcome and/or impact of EPA efforts in these topic areas and help ensure EPA achieves its strategic goals and objectives in support of this administration's priorities.

Learning Agenda Priority Topic Areas

The Trump EPA is prioritizing three topics for the FY 2026 – FY 2030 Learning Agenda; Table 1 provides additional information about each priority area, including each overarching priority question and the lead office(s) for each topic area.

Table 1: FY 2026 – FY 2030 Learning Agenda Priority Topic Areas

PRIORITY TOPIC AREA	OVERALL PRIORITY QUESTION	EPA LEAD OFFICE(S)
1 – Grant Outcomes	To what extent are EPA grant programs most effectively advancing the Agency mission of protecting human health and the environment, while being good stewards of tax dollars?	Office of Finance and Administration and Office of Policy and Regulatory Management in the Office of the Administrator
2 – Permitting Reform	What innovative strategies, initiatives, partnerships, and reforms will be most effective in streamlining EPA’s processes to reduce the (i) time, (ii) uncertainty, and (iii) costs involved in issuing a permit?	Office of Air and Radiation
3 – Leveraging Automation and Super Intelligence	How can EPA leverage automation and SI to enhance operational efficiencies and support the agency mission?	Office of Finance and Administration

In FY 2026, before and during external stakeholder/partner engagement, EPA addressed preliminary questions for each priority area. These questions, listed in Table 2, informed refinement of the proposed overall Learning Agenda and proposed FY 2027 evidence-building activities.

Table 2: Fiscal Year 2026 Preliminary evidence-building questions.

PRIORITY TOPIC AREA	FY 2026 PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTIONS
1 – Grant Outcomes	What existing approaches can be used to evaluate EPA’s stewardship of tax dollars in terms of (i) percentage of award used to fund activities that produce environmental and human health outcomes; (ii) return on investment; and (iii) long-term sustainability of funded projects after closeout of the EPA award?
2 – Permitting Reform	What innovative strategies, initiatives, partnerships, and reforms will be most effective in streamlining EPA’s processes to reduce the (i) time, (ii) uncertainty, and (iii) costs involved in issuing a permit?
3 – Leveraging Automation and Super Intelligence	To what extent has the Clean Air Act Permitting System improved experiences of the applicable permitting processes among state and local permitting authorities? To what extent has CAAPS reduced the length of the permitting process? Which aspects of the Electronic Permitting System can the EPA effectively apply to other permitting programs?

Preliminary evidence-building activities to answer these questions included literature reviews, scoping work on evaluation methodologies, identifying potential programs, initiatives, or systems to evaluate, and gathering and analyzing data from EPA staff and key agency partners.

Stakeholder and Partner Engagement

The Evidence Act requires consultation with “stakeholders, including the public, agencies, State and local governments, and representatives of non-governmental researchers” when developing the Learning Agenda/Evidence Plan alongside the Strategic Plan. OMB Circular A-11 clarifies that this engagement should include “industry and trade groups, OMB and Congress.” To meet these requirements, EPA engaged these stakeholders and partners through several communication mechanisms including a [Federal Register Notice](#) announcing a 14-day public comment period from April 30, 2026, to May 14, 2026, which was extended to 28 days through May 28, 2026, and a second [Federal Register Notice](#).

Following the “EPA Policy for the Administration of Environmental Programs on Indian Reservations” (Indian Policy) and the “EPA Policy for Consultation with Indian Tribes”, EPA met with six Tribes who requested consultation. For planned evidence-building activities, EPA will work with federally recognized Tribes on a government-to-government basis to carry out its responsibilities to protect human health and the environment in Indian country, consistent with federal law, the federal trust responsibility and Tribal sovereignty. EPA is committed to consulting with Tribes to understand the potential impacts of EPA actions on Tribal treaty rights and considering those rights within the scope of the Agency’s statutory authority.

EPA considered all comments and made refinements before finalizing the FY 2027 Evidence Plan.

Next Steps

As the current Learning Agenda evolves, EPA will develop required annual Evidence Plans to document planned evidence-building activities for the following fiscal year that will answer questions focused on the three priority topic areas. Annual evidence plans provide:

- ✓ Information on key evidence activities to be conducted.
- ✓ Alignment with administration priorities.
- ✓ Proposed timelines for evidence-building activities.
- ✓ Potential stakeholder engagement opportunities.
- ✓ Anticipated challenges.

Annual Evidence Plans typically build on the previous year's findings and lessons learned. Annual Evidence Plans in FY 2028 and future iterations may include brief descriptions of completed results, how they align to priorities and how the results may be applied or used. [OMB M-20-12](#) states,

“Evaluation data may only be disclosed consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies to ensure the proper protection of interests such as the security, privacy, and integrity of the data and participants.”

Once complete, in accordance with EPA's Evaluation Policy and to the extent possible under all applicable laws, EPA intends to share evidence-building and evaluation findings that are not specifically focused on internal management, legal or enforcement procedures, or that are not otherwise privileged or prohibited from disclosure.

Based on the findings of the FY 2026 – FY 2030 Learning Agenda, EPA will leverage various activities across the agency to support the implementation of program improvements. By exploring the three priority topics of the Learning Agenda – grant outcomes, permitting reform, and leveraging automation and SI – EPA can use the collected evidence as a foundation for addressing challenges that may hinder the efficient and effective implementation of EPA's mission to protect human health and the environment.

Appendix A: Closeout of FY 2022 – FY 2026 Learning Agenda

In FY 2021, EPA began work on its [first Learning Agenda](#), originally aiming to gather evidence for these four priority learning areas:

1. Expanding EPA's Toolkit of Air Benefits Assessment Methodologies and Practices.
2. Drinking Water Systems Out of Compliance.
3. Workforce.
4. Grants Commitments Met.

Due to resource constraints, EPA did not move forward on the first area – “1. Expanding EPA's Toolkit of Air Benefits Assessment Methodologies and Practices.”

EPA regularly reported on these activities. Table A-1 summarizes where EPA reported results from evidence-building activities under the FY 2022-2026 Learning Agenda.

Table A-1: FY 2022-2026 Learning Agenda reports.

PUBLISHED REPORTING OF EVIDENCE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES	GRANT COMMITMENTS MET	WORKFORCE	DRINKING WATER SYSTEMS OUT OF COMPLIANCE
Learning Agenda: Grant Commitments Met (Year 1) Report	x		
FY 2021 Annual Performance Report (E&E Summaries)*	x	x	
Learning Agenda: Grant Commitments Met (Year 2) Report	x		
FY 2022 Annual Performance Report (E&E Summaries)	x	x	x
FY 2023 Annual Performance Report (E&E Summaries)	x	x	x
FY 2024 Annual Performance Report (E&E Summaries)	x	x	x
Learning Agenda: Grant Commitments Met (Years 3/4) Report	x		
Learning Agenda: Grant Commitments Met Years 3-4 Report Fact Sheet	x		
Learning Agenda: Grant Commitments Met Final Summary Report	x		

*Evidence and Evaluation.

Closeout

Workforce

In FY 2024, EPA completed its work on the Workforce priority area and shared a summary of results in the FY 2024 E&E Summary published alongside the FY 2024 Annual Performance Report.

Grant Commitments Met

In FY 2026, EPA completed its work on the Grant Commitments Met priority area and published a final summary report.

Drinking Water Systems Out-of-Compliance

In FY 2026, EPA completed its work on the Drinking Water Systems Out-of-Compliance priority area. EPA's Office of Water conducted evidence-building activities previously outlined in EPA's [FY2026 Annual Evaluation Plan](#) with some changes based on data availability.

In FY 2026, the agency focused on understanding the impact of EPA-led technical assistance on drinking water system compliance and identifying gaps in state capacity development program assessment of drinking water systems' technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capabilities. The agency's review highlighted that EPA-led technical assistance successfully improves compliance by helping water systems apply for funding to improve/maintain infrastructure, meet rule requirements and assess needs. The review also found that while many states support sufficient TMF through various programs, some have gaps or areas needing strengthening (e.g., heavy focus on technical capabilities instead of managerial). EPA is using these findings to provide national leadership and feedback to states, along with new guidance, including resources to help water systems conduct their own capacity self-assessment.

Next Steps

EPA has begun the next Learning Agenda's activities for FY 2026-2030. One priority topic area – Grant Outcomes – can build on lessons learned from the prior Grant Commitments Met topic area and continue EPA's investment in building evidence to improve outputs and outcomes in EPA's assistance programs.