

For years Michigan's Air Permitting Program was under scrutiny. It was accused of being cumbersome, slow, and unresponsive to the needs of the regulated community, thus driving business away.

The Air Quality Division Permit Section (AQD) sought ways to reduce the volume of work and amount of time needed to process a permit. Together with stakeholders from the regulated community and other State agencies, the AQD decided to use Value Stream Mapping (VSM) to improve the air permitting program. This Team included permit engineers, supervisors, plant personnel, and policy people. The AQD entered these discussions willing to change and viewed the VSM as a great opportunity.

VSM takes the complexity of a process, such as air permitting, and transforms it into simple, visual documents. All product and information exchanges in a process are mapped. The value adding and non-value adding (waste) activities are identified. The "current-state" map is used to focus on the waste and identify improvement opportunities. The "future-state" map is drawn to create a blueprint for transformation. By incorporating the improvements to be implemented, the future-state map shows what the future process could and should resemble.

A clear, common goal was established by the Team:

"The purpose of the Air Permit Team is to develop and implement an air permitting process that results in expeditious issuance of environmentally sound, operationally flexible, and achievable permits in a timeframe not to exceed 6 months and ensure requirements are identified clearly prior to submittal reducing rework in the process by 90%."

The group mapped the current air permitting process, identified the areas and reasons for wasted effort, and brainstormed potential efficiencies. Through consensus, a future state was created. An Implementation Plan, including objectives such as the development of written procedures, information packets, and training program, all vital components, was developed. Leaders endorsed the work product and agreed to make the Implementation Plan a high priority for all involved.

What makes VSM different from other efforts is the development of the detailed Implementation Plan and the follow-up meetings to ensure the future state becomes a reality. Our Team met six times in the year after the workshop to evaluate the status of the Implementation Plan and develop any countermeasures needed to ensure that the goal for the future state is met and maintained.

The revised air permitting process is designed for all applicants. It ensures that permit decisions are made within 180 calendar days of the application submittal. The redesigned process incorporates early and effective communication between the applicants and AQD, eliminating repetitive work and waiting. This earlier communication also provides a new opportunity to identify projects that might benefit from enhanced public outreach. Most importantly, the integrity of the applicable environmental requirements and standards as well as the AQD's review remains.

The new permitting process has been very successful. Data shows a significant decrease in the average number of days needed to process a permit from 167 days in 2003 to 52 in the first year of the new process.