

US Army Corps of Engineers  
Waterways Experiment Station

# RECNOTES

Recreation Research Program

Vol R-97-1 February 1997

## Comment Card surveys— answers to frequently asked questions

by James J. Vogel, Clemson University  
and John P. Titre, U.S. Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station

The Corps of Engineers, along with all government agencies that provide significant services directly to the public, was directed by Presidential Executive Order to set customer service standards. The standard of quality was defined as "customer service equal to the best in business."

Toward this goal, the Recreation Research Program (RRP, formerly the Natural Resources Research Program) initiated a study in 1995 to assess the needs of the Corps' recreational customers—the millions of visitors to recreation sites at Corps water resource projects—and to develop customer care standards and goals. Recreation researchers at Waterways Experiment Station (WES) first conducted pilot testing, and then developed a standard set of "core" survey questions.

### Customer Care Kit

All Corps recreation projects were provided a Customer Care Kit with materials to conduct customer satisfaction surveys, beginning with the 1996 recreation season. Each kit included 400 "Comment Cards" (Figure 1) and instructions on administering the survey and analyzing and reporting the results.

Project personnel were asked to provide feedback to the working group on their first year's experience with the survey. In many cases, this feedback was positive. However, for many of those involved, the Comment Card was their introduction to customer satisfaction surveys. Not surprisingly, numerous questions have been posed about the Comment Card effort and about customer satisfaction surveys in general.

This article discusses the questions most frequently asked about

the customer satisfaction survey by the project managers and rangers who participated in the Comment Card effort.

### Customer satisfaction— purpose and benefits

Based on feedback from the survey, many of the project personnel who implemented Comment Cards in 1996 gained an understanding of the purpose and potential benefits of customer satisfaction efforts, of which the Comment Cards were

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**Comment Card** OMB 0710-0002, Exp. 30 Sep 98

US Army Corps of Engineers

Please give us a minute of your time to help us serve you better. How would you rate our facilities and services at \_\_\_\_\_ ?

Please  check one for each:

	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	Don't Know
Safety and security	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Park appearance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restroom cleanliness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff helpfulness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Condition of facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
General park information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Water safety information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Value for fee paid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall quality of facilities and services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What improvements would you like to see in this area? \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1. Comment Card distributed to Corps projects

2000 QUALITY IMPROVED 4

the first step. Sample responses from project personnel, when asked about the purpose of the survey, are given below.

- To communicate to our customers that *we are interested in their opinions* and in how they think we are doing our job as providers of recreation opportunities.
- To provide project managers *systematically obtained ratings and written comments* that have much more credibility and usefulness than information or impressions gathered through casual contacts.
- To provide a means for visitors to *voice concerns and complaints* and to make *constructive suggestions*.

Some project managers obtained information that will be used to support specific changes at the project. This includes providing support for planned facility upgrades and confirming the managers' perceived need for upgrades. Personnel at one project said they had incorporated the comments into the project's Operational Management Plan.

**Field acceptance** remains a central goal of the RRP's customer satisfaction effort. Responses to questions such as those on the Comment Card provide a "reality check" on the usefulness of this effort.

In future phases of the customer satisfaction study, the Customer Care Kit will be expanded beyond the Comment Card application to include an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of different methods for sampling (such as systematic and stratified random) and for conducting surveys (windshield, drop box, face-to-face, etc.). This information will be applied to all visitor surveys.

During fall 1997, a workshop for project managers is planned to obtain additional feedback from the summer 1997 surveys. Based on this input, an expanded "kit" will be developed and made available during spring 1998. These 3 years of trend data will give Corps projects a powerful management tool



Comment cards were distributed at project entrances

for planning continuous improvements in facilities and services.

### Working Group members

The following field personnel comprise the working group that has helped guide this research and who will organize continuing feedback: Jim Buck, Lower Granite-Little Goose Project (Walla Walla District); Greg Oller, Table Rock Lake (Little Rock District); Diane Parks, Portland District; Erik Petersen, Hartwell Lake (Savannah District); and Bruce Williams, New England Division. Additional comments can be provided to Jim Buck (e-mail [jim.a.buck@npw01.usace.army.mil](mailto:jim.a.buck@npw01.usace.army.mil)).

### More detailed information

Readers who would like additional background information on the Comment Card can refer to *Natural Resources Technical Note REC-06*. The technical note also summarizes the results of Year 1 of the survey and explains how to interpret and apply the Comment Card results.

### Responses to frequently asked questions

On the following pages, the 15 most frequently asked questions concerning the survey are listed,

along with answers provided by the WES recreation research team.

### Question 1. Why should we expend valuable time and resources on these surveys?

We fully recognize that many projects are hard pressed to complete all of their duties with current staffing. We want to be sure that any new programs that place an additional burden on projects are worth the effort.

We have attempted to make the Comment Card survey as streamlined and easy to administer as possible. The recommendation for distribution of the cards from gatehouses and the provision of the compiled analysis and reporting program disk are intended to minimize the effort required.

The feedback received suggests that personal distribution of cards to areas without gatehouses may be more than most projects can afford to do, especially at low-use areas. Less effective means, such as windshield survey distribution, may be the only way small projects can justify the effort necessary.

All that being said, we believe it is important to remember that **our customers are the reason for our jobs!** Part of the Natural Resource Management mission is to provide high-quality recreation opportunities to the public, and obtaining customer feedback should be an integral part of meeting that responsibility. We would argue that **some of our admittedly scarce resources need to be expended on data collection efforts that measure our performance and that will help us serve our customers better.**

Although some survey respondents felt they "gained no new information," we want to point out the value in having *documented information*, in contrast to the information that project staff may have gained during informal contacts with visitors or that was obtained in other unsystematic means. In past survey efforts we have found

that 80 percent of the information gained may be something "you already knew," but the remaining 20 percent may be a surprise.

**Question 2. The Comment Card does not provide us with enough information on how we can improve; how can we get more information that we can act upon?**

This question speaks to the fundamental limitations of the Comment Card format. We were directed by the working group to initiate customer satisfaction measurement in the Corps with the shortest, simplest type of survey. This has allowed us as an agency "to learn to crawl before we can walk" in regard to customer satisfaction. However, we have not lost sight of the need to provide other tools that will provide more information.

We feel certain that many projects will want and need more information than the Comment Card can provide in order to improve their performance in providing for their customers. To this end, we are developing a longer "Market Segment Survey" that can be filled out in about 5 minutes and that can be used to survey specific user groups such as campers, day-users, and beach users. These instruments will be tested at 10 projects around the country during 1997.

**Question 3. What should we pay more attention to—the ratings we received or the written comments?**

Both the ratings and the written comments should be given attention. To help project personnel focus their interpretation of the results, we have the following suggestions.

Although it appears that the majority of visitors will give at least a "good" rating for all items, even when they provide written complaints, we suggest looking closely at the items and locations for which the project received the greatest number of "average" or worse ratings. These responses most clearly suggest room for improvement. We have seen that respondents provide

many written comments that specify a wide range of facility, service, management, and user fee-related complaints and suggestions. These comments, which provide substantial information upon which managers can act, should be another area of focus.

Project personnel should list the most frequently repeated comments and group them, to identify the areas where the most improvements have been requested (for example, facility upkeep). Further guidance on interpreting and applying the Comment Card results is provided in *Natural Resources Technical Note REC-06* (available from the RRP manager, Russell Tillman, e-mail: [tillmar@ex1.wes.army.mil](mailto:tillmar@ex1.wes.army.mil)).

**Question 4. How can we learn more about project-specific features such as beaches, campgrounds, etc.?**

The Comment Card format allows for only the most generalized, nonspecific items. However, many visitors provide specific written comments about beaches, campgrounds, playgrounds, etc., when they relate specific complaints or concerns. We are developing expanded customer satisfaction surveys that will target specific user types, such as campers, visitor center customers, day-use area visitors, and boaters. Also, by limiting distribution of the cards to a specific group (for example, campers registering at a gatehouse), project managers can more easily determine the area or facilities being rated.

**Question 5. Visitors don't know why we are asking for their comments. How might we illustrate our willingness to attain customer satisfaction?**

The Comment Card itself provides little opportunity for such explanations beyond the words "to help us serve you better," which appear in the introductory sentence. Projects wanting to communicate more to the public about their customer satisfaction efforts might prepare a

simple brochure or a sign to post at gatehouses, bulletin boards, or in the project office.

**Question 6. What about using the Comment Card at areas that do not and are not intended to have "water safety information" or that are non-fee areas?**

This is another concern related to the space limitations of the card format. Adding the response "Not applicable" would help, but there is no room on the card for this additional response, and the option is not needed for most other items on the card. Most of the survey respondents at areas without water safety information checked "Don't know," and thus removed themselves from the sample for that item.

Regarding the "Value for fee paid" item, most respondents marked "Don't know," or left the item blank in non-fee areas. However, other responses may still be considered valid, since a visitor may legitimately evaluate the value even when the fee is zero. Alternatively, these items may be "blacked out" on cards distributed at areas with no water safety information or in non-fee areas.

**Question 7. How do we know if the public is commenting on the Corps' or State areas or on Corps or contractor service?**

This relates to how much control is exercised over which visitors receive the cards. Ideally, the cards will be distributed from a gatehouse, and the area being used by those who pass through that gatehouse will be known. Also, at the top of the card there is a line on which project personnel can stamp or write the name of the specific recreation area in which the cards are being distributed. This allows project managers to distinguish cards distributed at different areas. If less control is exercised over which visitors receive the cards, it may not be possible to distinguish what facilities they are commenting on.

**Question 8. Why can't we distribute more than 50 cards per day since we could distribute many more on busy days?**

Among the few controls placed on the distribution of the cards was the sampling restriction that no more than 50 be distributed in one day. The reason for this is to avoid situations where all of the cards are distributed within a 1- or 2-week period, which could conceivably happen at heavily used areas. Although project personnel may prefer to distribute the cards and finish the survey as quickly as possible, it is preferable to have a sample that is distributed throughout as much of the primary use season as is practical. For this reason, an 8- to 12-week distribution schedule was recommended.

**Question 9. Why not use self-return addresses and prepaid postage on the Comment Card?**

Postage-paid and return-addressed cards were considered but were not used for two reasons. First, with such a short and quickly completed survey, it is better to encourage the visitors to complete the Comment Card before they leave the area. Experience has shown that most return-addressed postage cards are put aside and forgotten or lost by visitors. Second, postage for the 400 cards would have added \$80 to the projects' survey cost.

**Question 10. What about repeat respondents? Some of our campers may be filling out more than one card?**

There is no way to know if more than one Comment Card was filled out by the same person, especially if the cards were not distributed from a gatehouse. However, this is not necessarily a problem. We don't want visitors to fill out more than one card on the same day, but a camper staying for several days may encounter very clean

restrooms one day and not so clean restrooms later in the visit. In this case, he might want to provide a different rating for the second day. It is also okay for visitors to fill out a new card during succeeding visits, since performance on these items may well vary between visits.

**Question 11. Why not replace some of the Comment Card items (Safety and Security, Restroom Cleanliness, Value for Fee Paid, Overall Quality) with less subjective topics?**

All of the Comment Card items can be said to be "subjective" in that we are asking for visitors' opinions. But visitors generally base their opinions on their experience, and visitors' experience at our recreation areas is as strong a basis as we can have for evaluating our performance. It is certainly much more defensible than relying on our own perceptions or those of managers, since neither we nor the managers are the users of the areas.

**Question 12. Won't we always have complainers, so that we will never receive all "very good" or "good" ratings for any item?**

We would not expect projects to receive 100 percent "very good" or "good" ratings for any item on the card. However, we have seen that 90 percent or more of customers do give projects "good" or "very good" ratings for some items. So we can use these 90+ percent scores to represent the true "ceiling." Certainly, such scores can be interpreted as very good performance by the projects that receive these ratings.

**Question 13. Doesn't asking for suggestions for "improvements" bias respondents?**

Visitors were asked for suggested "improvements" rather than something more generic such as "additional comments" in order to obtain the most useful information in the limited space available. Nevertheless,

some of the comments are typically "general positive comments" (for example, "doing a good job") on the recreation area or project.

**Question 14. What about some of the silly remarks or unrealistic suggestions we get?**

There are always a few people who make suggestions they know cannot be met (for example, "install beer vending machines"). However, the majority seem to take the surveys seriously and apparently are happy for the opportunity to be heard. Others may make requests they honestly think are valid, but which we know to be unrealistic or impossible to address. Neither of these situations can be prevented, but they are a predictable (hopefully, small) part of any survey's results.

**Question 15. Why doesn't the computer program permit entries to be changed?**

The dBase data entry program is designed to allow entries to be changed only during data entry. Later changes are not permitted to prevent the possibility (or the accusation) of data corruption.

## **A final note**

Although the Comment Card system has several shortcomings, as evidenced by these questions, we encourage managers to use the cards to "red flag" concerns that may need attention.

In the course of obtaining feedback from project offices, three strengths of the system remain evident: 1) the process is straightforward and simple, 2) the questions are standardized for comparison across sites and projects, and 3) the burden on project resources is minor.

Finally, other options (such as market segment surveys) are available to help managers meet project-specific information needs and to provide flexibility. ©

# Developing a road map to address customer needs

by **John P. Titre, U.S. Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station**  
**Robert Burns, Pennsylvania State University**  
and **James J. Vogel, Clemson University**



Management tools are being developed to better understand the needs of Corps customers. A customer satisfaction Comment Card was administered during the 1996 recreation season (see preceding article). This was the first in a series of survey tools that will help managers make improvements in the way recreation areas are managed. When fully deployed, these tools will give managers greater flexibility in addressing their visitor information needs.

## Focusing research on the needs

A cooperative effort among Corps Headquarters personnel, a working group of field personnel, and researchers at the Waterways Experiment Station (WES) began in response to a Presidential Executive Order that required agencies to set customer service standards based on performance measures. This cooperative triangle (Figure 1) resulted in the development of a Customer Care Kit, which was mailed to Operations Project Managers to implement the Comment Card survey.

The Recreation Research Program (RRP, formerly the Natural Resources Research Program), which funded the research and development, is guided by a Field Review Group (FRG). Members of the FRG are Corps division and district representatives who

provide feedback on proposed studies and ongoing efforts.

Typically, problems and issues generated by the field are translated into something researchers can measure in the form of a *descriptive* or an *evaluative* question (Figure 2).

Project managers answer descriptive questions (such as, How many visitors and of what types do we have?, and How much do visitors spend?) using the Visitor Estimation and Reporting System (VERS) and the large-scale input/output model (IMPLAN) developed by the U.S. Forest Service (Figure 2). For customer satisfaction, questions are evaluative and can be phrased as, **How do our visitors rate our**

**basic facilities and services? and Are we providing visitors high-quality recreation opportunities?**

The Comment Card and the Market Segment Survey are the vehicles for measuring visitor perceptions, with the product being a manager-generated report based on survey results. These efforts comprise a Customer Service Evaluation Process. Both descriptive and evaluative questions are important to performance measures.

Underlying the Problem-Solving Model is a feedback mechanism (involving Headquarters, the RRP, and the FRG) which is responsible for review and coordination of the products with respect to policy and guidance initiatives. For example,

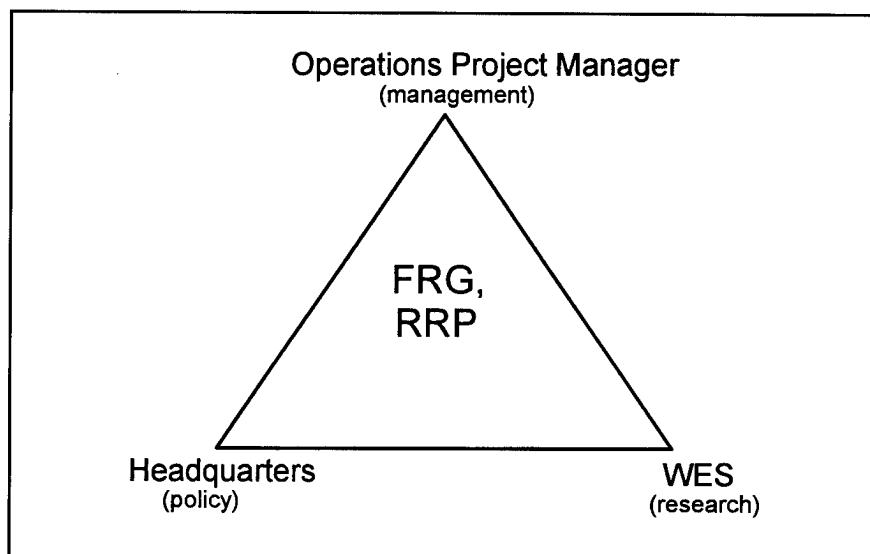


Figure 1. Policy/management/research relationship

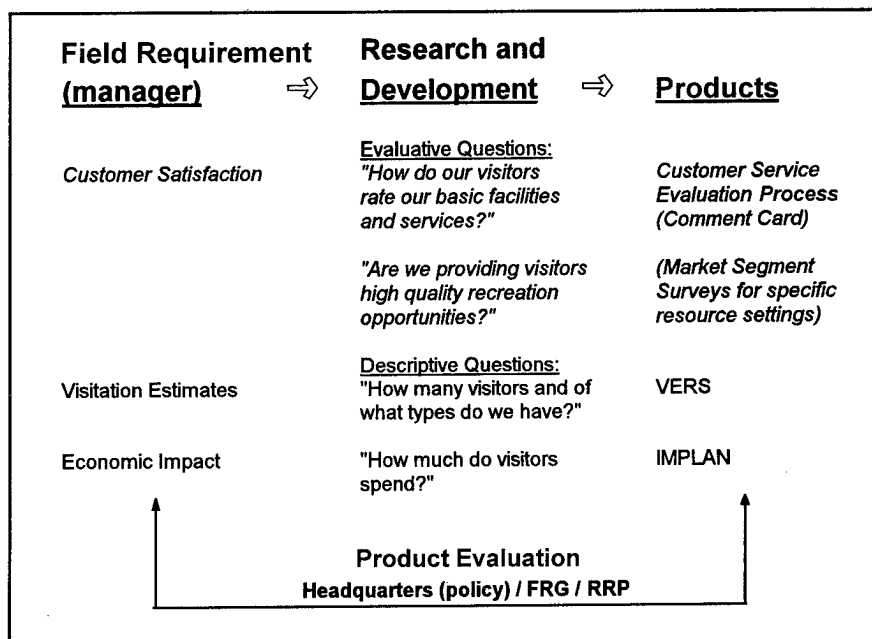


Figure 2. Problem-solving model for project management

the Government Performance and Results Act has factored into the kinds of information needed to evaluate how well the Corps is responding to customer satisfaction issues.

To allow Corps managers to compare individual project results with national findings, WES researchers summarized the survey results obtained at 17 demonstration projects during the first year of sampling. This information is summarized in *Natural Resources Technical Note REC-06*.

Two additional years of national surveys are planned to provide a stable indication of how visitors rate our facilities and services nationwide.

### Developing a road map

Developing a customer-oriented organization depends on two things: attending to customer needs (using business approaches where appropriate) in order to generate an atmosphere of *continuous improvement*, and *empowering* project personnel to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their customers.

The Comment Card provided a "one size fits all" approach toward performance measurement, based on a set of "core" or standard questions. However, other tools will be necessary to fully address customer satisfaction.

One such tool is the *Market Segment Survey* using importance/performance analysis. This approach recognizes differences in the expectations of customers as they experience different resource settings. In the business community, surveys for restaurant customers differ from those for hotel guests. Likewise, questions about showers and electricity that might be important to campers may not be important to day-users.

Indeed, businesses have become successful by identifying market niches and meeting specific needs. Each segment will likely respond to different needs, requiring different management strategies. A single survey cannot accommodate all the items important to the major market segments in the Corps.

In future phases of this research, Corps projects will be able to choose

from a list of attributes important for each major market segment. This approach has been implemented elsewhere. For example, the Ohio State Parks are in their fourth year of using similar market segment/place information. The following quotation is from "Improving Customer Satisfaction with Parks and Recreation Services Under Smaller Budgets," by Glen Alexander, Chief, Ohio State Parks (January 1996).

*The form itself is set up by physical area of the park such as campground, beach, marina, etc. This matches the way we allocate our resources and gives the questionnaire a "place" relationship to where the visitor received his services. By maintaining the integrity of "place" we maintain a statistically sound comparison from year to year.*

### Evaluating setting, activity, and management influences

Recreation experiences consist of resource setting, activity, and management influences. While basic needs such as a clean restrooms are important to overall satisfaction, they are generally not tied to motivations that draw people to water-based settings. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between the **basic** and **experience** needs of visitors and use that as a basis for measuring performance.

Managers generally agree on the basic needs of visitors. These appear as items on the Comment Card. The decision to include these items was based on the question, What are the "top ten" customer needs that management should address from the perspective of performance?

While the Comment Card satisfied these questions, some managers voiced concerns that additional information is often needed to respond to customer suggestions with greater detail on improvements. These managers have expressed interest in the concept of importance/performance, since it provides an intuitive sense of whether management is doing a good job and where attention is needed.

The suggestion of expanding the Comment Card is presented in the context of a framework, as described in a previous *RecNotes* article (Five-Minute Customer Care "Report Card," *RecNotes*, Vol R-95-2, August 1995). This framework, which focuses on the aspects of visitor experience that are important to satisfaction, led researchers to form two evaluative research questions:

**Question 1—Basic services and facility needs.** *To what extent are we meeting performance standards for the basic service and facility needs of our customers? (Here the Comment Card serves as a "red flag" alerting managers of problems.)*

**Question 2—Experience/setting needs.** *How and to what extent do perceptions of quality experiences vary across different settings or market segments to meet the present and future needs of our customers?*

## Market Segment Survey

A series of Market Segment Surveys are being developed to accommodate the aspects of visitor experience that are not covered under the basic needs question

(Comment Card). For example, if a manager wanted to know more about camper preferences, the camper module of questions that are being developed can be inserted. These would be added to the basic needs questions since they deal with a specific setting.

Other questions that the manager might want to add could also be accommodated with this format, provided instructions are given on preparing and administering surveys. *However, it is important for managers to include the "core" set of standard questions to permit comparison from year to year and across projects.* This module is basic to all surveys.

This modular approach to conducting surveys was recently applied with great success by a lake manager who wanted better information about closing parks. A series of public workshops had been conducted. However, they were poorly attended and provided little defensible data for decision-making. A call to WES for assistance began with survey questions that had been developed by the project for testing.

A WES researcher modified the questions and suggested they be pretested with about a dozen individuals. The results of pretesting were discussed over the telephone, and a final survey and sampling plan were prepared. This task was completed in a few days. The companion analysis program was modified to accommodate the park closure questions in less than 2 days.

The manager was provided a pretested survey, a sampling plan,

and an analysis routine based on a proven survey format. The complete survey package allowed the task to be completed quickly and at low cost.

## Training

Training has surfaced as a topic of importance as it relates to empowering employees to act on changes suggested by the public. Data collection without employee awareness and commitment to using the results provides only a partial solution to addressing performance.

To meet this need, WES researchers are planning two workshops, in late 1997 and in 1998. Managers and rangers from the 10 demonstration sites will make short presentations and evaluate a proposed training curriculum. During spring 1998, a training workshop (short-course) on the Customer Service Evaluation Process will be offered. This workshop will integrate information on several topics, including Total Quality Management, performance measures, surveys, data analysis/report writing, and implementation strategies.

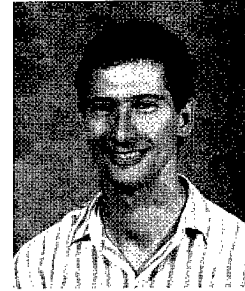
Following the training workshop, a 10-minute training video will be produced and distributed to Operations Project Managers with an extended Customer Care Kit, including all the materials for project managers to administer their own surveys. WES researchers will be available to provide specialized assistance for problems beyond the scope of the materials provided in the kit. ©

## Information about the authors:



John Titre has been associated with the U.S. Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station (WES) for 13 years. His prior experience includes assignments in the western states with the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service. John spent 3 years in South America under the Smithsonian/Peace Corps program, establishing national parks and reserves. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Forestry from Southern Illinois University and a Master's degree in Recreation Resource Development from Texas

A&M University. John is working toward a Ph.D. from Clemson University dealing with the nonmonetary value of wetlands.



James Vogel has been associated with WES for 4 years. During that time he has been involved in carrying capacity and management information studies at Corps projects around the country. His prior experience includes participation in outdoor recreation research on the Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri and at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Land Between the Lakes in Kentucky. He holds Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Forestry from Southern Illinois University.



Robert Burns is currently pursuing Ph.D. studies at Pennsylvania State University, with emphasis on customer satisfaction. His previous work experience has been in active military duty at Fort Belvoir, VA, Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD, and Fort Irwin, CA. He has held positions as Company Commander, Division Chief, and Battalion Executive Officer with responsibilities for training, communication, and Total Army Quality.

## Name Change: Recreation Research Program

The program name Natural Resources Research Program (NRRP) has been recently changed to Recreation Research Program (RRP). This change follows a recommendation by the Civil Works R&D Committee to better realign the RRP toward recreation business practices. The RRP will continue to support the Corps of Engineers' recreation mission by developing and providing more responsive, comprehensive, and cost-effective technology.

Meanwhile, the research responsibilities for natural resources stewardship management, once performed by the NRRP, will be accomplished under the Ecosystem Management and Restoration Research Program (EMRRP). RRP Field Review Group members are being assigned to the EMRRP Field Review Group to facilitate the transition of these responsibilities.

# “Dam Watch” news feature successful in Alaska District

Contributed by John Schaake, Alaska District

Residents of Fairbanks, Alaska, need look no farther than the weather page of their morning newspaper to find operational information regarding the Corps’ flood control project that protects their city.

The *Moose Creek Dam Watch* is an eye-catching, easy to follow diagram that is published daily in the local newspaper during flood and high-water events. It uses information graphics to quickly summarize current flood control information and trends for the community near the Chena River Lakes Project.

Located approximately 40 river miles upstream of Fairbanks, the Chena River Lakes Project protects the city by impounding Chena River floodwaters behind the massive 7-mile Moose Creek Dam. Smaller floods are wholly contained behind the dam until the flood danger has passed. Larger floods are diverted by the dam into the Tanana River, where they safely bypass the town.

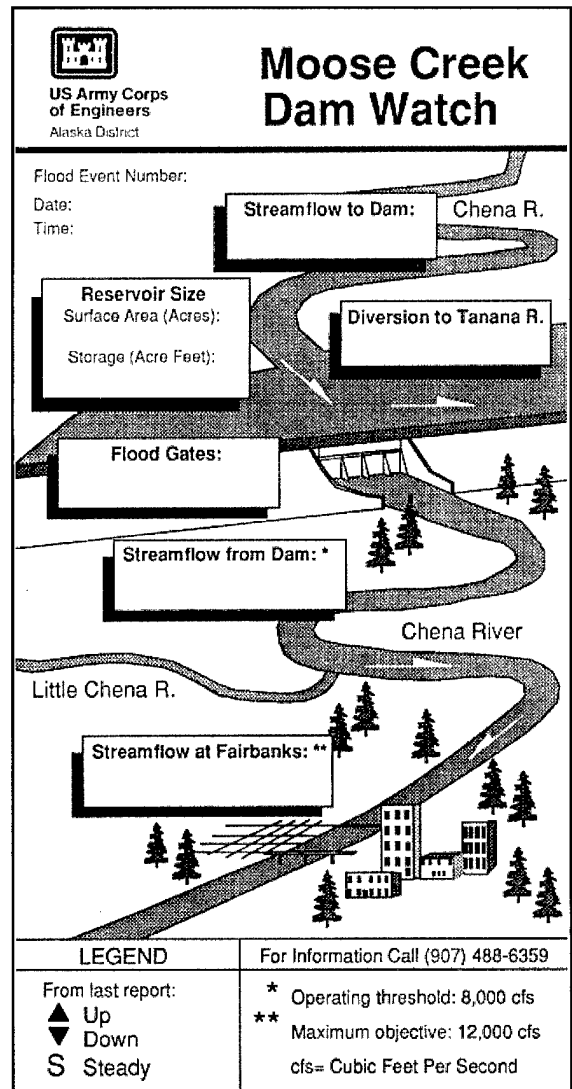
The *Moose Creek Dam Watch* feature relates daily information regarding streamflow and reservoir characteristics to the public. One of its more important purposes is to note trends in each of the observation categories. The dynamic nature of *Dam Watch* invites reader interaction on a daily basis, much like following a daily weather map.

The feature has become much appreciated for the practical information it provides. As a result, it has generated a much greater community interest in, and appreciation of, the Corps’ flood control mission, as measured by the positive comments received and the increased numbers of speaking invitations and requests for dam tours.

*Dam Watch* is published whenever a flood or high-water event is considered imminent. Publishing arrangements with the local newspaper are made prior to the flood season each year.

Although the Corps is charged a display advertising rate for the space, the newspaper treats *Dam Watch* as a news item in terms of preferred page placement and location. This treatment helps “bookmark” the feature for the everyday reader who searches for the information.

Once the feature is activated, it runs continuously on a daily basis until the flood or high-water episode is over and streamflows have returned to normal levels.



DAM WATCH diagram used in the Alaska District

The Chena River Lakes Project has used *Dam Watch* for the past 5 years. It has proven to be an extremely cost-effective means of disseminating important information and has improved the public’s understanding of the primary mission of the Chena River Lakes Project.

**For further information,** contact John C. Schaake, Project Manager, Chena River Lakes Project, Alaska District, (907) 488-2748. ©

# Corps Volunteer Clearinghouse



Corps Of Engineers  
Volunteer Hotline  
1-800-865-8337  
Give A Helping Hand

*Contributed by Todd Yann, Park Ranger, Nashville District*

“Give a helping hand” is the theme of the Corps of Engineers’ Volunteer Clearinghouse, which seeks to match up volunteers with the needs of Corps projects.

The Clearinghouse, based in the Corps’ Nashville District headquarters, began taking calls on its Volunteer Hotline in January 1994. Since that time, Gayla Mitchell, who manages the Volunteer Clearinghouse and serves as its sole staff member, has spoken to potential volunteers from every state in the union, representing all walks of life and ranging in age from 14 to 91.

Ms. Mitchell receives calls from potential volunteers, who are asked to relate a few items of informa-

tion, including their name, address, telephone number, their volunteer skills or interests, and their geographic area of interest (or the name of a specific project or site of interest).

The role of Corps projects that choose to participate in the program is to name a Volunteer Coordinator. This individual serves as his or her project’s point of contact with the Clearinghouse. Most importantly, this person identifies the project’s needs for volunteers and, at least annually, informs the Clearinghouse of these needs.

Any time the need arises for a specific volunteer task, the project’s Volunteer Coordinator can send a

job description to the Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse in turn sends a mailing directly to hotline callers in the area who have expressed interest in such a position.

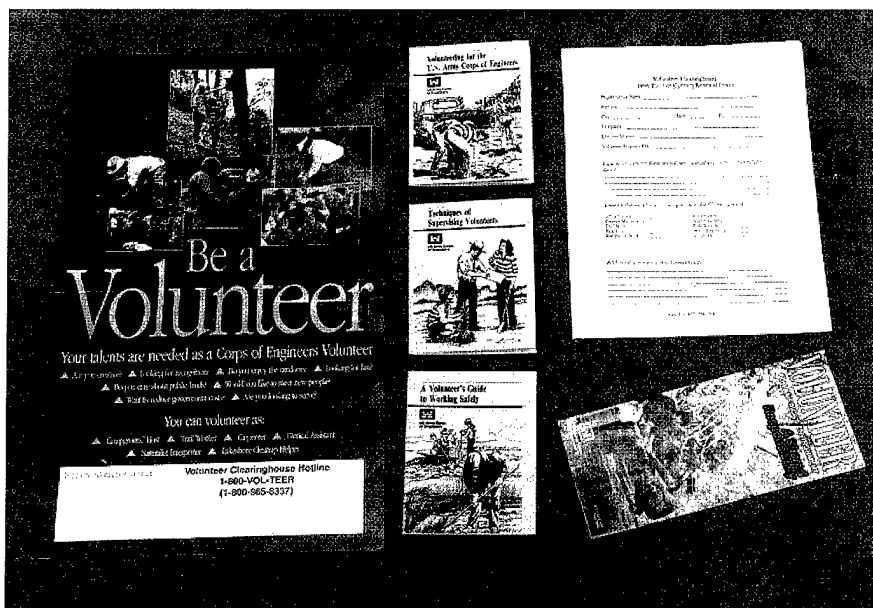
Corps projects are encouraged to continually advertise the program and recruit local volunteers. To help the project coordinators inform the public about the program, the Clearinghouse has made available a number of promotional materials.

Posters and pamphlets on the program can be displayed on project bulletin boards and distributed in visitor centers and in nearby convenience stores, marinas, and bait shops. Camera-ready art and sample fact sheets and news releases for print and radio have also been distributed to Corps projects, along with tips on how to make most effective use of these materials.

The Clearinghouse has located a source for volunteer hats and patches, and gives instructions to Volunteer Coordinators on procuring these items so that volunteers can be properly identified.

According to the Natural Resources Management System (the Corps’ informational database), more than 70,000 volunteers provided almost 927,000 hours of service at Corps projects nationwide during 1996. The total value of this service to the Corps of Engineers is estimated to be worth more than \$9 million.

The most successful use of volunteers has been achieved at those projects that do the best job of recruiting volunteers. To take advantage of the benefits offered by the program, contact the Corps’ Volunteer Hotline (1-800-VOL-TEER) or Park Ranger Todd Yann, Nashville District, (615) 736-5155. ©



Promotional materials help projects reach potential volunteers

# Work Unit summaries— Recreation Research Program

RRP Work Unit Title	What is it?	What does it do?	Scheduled completion
Measuring the economic effects of Corps of Engineers marina-slip and dock permit holders	A procedure for measuring the economic effects of marina-slip and dock permit holders	Allows Corps managers to evaluate the regional benefits of recreation in terms of jobs, income, and sales by providing baseline information on the benefits associated with marina-slip renters and dock permit holders	FY 99
Ethnic culture and Corps recreation participation	Existing and future needs and preferences of ethnic group recreation users at Corps projects are being evaluated	Allows Corps managers to clearly identify and incorporate ethnic recreation users' needs and preferences into delivery of existing, proposed, and rehabilitated recreation area facilities	FY 99
Measuring the effects of recreation fee programs	Information about attitudes, perceptions, and motivations of user fees is being obtained for better use in managing user fee programs	Allows managers to better understand visitor reactions to pre- and post-fees, information that is used to improve a project's user fee program	FY 98
An assessment of natural resources managed by the Corps of Engineers	National and regional significance of natural resources management activities on Corps projects is being assessed. This assessment will be used to determine the importance of resource significance, for use in setting natural resource management priorities at Corps projects	Will allow managers to set and implement priorities that reflect resource significance, identify implications of Corps management actions, identify management actions with high payoffs, integrate natural resource management actions into other Corps functions, and identify opportunities to integrate Corps natural resource management actions with public and private agencies	FY 97
Developing customer service plans for improved project management	Development of a field-tested procedure to allow managers to implement strategies that improve the quality of Corps recreation services	Allows managers to measure and implement cost-effective management actions based on recreation user input	FY 98

## Measuring the economic effects of Corps of Engineers marina-slip and dock-permit holders

*POC: M. Kathleen Perales*

**Problem:** The Corps of Engineers has conducted a series of studies across the United States designed to estimate the economic effects of visitors to Corps-developed recreation areas. These studies provided insight into the variety of spending patterns exhibited by Corps visitors. Populations of Corps visitors that have had limited or no treatment in previous work include marina-slip renters and dock-permit households, respectively.

Previous studies have found that spending patterns by boat owners are typically higher than other recreation groups. The limited treatment of marina-slip renters and dock-permit holders restricts the Corps' ability to assess the impacts associated with these two populations. An evaluation of these populations, which are highly correlated with boating, will provide the next step in evaluating the Corps' total economic benefits package.

**Objectives:** Key to this effort is developing dependable, repeatable standardized procedures for implementing a study for these populations. The goal is to develop regional impacts aggregated to determine the total Corps economic effects based on visitor surveys. Specific objectives are to develop a population profile analysis, profiles of visitor recreation use and spending estimates, and estimates of economic effects relevant to the Corps from

marina-slip renter and dock-permit holder populations.

**Tasks:** The size of the populations (dock-permit holders and marina-slip renters) will be identified for the Corps nationally using the Corps' informational database, the Natural Resources Management System (NRMS). The NRMS contains the number of dock-permits by project and concession rentals (slips) by area. The chart below illustrates the 1995 NRMS data for these populations.

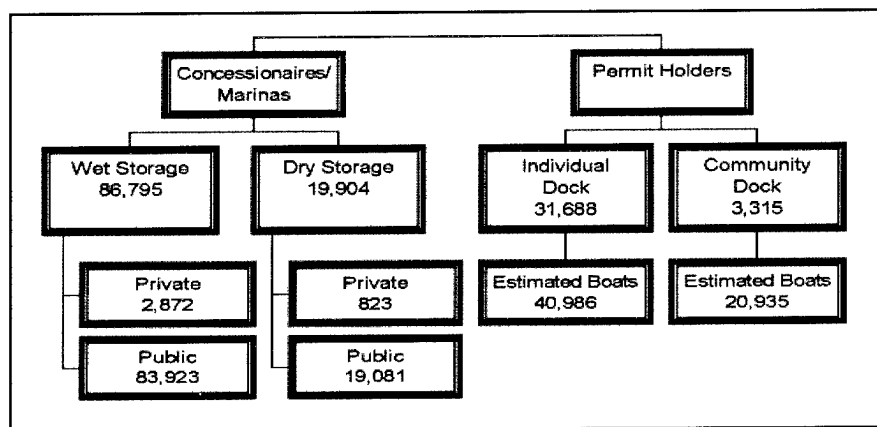
Procedures from previous efforts will be adopted and developed for measuring recreation use and visitor spending. Interviews will provide data for a sample of each population to develop estimates of recreation use and spending. Trip and durable good expenditure profiles will be developed from the national panel. Data will provide input for an input/output model of the economy, which will provide estimates of Corps-wide economic

effects. Outputs will be in the form of sales, employment, and income attributes.

Products to be developed include estimates of recreation use for the two populations under study. Recreation expenditure profiles will also be produced for categories of visitors.

**Benefits:** The Federal Water Project Recreation Act (Public Law 89-72) outlines that the Corps must have partners to share the cost for any future public recreation development. It is then in the best interest of the agency to gain an understanding of the economic benefits of its contribution to public recreation and make that information known to potential cost-share partners.

The economic impact analysis is one tool that allows the Corps to evaluate the regional benefits of recreation in terms of jobs, income, and sales. This effort will provide baseline information on the benefits associated with marina-slip renters and dock-permit holders.



Corps population distribution for marina-slip and dock-permit holders (1995 NRMS data)

## Ethnic culture and Corps recreation participation

**POC:** Jim E. Henderson

**Problem:** Current demographic trends indicate that Asians, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans comprise an increasing percentage of the population in the United States. By the year 2025, ethnic minorities will account for one third of the U.S. population, compared with one fifth in 1980. Presently, the Corps has no data concerning the recreational use, interests, or expectations of this growing percentage of U.S. citizens. Development of complete and effective project management strategies is not possible without this information.

**Objective:** The overall objective is to develop information regarding ethnic group use and recreation

needs of Corps projects for use in decision-making for project planning and operations. Specific objectives are to 1) determine existing and future ethnic group use of Corps projects and determine recreation preferences and needs, 2) evaluate existing and future needs of ethnic groups, and 3) provide summary of findings with guidance incorporating considerations of ethnic users in planning and operations decisions.

**Tasks:** A literature review was completed reviewing future demographic trends, identifying the major findings in understanding of ethnic group recreation use, and identifying data gaps.

A Plan of Study for the work unit was completed in early fiscal

year (FY) 1996. A group of field representatives identified the following priority research areas:

- Development of a methodology for obtaining recreation use and preference information from ethnic groups that use Corps projects.
- Development of summary information on ethnic groups' recreation preferences and other information useful to project personnel to improve day-to-day interactions with ethnic group visitors.
- Development of information on non-users of Corps projects.

Funding for this work unit was severely cut in FY 96 to accommodate savings and slippage for the RRP. Work in FY 97 will depend on funding levels, and decisions

will be made on the priorities of addressing the above research areas.

**Benefits:** By better understanding the different recreation

needs and preferences of major ethnic user groups, better informed decisions can be made on such things as improvements or rehabili-

tation of facilities and the need for and types of visitor information programs.

## Measuring the effects of recreation fee programs

**POC:** Jim E. Henderson

**Problem:** Managers have inadequate information on the response of visitors to implementation of and changes to recreation use fees. Implementation of day use fees in 1994 produced some problems and concerns regarding effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability.

**Objective:** The objective is to evaluate the effects of implementation of the recreation fee program. Evaluation is based on two surveys of visitors: a pre-fee survey (the 1993 Demand and Marketing Study) and a post-fee implementation survey (May-July 1996).

**Tasks:** Early products in the work unit were a bibliography of literature on recreation fees and a legislative history of fees.

In 1993, the Demand and Marketing Study evaluated attitudes, motivations, and perceptions of

visitors regarding fees and elicited willingness-to-pay preferences for a range of entrance fees and annual pass fees.

During 1995, project personnel were surveyed to identify innovative solutions, methods, and "success" stories related to fee implementation. These efforts to improve compliance and increase efficiency and effectiveness were documented in a *Natural Resources Technical Note REC-03* (February 1996).

A post-fee implementation survey was undertaken at J. Percy Priest and Harry S. Truman Lakes during May-July 1996. Survey findings will be compared to the 1993 survey to evaluate changes in perceptions of fees and the fee program, visitor characteristics, and



recreation patterns and experiences after or as a result of the implementation of fees.

**Benefits:** Comparison of the 1996 survey findings to the Demand and Marketing Study results will provide an assessment of the effects of fee implementation on visitor behavior (visitation) and experience or satisfaction and attitudes and support related to the fee program. This information will enable Corps project and district personnel to make better informed plans and decisions regarding fees.

## An assessment of natural resources managed by the Corps of Engineers

**POCs:** Richard L. Kasul and Chester O. Martin

**Problem:** This work unit was motivated by the need for a better understanding of the natural resources that occur on Corps projects and of the goals and methods for managing those resources. This information is necessary to help identify natural resource management priorities within the Corps and to help assess the consequences of those priorities. If the Corps is to continue to meet its stewardship responsibili-

ties and to satisfy changing user demands, it is important to evaluate the national and regional significance of the natural resources on Corps projects and the management priorities associated with those resources.

**Objectives:** This work unit was developed with assistance from a steering committee consisting of Mr. Phil Benge (Walla Walla Dis-



trict), Mr. David Brady (Savannah District), Mr. Jude Harrington (Baltimore District), Mr. Roy Proffitt (Sacramento District), and Mr. Don Weiss (Fort Worth District). The steering committee, along with Mr. Paul Peloquin (North Pacific Division), the Field Review Group

proponent for this work unit, helped formulate three objectives designed to help Corps personnel evaluate management priorities and practices associated with the natural resource programs. Those objectives were to:

- Identify the national and regional significance of natural resource on Corps projects.
- Identify current and future management priorities on Corps projects.
- Demonstrate the importance of resource significance in setting natural resource management priorities on Corps projects.

Three tasks that correspond closely to the study objectives are being conducted. These tasks are in various stages of completion, as described below.

**Task 1:** The task on significance was intended to help project staff assess the national and regional significance of major types of natural resources that may occur on their projects. Several government agencies, including the Corps of Engineers, have previously addressed the significance of the resources they manage. Some have tried to establish the significance of various types of resources for use in policy and management planning. Others have attempted only to establish the criteria for assessing significance.

This task was designed to provide project staff with the tools and information needed to make assessments of resource significance. The process identifies major criteria

for resource significance and provides a simple method for rating the significance of those resources. Two sources are provided to give project staff access to information helpful in determining significance. One is access to the major assessments of resource significance that have been developed by others. The second source is a set of bookmarks identifying the location of relevant information on resource significance, management priorities and policies, and related information available on the Internet from government agencies and natural resource organizations. A *RecNotes* issue describing this process is scheduled for publication in late summer 1997.

**Task 2:** The task on management priorities consisted of a questionnaire of natural resource management practices on Corps projects. The survey was sent out in January 1996 to 66 randomly selected Corps projects. Completed questionnaires have been received from 62 projects, a response rate of nearly 94 percent. Data entry and analysis are under way at this time.

The questionnaire asked for detailed information about the projects' natural resource management programs. It covered budget, personnel, and the availability of inventories and other types of management data. It also asked many questions about current management activities and changes in management activities that are ongoing or anticipated

in the next 10 years. Results of the survey will provide the agency with an overview of present and future natural resource management priorities and objectives on Corps projects. It will also provide resource managers with a detailed summary of the types of management practices in current use.

**Task 3:** A demonstration of the significance evaluation process is planned for the final year of this work unit. The demonstration will consist of a case study at one project with substantial and significant resource holdings. It will apply the tools and information produced in this study to demonstrate the role of resource significance in establishing natural resource management priorities on Corps projects.

**Benefits:** This work unit will provide managers with information that is needed to set management priorities that reflect resource significance, identify implications of Corps management actions, identify management actions with high pay-offs, integrate natural resource management actions into other Corps functions, and identify opportunities to integrate Corps natural resource management actions with those of other public and private natural resource managers.

The information tools produced in this work unit will be useful in addressing policy issues and in making management decisions regarding public use and natural resource stewardship.

## Developing customer service plans

**POC:** John Titre

**Problem:** The two cornerstones of this research effort are 1) President Clinton's Executive Order 12862, requiring agencies to set customer service standards based on performance, and 2) the "National Performance Review,"

recommending that agencies measure success based on customer satisfaction within a government that works better and costs less. The overall objective of this effort is to provide Corps managers with a



simple, yet valid and reliable, feedback mechanism that contains information from their customers, *who* use water-based recreation facilities *and services*, on ways to implement customer-driven suggestions for improvement.

**Objectives:** This research addresses customer satisfaction by developing methods and implementation strategies, such as training, that will improve the quality of services provided by the Corps. Customer satisfaction information can support cost-efficient decisions and help managers deal with reduced budgets.

Objectives of the research are to 1) establish a national database from a representative sample of Corps projects based upon a standard set of "core" questions for evaluating progress toward performance criteria, 2) provide surveys for major Corps customer market segments (for example, boating/ramp, camping/campground, swimming/beach, visitor center, and dispersed use), and 3) develop methods to implement customer satisfaction criteria to meet performance requirements to include operational guidance documents (Operational Management Plan, Lakeshore Management Plan, Project and District Performance Plan).

Ms. Susan Whittington, Natural Resources Management, South Atlantic Division, is the Field Review Group Proponent. She is responsible for coordinating input from an es-

tablished working group and providing comments related to objectives, benefits, and technology transfer.

**Tasks:**

*Measuring customer satisfaction.*

Districts have been tasked with setting customer service standards based on performance goals. Implementation of service standards to "provide quality public outdoor recreation experiences to serve the needs of present and future generations" (Corps Mission Statement) will be accomplished by 1) attention to customer requirements, using business approaches where appropriate, to generate an atmosphere resulting in **continuous improvement** and 2) **empowering our employees** to achieve a comprehensive understanding of our customer.

To ensure success, management tools such as customer surveys and implementation guidance are being developed with the goal of integrating many of the capabilities at the lowest organizational level. The delegation of responsibility to the Operational Project Manager and subordinate staff elements in the organization is consistent with tenets of the National Performance Review.

*Setting customer standards.* The comment card provides a tool to measure customer satisfaction for the product quality of facilities and services using average scores or percentages based on a scale ranging from 5 = very good to 1 = very poor. The items selected are the "top ten" questions considered im-

portant to management. Several agencies have adopted the comment card approach.

*National comment card.* National sampling of the comment card began in FY 96, with the 24 Recreation Research and Development Units, and will continue during 1997 and 1998, with researchers at Waterways Experiment Station conducting the analysis and providing a final report. The national database will be used to chart national trends and as a comparative tool for projects to gauge performance.

*Verification and field testing.* Pilot studies, using focus groups at the Fort Randall and Gavins Point projects (Omaha District), have been completed to test the items to be included in the market segment surveys. Data from these studies will be reviewed prior to spring 1997, and market segment surveys will be developed from the items generated.

Demonstration projects will be selected for further testing of the comment card and initial testing of the market segment surveys during 1997 and 1998. It is anticipated that a matrix of market segments by projects will best represent the diversity of our customers. Ten projects will be selected each year, based on representative criteria to be determined by discussions with the working group. ©



# RECNOTES

Recreation  
Research  
Program

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