

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5438

As Reported by House Committee On: Environment

Title: An act relating to promoting the completion of environmental impact statements within two years.

Brief Description: Promoting the completion of environmental impact statements within two years.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Energy, Environment & Telecommunications (originally sponsored by Senators Braun, Angel, Bailey, Rivers, Becker, O'Ban, Schoesler, Brown, Warnick, King, Honeyford, Fortunato, Baumgartner, Rossi, Sheldon, Wilson and Takko).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Environment: 3/16/17, 3/27/17 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill (As Amended by Committee)

- Directs lead agencies to aspire to complete environmental impact statements (EISs) under the State Environmental Policy Act within two years of making a threshold determination that an EIS is required.
- Requires the Department of Ecology to submit a report to the Legislature every two years regarding the average and range of time taken by state agencies and local governments to complete EISs, and to identify incomplete EISs that have been ongoing for at least two years.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Fitzgibbon, Chair; Peterson, Vice Chair; Taylor, Ranking Minority Member; Maycumber, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Buys, Dye, Fey, Kagi and McBride.

Staff: Jacob Lipson (786-7196).

Background:

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) establishes a review process for state and local governments to identify environmental impacts that may result from governmental decisions, such as the issuance of permits or the adoption of land use plans. The SEPA environmental review process involves a project proponent or the lead agency completing an environmental checklist to identify and evaluate probable environmental impacts. If an initial review of the checklist and supporting documents results in a determination that the government decision has a probable significant adverse environmental impact (threshold determination), the proposal must undergo a more comprehensive environmental analysis in the form of an environmental impact statement (EIS). Under SEPA, a government agency is designated as the lead agency, and in that role is assigned responsibility for complying with SEPA's procedural requirements, including making a threshold determination and preparing the EIS when one is required.

Administrative rules adopted to implement the SEPA direct lead agencies to commence EIS preparation as close as possible to the time the agency is developing or is presented with the proposal, so that the EIS can be included in the final recommendations or reports of the lead agency for the associated government decision. The Department of Ecology (ECY) is the state agency responsible for adopting SEPA rules, and for performing certain other guidance and public notification functions associated with SEPA reviews undertaken by other state agencies and local governments.

Summary of Amended Bill:

Lead agencies undertaking a SEPA review are directed to aspire to finish an EIS as expeditiously as possible without compromising the integrity of the analysis. For complex government decisions, the lead agency must aspire to finish an EIS within 24 months of making a threshold determination that an EIS is needed; for government decisions with narrower and more easily identifiable environmental impacts, the lead agency must aspire to finish in far less time than 24 months.

Beginning at the end of 2018, every two years the ECY must submit a report to the appropriate committees of the Legislature regarding the EISs produced during the previous two years by state agencies and local governments, including the average and range of times for EIS completion. The report must also identify any incomplete EISs that have been ongoing for at least 24 months.

The aspirational time limit does not create civil liability or a new cause of action against a lead agency.

Amended Bill Compared to Substitute Bill:

The biennial report to the Legislature on recently completed EISs produced by state agencies and local governments must also identify any incomplete EISs that have been ongoing for longer than 24 months.

The biennial report must be submitted electronically and be included in an online legislative report web site located on the legislative internet home page.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) None.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.