



Montana Legislative Services Division

Legislative Environmental Policy Office

TO: EQC
From: Joe Kolman
Re: Trends

The work plan approved by the EQC in September 2013 included a direction to create an online repository for trend information. Jason Mohr has been working on this project and will have a few examples to hand out and discuss at the meeting. Included with the mailing is a list of possible topics that could be included in such a list.

Some history is needed to understand the basis for this endeavor. The statutory roots of compiling trend information dates back more than four decades - to the creation of the EQC.

The first subsection of 75-1-324, MCA states that the EQC shall:

"gather timely and authoritative information concerning the conditions and trends in the quality of the environment, both current and prospective, analyze and interpret the information for the purpose of determining whether the conditions and trends are interfering or are likely to interfere with the achievement of the policy set forth in 75-1-103, and compile and submit to the governor and the legislature studies relating to the conditions and trends."

As a matter of course in complying with the law, studies conducted by the EQC incorporate timely and authoritative information on trends. Past examples of study-specific trend gathering includes historic lumber prices and processing capacity; recycling and waste disposal rates; and an inventory of conservation easements.

However, at times in its history, the EQC documented trends beyond its study of specific issues and compiled baseline information in a hard copy report. In 1975, the EQC produced a 178-page report "[Montana Environmental Indicators](#)." The report included examinations of population, energy production, water, minerals, forest and agricultural land, water and air quality, and wildlife.

The report came with caveats:

An objective of the report is to assemble, integrate, and report existing and periodically collected or monitored data on conditions and trends of the Montana environment. If the report highlights inadequate or faulty data or identifies areas where new data are needed, the report has been successful.

The report does not attempt to interpret whether the conditions and trends contained here are "good" or "bad." Likewise, it is not organized around any preconceived notions of what Montana should be or do to protect and enhance the "quality of life" of its citizens. The effort here is to present the data required to make these choices in an informed, as opposed to intuitive, manner.

The report asks readers to evaluate the report and help the EQC increase the utility of the environmental indicators project. The EQC believes that critical choices confront the citizens of Montana and that for action to be effective it must, among other things, be informed.

The EQC conceded that it was a major effort to assemble comprehensive baseline data, reported in a systematic format, on the current state of the Montana environment. Five staff members worked on the document. But the EQC was dedicated to a long-term commitment of refining the indicators and of issuing updated and revised summaries periodically.

The first few pages of that report are included in the mailing.

It took another 20 years until the EQC attempted another comprehensive trend report. "[Our Montana Environment ... Where Do We Stand?](#)" was a 28-page document that examined many of the same issues as the 1975 report, but capitalized on conveying statewide information in maps, graphs, and concise summaries.

Again, the EQC emphasized that the information is presented as a basis for readers to form opinions. "This report does not attempt to interpret where Montana's environment stands, but encourages the reader to answer that question," said the 1996 report, which is included in the mailing.

Since those two efforts, a number of things have changed that make a commitment to refine and issue updated trends much easier. Unlike the previous reports, the current endeavor would be online only. Advanced technology makes the gathering, presentation, and updating of information infinitely easier.

Much of the information that could be presented by the EQC is available online. However, anyone looking for information may have to visit scores of websites. Gathering that information under the EQC umbrella could make it much easier for Montanans to find and use that information.

The online repository of trend information would be a continuation of the EQC tradition of providing factual information upon which policy makers and other Montanans can make informed choices. Inevitably, the information will lead to more questions, the answers to which can also be included. Previous reports solicited feedback from readers and this version would welcome suggestions too.

As with the other publications, the online trend information would be subject to EQC review on a regular basis.

Please know that these examples represent only a fraction of what could be made available. But given the staff expertise and available technology, there exists an opportunity to establish an ever-growing, one-stop shop for trend information.

This would allow the EQC to bolster its commitment to gather timely and authoritative information and convey it to Montanans in a way that the EQC members in the 1970s and even the 1990s could not have imagined possible.

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