OFFICE OF RESOURCE CONSERVATION AND RECOVERY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

June 5, 2024

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implementing Climate Resilience in Hazardous Waste Permitting Under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)

FROM: Carolyn Hoskinson, Director

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Date: 2024.06.05 20:15:53 -04'00'

TO: Land, Chemicals, and Redevelopment Division Directors, Regions 1-10

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide guidance to EPA Regions, states, and territories on when and how to consider potential adverse climate change impacts in the hazardous waste permitting process under the RCRA. This includes recommendations for conducting climate change vulnerability screenings and assessments for treatment, storage, and disposal facilities (TSDFs) to determine whether there are climate vulnerabilities that hazardous waste permits should address.

Adverse impacts of climate change can include the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, changing wind patterns, temperature fluctuations, increased precipitation, sea level rise, storm surges, inland and coastal flooding, bank and shoreline erosion, changes in groundwater levels and direction of flow, drought, increased risk of wildfires, and permafrost thaw. These potential impacts can threaten the resilience of engineering and other controls at TSDFs for which applicants seek permits from EPA Regions or states and territories authorized to implement the RCRA program. This memorandum identifies authorities, provides interpretations of relevant RCRA provisions, and recommends approaches to ensure that controls will provide long-term effectiveness through resilience to adverse climate change impacts into the future.[1]

Definitions of key terms pertaining to climate adaptation used in this memorandum are included in the attachment.

[1] This document does not substitute for the statute or regulations, nor is it a regulation itself. Thus, it cannot impose legally binding requirements on EPA, states, or the regulated community, and may not apply to a particular situation based upon the circumstances. Any decisions regarding a particular situation will be made based on the statute and the regulations, and EPA and authorized state/territory decision makers retain the discretion to adopt approaches on a site-specific basis that differ from these recommendations where appropriate.

BACKGROUND

EPA released a Climate Adaptation Plan (CAP) in October 2021 which laid out five priority actions for the agency to implement in the coming years, including integrating consideration of climate impacts into EPA's programs, policies, rulemaking processes, and enforcement activities.[2] In October 2022, EPA's Office of Land and Emergency Management (OLEM) released its Climate Adaptation Implementation Plan, which included the commitment to incorporate climate adaptation into OLEM's mission, programs, and management functions.

IMPLEMENTATION

The 40 CFR Part 264 standards for RCRA TSDFs are designed to ensure that hazardous waste treatment, storage and disposal are conducted in a manner that protects human health and the environment (See RCRA 3004(a)). These standards are implemented through RCRA permits at permitted TSDFs. RCRA permits must ensure that facility operations will comply with these standards (RCRA 3005(c)(1)) and must contain any additional terms or conditions that EPA or the authorized state determines are necessary to protect human health and the environment (RCRA 3005(c)(3)).

The climate change impacts described above may affect what a facility needs to do to comply with the RCRA standards applicable to TSDFs. EPA expects that EPA Regional offices and authorized states and territories will consider the potential for adverse climate change impacts to affect TSDF operations in the permitting process, and that RCRA permits will include the conditions that the permitting authority determines are necessary to ensure that facility operations will be compliant and protective in the face of such impacts. Climate change adaptation considerations should be incorporated as appropriate during initial permit issuance, permit renewal, and/or permit maintenance (e.g., permit modification). The potential for climate impacts should be considered and addressed throughout the expected active life of the facility, as well as during post-closure, as appropriate, not just for the term of the permit or permit modification under consideration.

Conducting climate vulnerability screenings and analyses at TSDFs can help determine whether changes to facility permits are necessary to ensure that TSDFs are resilient to climate events and remain so into the future. For example, prior to receiving a renewal permit application, or during the process of reviewing an application for an initial permit or modification, EPA Regions, states, and territories should perform an initial climate vulnerability screening as appropriate to determine which adverse climate change impacts might apply to the facility. The vulnerability screening is a high-level screening step to determine if a site or facility is located in a geographic area at risk to adverse climate change impacts. If the results of the screening indicate that climate change impacts might plausibly impact the protectiveness of facility operations, EPA, states, and territories should conduct, or should request or require an owner or operator to conduct, a more detailed climate vulnerability assessment to determine whether adaptive measures are necessary. If an initial climate vulnerability screening indicates that adaptative measures are necessary, and no further information or analysis is needed, then the more detailed climate vulnerability assessment is not necessary. However, if the initial climate vulnerability screening indicates a plausible basis for concern and there is uncertainty as to the level of

[2] For additional information, see https://www.epa.gov/climate-adaptation/climate-adaptation-plan.

climate risk or the adaptive measures that may be needed, then the regulator may require a climate vulnerability assessment.

KEY RCRA REGULATORY AUTHORITIES RELEVANT TO CLIMATE CHANGE CONSIDERATIONS IN PERMITTING

Several regulatory authorities support consideration of potential adverse climate change impacts on permitted activities and the development of permit conditions, as needed, to ensure that such activities will be protective of human health and the environment in the face of such impacts. Below is a list of regulatory provisions, although this is not an exhaustive list of the potentially relevant regulatory provisions.

Facility Design and Operation [§ 264.31]
Facilities must be designed, constructed, maintained, and operated to minimize the possibility of a release of hazardous waste or hazardous waste constituents that could threaten human health and the environment. EPA Regions and authorized states/territories should consider the potential adverse climate change impacts in ensuring that this standard is satisfied. For example, more frequent storm events as well as temperature fluctuations can influence how a facility's units (e.g., containers, tanks, landfills) should be designed and operated to protect human health and the environment. Facility design and operation may need to change in the face of future climate conditions.

Facility Location Standards [§ 264.18(b)]
The RCRA regulations generally require facilities located within a 100-year floodplain to be designed, constructed, operated and maintained to prevent washout, should there be a flood. The number of facilities within a 100-year floodplain will likely increase as a result of potential adverse climate change impacts causing floodplains to expand. TSDFs located in a 100-year floodplain will need to ensure their operations comply with this requirement, and permit writers should take care to ensure that permits adequately address this requirement. These requirements should be considered during permit renewal as well as initial permit issuance. In view of changing climate conditions, it will be important to employ an approach for identifying the 100-year floodplain that considers predicted future conditions, and recent flooding events and their impact on the facility, rather than simply long-term historical data.

Contingency Plans [§ 264.50 – 264.56]
The RCRA regulations require that TSDFs have contingency plans designed to minimize hazards to human health or the environment from fires, explosions, or any unplanned sudden or non-sudden release of hazardous waste or hazardous waste constituents to air, soil, or surface water. Development and review of contingency plans should consider potential adverse climate change impacts.

Omnibus Authority under Section 3005(c)(3) [§ 270.32(b)(2)]
The omnibus permit authority provides that "Each permit issued under section 3005 of this act shall contain terms and conditions as the Administrator or State Director determines necessary to protect human health and the environment." EPA expects that climate change impacts can generally be addressed using more specific regulatory authorities such as those identified above. However, where permitting authorities determine that permit conditions beyond those required under these specific authorities are necessary to protect human health or the environment from potential adverse climate change impacts, the EPA Region or the state/territory has the responsibility to impose such terms and conditions by exercising their omnibus authority.

Review of State Permits [§ 271.19]
EPA has the authority to oversee state program implementation to ensure it is consistent with the state's own authorized requirements. This includes the authority for EPA to comment on a draft permit. EPA can enforce the terms of the comment, even if those terms are not incorporated into the permit, if the comment indicates that the terms are necessary to implement the approved program, as provided in § 271.19(b). EPA Regions should consider potential adverse climate change impacts in evaluating the use of its comment authority.

Agency Initiated Permit Modifications [§ 270.41(a)(2)]
This provision authorizes the permitting authority to modify a permit based on "information [that] was not available at the time of permit issuance … and would have justified the application of different permit conditions at the time of issuance." Such a basis for permit modifications could include changes due to climate change-related factors (e.g., updated floodplain maps or precipitation data from federal or state sources) that may impact facility operations.

Part B Permit Application [§ 270.14-270.28]
The RCRA Part B permit application regulations specify information that must be submitted in permit applications. Particularly relevant are the provisions of § 270.14(11)(iii) and (iv), which relate to floodplains, and also § 270.14(19) relating to mapping and location. EPA Regions and authorized states/territories should work with facility owners and operators to ensure that Part B permit applications are prepared using up-to-date climatological data and data projections for the anticipated life of the facility. This ensures that unit-specific designs and permit conditions remain protective in the face of potential adverse climate change impacts. While not part of the specific Part B Application requirements, a general permit application requirement under § 270.10(k) provides broader authority to require additional information necessary to develop permit conditions that can be used to address climate adaptation concerns.

CLIMATE ADAPTATION TOOLS

RCRA climate vulnerability screening tools and assessment methodologies are currently under development. One screening tool has been released in RCRAInfo for sea level rise projections at RCRA facilities (https://rcrapublic.epa.gov/rcra-public-web/action/posts/5). EPA also anticipates releasing further policy and guidance regarding how permits can incorporate climate change adaptation considerations through its effort to update the RCRA Model Permit and through development of the

Updates to the RCRA Hazardous Waste Permitting Regulations and Other Technical Corrections rulemaking.

In the interim, for further information, please see the Superfund Climate Resilience website which provides an overview of climate-related initiatives within the Superfund program, with information about strategies that can be used to evaluate and strengthen climate resilience at Superfund sites. While this website offers guidance on Superfund sites, it can also help inform decisions at RCRA facilities. EPA intends to develop a climate vulnerability assessment methodology for the RCRA program, based on Superfund's methodology.

CONCLUSION

RCRA permits must be protective of human health and the environment. Climate change has the potential to impact TSDF compliance with RCRA regulatory provisions, and more broadly, the protectiveness of TSDF operations. Thus, throughout the RCRA permitting process, including issuance of initial permits, permit renewals, and permit modifications, EPA Regions and authorized states and territories should work with facilities to consider potential adverse climate change impacts in assuring that RCRA requirements are met and that RCRA permits are protective of human health and the environment in the face of those impacts.

If you have questions about this document or would like assistance with evaluating climate vulnerabilities and adaptation measures as they relate to RCRA permitting, please contact Jeff Gaines, Office of Resource Conservation and Recovery (ORCR), at (202) 566-0332 or gaines.jeff@epa.gov.

KEY TERMS PERTAINING TO CLIMATE ADAPTATION

For purposes of this memo, key terminology[3] includes:

Adaptation: Taking action to prepare for and adjust to both the current and projected impacts of climate change.

Adaptive Capacity: The ability of a human or natural system to adjust to climate change (including climate variability and extremes) by moderating potential damages, taking advantage of opportunities, or coping with the consequences.

Climate Change: Climate change refers to changes in global or regional climate patterns attributed largely to human-caused increased levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases.

Extreme Weather Event: An extreme weather event is an event that is rare at a particular place and time of year. Definitions of rare vary, but an extreme weather event would normally be as rare as or rarer than the 10th or 90th percentile of a probability density function estimated from observations. By definition, the characteristics of what is called extreme weather may vary from place to place in an absolute sense.

Resilience: Climate resilience can be generally defined as the capacity of a system to maintain function in the face of stresses imposed by climate change and to adapt the system to be better prepared for future climate impacts.

Vulnerability: The degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change, including climate variability and extremes; it is a function of the character, magnitude, and rate of climate variation to which a system is exposed; its sensitivity; and its adaptive capacity.

[3] https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-03/fy-2022-2026-epa-strategic-plan.pdf