

The Electronic REF Template

COUNCIL NAME

Hunter & Central Coast
Regional Environmental
Management Strategy

WEB ADDRESS

hccrems.com.au

SIZE

39,021 square kilometres

POPULATION

1 million (14 councils
combined)

Overview

The Electronic Review of Environmental Factors Template (or REF Template) is an MS Access database designed to substantially reduce the risk to councils of non-compliance with key State and Federal pieces of environmental legislation. The template assists with the collation of information necessary to assess the environmental impact of activities and comply with Part 5 of the NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EP&A Act).

The electronic REF Template provides a comprehensive risk management tool that actively enables councils to effectively manage the risk inherent in conducting on-ground works (with respect to environmental protection legislation). The REF template is scalable, making it appropriate for evaluating the impact of small maintenance tasks and large scale construction projects.

The electronic REF template's simple, systematic process has broad scale application for all agencies captured by Part 5 of the EP&A Act and actively assists agencies to protect the environment.

Background

Over the past 4 years, HCCREMS has been working with our 14 member councils on a range of operational and environmental compliance projects. As these projects developed, it became increasingly clear that a range of systems were being used to conduct REF assessments, and whilst some systems were comprehensive, others were in need of improvement.

A number of councils in the region have, through various activities, been subject to investigation or prosecution, for activities likely not to have occurred if a comprehensive REF process had been undertaken. Following these investigations and prosecutions, the General Managers of the councils were very supportive of the development of the REF template.

Implementation

HCCREMS worked closely with the 14 council project partners (Cessnock City, Dungog Shire, Gloucester Shire, Great Lakes, Lake Macquarie City, Maitland City, Greater Taree City, Muswellbrook Shire, City of Newcastle, Port Stephens, Singleton, Upper Hunter Shire, Gosford City and Wyong Shire) over 2 years to develop the REF process, the electronic REF template and associated materials and training. The project was implemented over several stages:

Research and Consultation

- Review of partner councils' current processes for considering REFs under Part 5 of the EP&A Act to identify efficient processes and learn from the less efficient processes.
- Review of the relevant legislative requirements for inclusion in the electronic REF Template.
- Meetings with the partner councils to establish their requirements for the database.

Development, Testing and Review

- Development of the electronic REF Template (MS Access database) to create a system that expands or contracts, based on the information entered.
- Development of supporting documentation including a REF User Guide.
- Testing of the electronic REF Template with partner councils, and modifying or amending the Template based on feedback.
- Pilot of the electronic REF Template in 6 partner councils. The Pilot operated for 10 weeks and enabled councils to trial the template on active REF processes to fully assess the capability, strengths and weaknesses of the template. The Pilot also provided valuable feedback on issues specific to each council's IT environment, and provided face-to-face training of officers that would be responsible for utilising the electronic REF Template.



REFERENCES

Information about the REF Template:

hccrems.com.au/Programs/Environmental-Compliance/Sub-projects/Electronic-REF-Template.aspx

- Review of the electronic REF Template following the comprehensive feedback generated through the Pilot. Final improvements were made to the template based on Pilot outcomes.

A business case for the installation and ongoing maintenance of the electronic REF Template for HCCREMS' member councils was subsequently developed.

Funding for the project was sourced from the NSW Environmental Trust. Estimated investment in the project including both cash and in-kind contributions is estimated at \$100,000.

Outcomes

The electronic REF Template project has delivered significant outcomes for councils in the Hunter and Central Coast region, including the development of a detailed register of all State and Federal legislative instruments that require councils to manage and protect the environment.

The legislative review, and active engagement with councils, enabled the development of an MS Access database that:

- Is unique in its ability to comprehensively cover all appropriate legislative instruments, triggered by the type of activity and proposed location of activity, enabling the one template to be used for minor maintenance works and large scale construction projects.
- Is simple, systematic, easy to use and compatible with the computer systems used by all councils in NSW, as it is built in Microsoft Access.
- Provides councils with the confidence they are addressing all relevant environmental legislation. The use of the database to drive the collection and assessment of environmental impacts provides a significant resource to councils to manage the risk associated with legislative non-compliance.
- Provides councils with detailed information on which staff have provided input into the development of a specific REF, enabling decision makers to ensure information and approvals have been received from appropriate agencies and individuals.
- Provides a detailed list of other approvals, permits and licences that councils may need to receive prior to undertaking works.

Not only does the use of the REF template provide councils with confidence they are meeting their legislative requirements, it will actively protect the environment through its use. The comprehensive nature of the database will provide councils with greater ability to determine when activities should not occur because the risk to the environment is too great.

Future

Next steps include developing the business case for the installation and ongoing maintenance of the electronic REF Template for all HCCREMS' member councils. The business case is necessary as the Electronic REF Template directly relates to Federal and NSW State legislation, therefore it will need to be actively managed to retain currency.

Next steps could also include transferring the electronic REF Template into an SQL database that does not rely on the MS Access program to function, potentially increasing the uptake of the product.

As the electronic REF template is transferrable, and developed in a MS Office environment, it is easily able to be utilised by public agencies. A significant opportunity exists to embed the use of the template in councils and State agencies and standardise the REF process throughout the State.

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