The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) environmental process for environmental assessments (EAs) and environmental impact statements (EISs) relies on a core team to work collaboratively to ensure project success. The core team provides a quality assurance (QA) function by working together to build quality in as deliverables are produced. Building quality in should minimize the need for review comments at the quality control (QC) phase. The purpose of the core team is to ensure effective communication and collaboration throughout the environmental process. This best practice outlines recommendations and strategies for collaborating and communicating as a core team, for effectively participating based on the appropriate role, and for documenting core team activities.

The formation of the core team means that responsibility for the project is shared between the district and the Environmental Affairs Division (ENV). The core team consists of a district environmental project manager and an ENV project manager. Both members of the core team need to be very familiar with the project’s progress, and should be proactive in identifying potential issues and developing solutions as early as possible. The team should be working together to make the environmental process for the project as efficient and effective as possible.

**Communication and Collaboration**

Managing the environmental process as a team requires regular communication between the core team members. The level of communication and how the team collaborates should be different for a relatively simple project versus a complex one. Early in the process, the core team should develop a communication strategy for the project. The kick-off meeting should include discussion on how the team intends to communicate throughout the environmental process. Identifying either a regular frequency for communication or milestones at which the team will discuss the project is recommended. The core team may decide to set up regular meetings, conference calls, or e-mail exchanges to stay in touch. At the very beginning of the project, the most important focus is to establish good communication among the core team. Begin exchanging information early, and establish a good rapport between teammates. Before really beginning work on the project scope, the team members can start establishing a mutual understanding of the project, begin preparing for scope development, and discuss whether there are subject matter experts (SMEs) or other parties that will need to be heavily involved in the project.

The core team is responsible for many aspects of the environmental process. While some of these responsibilities must be completed together, such as completing QC forms that must be signed by both team members, others may be done by either core team member. The team members should discuss their shared responsibilities and ensure both members know who will perform which core team functions. Consider discussing who will schedule and arrange any necessary meetings or conference calls, prepare meetings minutes, and enter specific information and documentation into the Environmental Compliance Oversight System (ECOS). If the project sponsor is a local government, identify who will provide information and TxDOT-produced deliverables to the local government for inclusion in the project file. Do not assume the other core team member is handling a specific function. Communication is the key to ensuring all requirements are met.

When developing the project scope, the district core team member should work with SMEs as appropriate to identify tasks and develop a schedule. It is also a good idea to ensure there are some discussions between both core team members and any appropriate SMEs regarding the methods to be used and the report expectations for subjects that are more context-specific, such as cumulative impacts.
As the project progresses, ensure frequent communicate and keep track of progress. Projects are expected to change over time; monitoring progress helps ensure that adjustments are made early enough to fit within the schedule.

Any time something unexpected arises regarding the project, the core team should discuss the issue. If the project is more complex than anticipated, the core team should increase the level of communication. If the project is progressing smoothly, less frequent communication may be appropriate.

The core team also should have a communication link to the overall project manager and should monitor the progress of the engineering aspects of the project. The core team should be aware of the links between environmental and engineering components of the project. Establishing strong communication with the overall project manager allows the core team to identify and resolve potential project issues proactively.

To help foster appropriate integration of the Environmental Management System (EMS) and the environmental aspects of project planning and delivery, the core team should find out who will be preparing stage gate checklists for the project and at what stages. The stage gate checklists are mechanisms for memorializing and communicating environmental issues to design staff. Establishing a link with the preparer is a way for the core team to improve overall project delivery. The core team and project sponsor are responsible for continuing to communicate about the status of outstanding environmental permits, issues, and commitments (EPICs) after the approval of the EA or EIS.

At the end of the project, the core team should discuss how the process went. Both core team members should identify what worked well for them and opportunities for improvement in future projects. The ENV core team member should relay this information to the Project Delivery Section of ENV so that best practices can be shared statewide.

**Documentation**

To demonstrate that the core team has worked together effectively in the project file, the file must contain evidence of communication commensurate with the complexity of the project. The amount of evidence included is at the discretion of the core team. Evidence of communication may include, but is not limited to, meeting minutes, e-mail exchanges, or journal entries reflecting core team discussions. Collaboration is demonstrated in the contents of the communication, and does not require separate documentation.

Documenting the communication strategy helps anyone reviewing the project file to understand what to expect. To avoid an erroneous assumption that the file is incomplete or that the core team had limited involvement in the project, this documentation may be particularly important for simpler projects with less frequent communication. Core team communication should be discussed at the kick-off meeting, and decisions can be documented using the kick-off meeting minutes, if appropriate. Documentation requirements for core team collaboration are limited to the kick-off meeting minutes; however, more thorough documentation of communication throughout the process is a best practice that the core team should consider. It is also a good idea to document changes to the communication strategy and any issue-specific communication.

Ultimately, the core team is responsible for the success of environmental aspects of the project. The TxDOT approach to the environmental process is rooted in collaboration, and strong communication is the key to success. The core team members should talk early, talk often, and document any communication for a positive project outcome.
Acronyms and Abbreviations

EA       Environmental Assessment
ECOS    Environmental Compliance Oversight System
EIS      Environmental Impact Statement
ENV      Environmental Affairs Division
EPICs   Environmental Permits, Issues, and Commitments
NEPA    National Environmental Policy Act
QA       Quality Assurance
QC       Quality Control
SMEs    Subject Matter Experts
TxDOT    Texas Department of Transportation
The following table shows the revision history for this document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Date Month, Year</th>
<th>Reason for and Description of Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>Version 1 was released.</td>
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