

GUIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEW.

INTRODUCTION.

This paper provides guidelines for consultants undertaking reviews of documents, policy statements and other material prepared on behalf of a client by a third party, usually a consultant.

The guidelines are aimed at ensuring that the client, the originating consultant and the reviewing consultant are dealt with fairly and honestly, and that none are unnecessarily disadvantaged by the process.

GUIDELINES.

1. REVIEW PROCEDURE.

The reviewing consultant should contact the originating consultant as soon as a request to undertake the review is made. The originating consultant should be made aware of the client's request and inform the reviewer if there were any circumstances of which they should be aware, e.g. conflicts of interest, limitations which were set by the client for preparing the original document, or severe restrictions in budget or available time which forced the originator to limit the scope of the work.

The client has the right to request a review without contact with the originator.

In all cases the reviewer should be careful to include a statement of any limitations placed on the review, any possible conflict of interest, or any other information relevant to use of the review.

2. TYPES OF REVIEWS.

2.1 Technical Review.

A technical review should state:

- the limitations placed on the originator in preparation of the original document,
- limitations placed on the reviewer during the review period, such as no contact with the originator or the client,
- comments on the technical accuracy of the material presented,
- comments on the adequacy of the material for the purpose it was intended,
- comments on special issues such as circular arguments, unsubstantiated statements and inadequate referencing or sourcing. Such statements should be evaluated bearing in mind the end-use of the document and whether the mode of presentation will prevent adequate public review or unnecessarily complicate the document with no advantage to the client or other parties.

2.2 Policy or Procedural Review.

When reviewing non-technical documents, especially where policy or procedural information is being reviewed, legal liability of both the originator and reviewer can be considerable if the implications of recommendations are not clearly understood.

When undertaking such reviews it may be desirable or appropriate for the client, the originating consultant and the reviewing consultant to meet before the review commences. The roles and responsibilities of each should be clearly defined and set out in minutes or a follow-up letter. Towards the end of the review period the three parties could again meet to discuss findings and redefine, if necessary, the implications of the findings.

3. SPECIFIC REVIEW CONSIDERATIONS.

3.1 English Construction.

A peer review is to ensure technical accuracy and comprehensiveness, not to "correct" the originator's English. It should be borne in mind that every writer has their own means of expression and English should only become a primary focus if it distorts the meaning of the text.

3.2 Errors or Discrepancies.

These should be discussed with the originating consultant and/or the client. There may be a typographic error or some other simple explanation, especially if the document under review is a draft.

3.3 Interpretation.

Differences in interpretation of data are common, especially when dealing with aerial photographs, graphs, tables of data and reference material. When reviewing such data consider

- is the alternative interpretation equally valid, and
- does the new interpretation significantly affect the project?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes then discussions should commence between the three parties involved.

3.4 Schools of Thought.

Schools of scientific thought may affect the interpretation of data. The originators' opinions may differ from the reviewers' but this does not make either wrong. Both opinions should be considered, especially if the implications of the alternative opinion are significant.

3.5 Common Goal.

Never forget the common goal of the client, the originator and the reviewer - to assist the client to obtain decision-making authority approval while protecting the environment and/or to ensure environmental responsibility in company practice.

3.6 Avoid Being Hypercritical.

It is easy for competing consultants, especially those of differing technical opinion, to be hypercritical of the other's work. The role of the reviewer is not to nit-pick but to review the suitability of the document for the role it was intended.

3.7 The Parts are Less Important than the Whole.

Again, disagreement over minor details will not progress the cause of the client or the consultants. Unless the impacts are significant, simply bring them to the originator's and/or client's attention.

4.0 PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY AND INTEGRITY.

If any significant problems arise during peer review, whether they are resolved to the reviewer's satisfaction or not, they should be set out in writing and presented to the client. This should especially apply if the implications for the project are of a policy nature or have wide ranging or ill-defined ramifications extending beyond the scope of the immediate study.