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Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment

eBrief

EFFECTIVE NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Conveying the key findings of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in a clear and concise format is not simple. However, a non-technical summary (NTS) must do just that to allow the public to understand a development proposal and its anticipated environmental outcomes. This e-brief is designed to improve the quality of NTS in EIA practice; however, the advice set out is also applicable more widely.

JANUARY 2012 ISSUE

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WHAT IS A NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY?

A non-technical summary (NTS) is a concise document that provides a description of the EIA process and its findings in a manner that is both appealing to read and easily understood by the general public. As a minimum an NTS must contain the information set out in **Box 1**; however, in good practice terms it should also provide an effective outline of all the key points set out in an Environmental Statement. The NTS *informs* the reader of the findings of the assessment and *consults* them on the decision to be taken; it should therefore be seen as one of the last steps in an effective pre-application engagement process.

A good NTS will improve public access to environmental information and is important in term of EIA Directive compliance (**Box 1**). For organisations registered to IEMA's EIA Quality Mark the criteria detailed in **Box 2** must also be complied with.

IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE

The purpose of a NTS is to make the key issues and findings of the environmental statement accessible and easily understood by the general public. The public can be defined as any individual or group of individuals, organisation or political entity with an interest in the outcome of a decision[1]. However, NTS are also used as a quick guide to an EIA's findings by a number of other stakeholders, including decision-makers. You must keep this in mind when thinking about the length and style of your NTS.

MAKE THE DOCUMENT ACCESSIBLE

Think about a consultation document dropping through your letter box. *How long would you expect to spend reading it to extract the key points and decide if you want more detail?* IEMA suggests that in most cases a period of 15-20 minutes is a reasonable request on a member of the public's time. The NTS should therefore be: **short** - see tips in **Box 3**; **quick to download** - a single file of less than 5Mb, for those with slower internet connections and; **replicable** - to those without colour printers. In some cases there may also be a need to consider providing the NTS in different formats or languages. Finally, the NTS should be provided both as a separate document and included in the Environmental Statement.

MAKE THE WRITING ENGAGING

Technical editors or communication specialists may be of help in writing complex technical information in an understandable way, but this must not change the meaning of what is being said. The narrative should aim to tell the story about: what is proposed and what else was considered, what the environmental implications are of the proposal and how they will be managed. There should be a logical flow, which need not reflect the order of chapters in the Environmental Statement. Information can be made more tangible and engaging for the public by presenting it in an alternate manner (e.g. presenting the size of the development in relation to a car, house, a jumbo jet, etc). Follow general rules on non-technical writing, including: keeping sentences short; avoiding jargon and acronyms, where possible, and; using the common names if describing species.

1. Planning an Effective Publication, International Association for Public Participation (2006)

BOX 1: EIA DIRECTIVE'S MINIMUM NTS CONTENT*

A non-technical summary of:

- a description of the project comprising information on the site, design and size of the project,
- a description of the measures envisaged in order to avoid, reduce and, if possible, remedy significant adverse effects,
- the data required to identify and assess the main effects which the project is likely to have on the environment,
- an outline of the main alternatives studied by the developer and an indication of the main reasons for his choice, taking into account the environmental effects.

* As set out in Article 5 of Directive 85/337/EEC, as amended.

MAKE THE STYLE VISUALLY APPEALING

An NTS does not need to follow a traditional report style; in fact, avoiding this will make it easier to concisely communicate information. Think about alternatives to blocks of text, but where they are necessary, keep them short. Don't use a small font size to reduce page numbers and remember to keep some white space around text and graphics. Select photographs and other images that do multiple jobs, for example a site location map can also set out key environmental receptors or identify alternative sites / layouts considered. Be imaginative in layout and make effective use of graphics, following the advice in **Box 4**.

BOX 2: EIA QUALITY MARK REVIEW CRITERIA*

COM3: Regulatory compliance

H) Has a Non-Technical Summary been produced containing an outline of the information mentioned in criteria COM3 A) to G)?

COM6: EIA Presentation

B) Non-Technical Summary (NTS)

i) Does the NTS provide sufficient information for a member of the public to understand the significant environmental effects of the proposed development without having to refer to main text of the ES?

ii) Are maps and diagrams included in the NTS that, at a minimum, illustrate the location of the application site, the boundary of the proposed development, and the location of key environmental receptors?

iii) Is it clear that the NTS was made available as a separate stand-alone document?

* See: NTS/001

MAKE THE CONTENT INFORMATIVE

The most important role of an NTS is to convey relevant environmental information to a public audience, thus the words and pictures used must effectively do this job! To do this the EIA co-ordinator must retain sign-off for the NTS and be responsible for checking its content is accurate and has been summarised transparently and objectively. This will include ensuring that the NTS:

- Reports all of the assessment's key conclusions
- Is up to date and consistent with the Environmental Statement, particularly the significant effects
- Covers relevant issues in an appropriate level of detail based on their significance
- Uses consistent references compared to the Environmental Statement e.g. numbering options.

The EIA co-ordinator should also check that the NTS has avoided the following examples of poor practices:

- Listing each heading from the environmental statement and putting a few words under each
- Present information without interpretation or explanation, in particular referring to tables, figures, maps or images that are not included in the NTS
- Cutting and pasting from the main text, including: simply repeating conclusion sections from topic chapters and copying other paragraphs, which then appear out of context
- Hiding any of the EIA's key messages by over-summarising or averaging out its findings

Examples of EIA Quality Mark registrant NTS that meet much of the advice in this ebrief:

- **AMEC**, formerly Entec (February, 2010): Cilgwyn leachate treatment plant – A well presented NTS related to Gwynedd Council's proposal for a leachate plant at the closed Cilgwyn landfill site.
- **ERM** (July, 2010): Land reclamation, surface coal mining and restoration at the former Tower Colliery site – Effective integration of graphics within a concise description of the EIA's findings.
- **Jacobs** (July, 2010): Thornton to Switch Island Link – A succinct NTS clearly setting out the issues identified by the EIA of a proposed single carriage way link road for Sefton Council.

IEMA members can access over 350 NTS from EIA Quality Mark registrants at: NTS/002

BOX 4: THE USE OF MAPS, FIGURES, TABLES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

A picture tells a thousand words, but only if…

1. It is needed e.g.
   - It helps generate understanding of its subject.
   - The information is more concisely and/or easily displayed in a visual format.
2. It adds to rather than detracts from the text e.g.
   - It is integrated with the narrative and explained.
   - It tells the whole story and is not misleading
3. It is clear and legible e.g.
   - It is not an auto-CAD or engineering drawing,
   - It has a key, scale and North arrow, where relevant.

BOX 3: TIPS FOR KEEPING IT BRIEF

Description of development	• Focus on setting out the what, where and why of the proposal. • Include an inset map on the location map to provide a regional context.
Alternatives	• List the alternatives considered, in relevant types, with concise descriptions. • Graphical representations can help explain locations or iteration of a proposal's design.
Scoping, Methods & Engagement	• Use the EIA's findings to identify the baseline information that will be summarised and consider using annotated maps to present it (see: **Box 4**). • Reference standard practices or list surveys / methods, do not describe the detail. • Concisely explain the scoping and consultation process setting out how opinions were sought, from whom, key issues raised and where the NTS addresses them.
Assessment and Follow up	• Presenting the assessment findings in one or more tables can be useful, but avoid large matrices that fail to justify the significance of the predicted effects. • Focus on significant effects ensuring the text is clear as to whether the significance presented relates to the effect prior to mitigation or post its anticipated success. • A table is an effective way to concisely set out the main actions planned to manage the proposal's environmental effects.