



# Listening sessions on municipal wastewater permits

## Summary of comments from communities at 2016-17 sessions

More communication, more technology and more user-friendly permits – these were some of the main themes the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) heard from wastewater professionals during listening sessions in October 2016 and January 2017. More than 100 community representatives attended the sessions on municipal wastewater discharge permits. MPCA staff held sessions in Marshall, Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Brainerd, Rochester, St. Paul and Eveleth. The purpose was to improve the process for issuing permits, build better relationships with communities, and to learn how to make compliance easier.

### Main themes

#### MPCA needs to communicate more

For example, permit holders are looking for more information about:

- How water quality standards are developed, how people can get involved in that process, how standards protect resources and uses, etc.
- The MPCA’s switch to a new database called “Tempo” and impact to the format of hard copy permits. One permit holder said, “The look of the new permit was a shock.”
- Status of permit applications, reviews, and reissuance.
- Water quality trading.
- Regulatory certainty program.
- Chloride water quality standard and impact to cities.



On a related note to communication, permit holders said **the agency needs to be more approachable**. “That’s like arguing with the state trooper standing outside your car window,” said one permit holder.

#### MPCA needs to use more current and reliable technology:

- Allow online permit applications. At least provide a permit holder’s last application that can simply be updated.
- Provide an online tracking system of the permit application process.
- Fix problems with eDMRs.

## **Cities want more time to review and discuss draft permits:**

- Among city personnel and elected officials as well as with MPCA staff.
- Cities want more time even if that means going beyond the 150-day goal to issue permits. Start the dialogue with cities much earlier in the reissuance process. “If 150 days is a target, I’d like to take 180 days and do it right the first time,” said one community representative.
- Keep in mind cities’ budgeting requirements when setting limits that require major changes in operation and/or facilities.

## **Make it easier to comply:**

- “Think about the operators. These are the people pushing the buttons, turning the valves and opening the gates. Compliance starts with them,” said one permit holder.
- Make permits more user-friendly.
- Permits should have a check-list to help operators keep track of due dates and monitoring requirements.

## **Point sources feel they are doing the bulk of lake and stream cleanup work:**

- “When is agriculture going to have to do its share? Let’s go to where the problem is,” said one community representative.
- MPCA needs to do more to highlight the positive impact on water quality from wastewater treatment facilities.

## **What we’re doing:**

- MPCA staff are meeting to discuss the comments heard and set priorities for the next steps to take.
- Actions already taken include:
  - Changing some of the confusing questions on eDMRs, such as “Yes, there is no discharge.”
  - Working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to align cropping cycles for reporting purposes.
  - Planning more frequent On Point newsletters.
  - Holding a question and answer session at the annual wastewater conference.