EXECUTIVE BRANCH

POLICY MEMO

WE NEED A U.S. PERMITTING CORPS

And Other Executive Actions to Make the Permitting Workforce More Efficient

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The executive branch must reimagine the permitting workforce to meet the demands of a new regulatory and technology environment. This memo outlines recommendations for doing that urgent work.

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Overview

Nearly every major national domestic priority—from energy and housing, to new infrastructure—runs through permitting. Yet, despite significant political momentum behind reform efforts, limited attention has been paid to the federal workforce that will actually be responsible for interpreting and implementing new permitting regulations and better outcomes.

Since the beginning of 2025, federal roles tasked with permitting are down 20-30%[1]. Agencies have lost staff responsible for everything from data analysis, environmental science, and regulatory interpretation, to complex project management—and numerous other functions—essential to permitting. At the same time, major regulatory change, new technology to streamline workflows, and the need for speed and efficiency, are placing new demands on the existing permitting workforce.

The solution is not to simply replace departed federal staff—the executive branch must instead **reimagine the permitting workforce to meet the demands** of a new regulatory environment. This memo details a series of recommendations for doing precisely that. *These include*:

- **Creating a "U.S. Permitting Corps" composed of innovative interdisciplinary professionals** who can be "deployed" alongside agency teams in ways that complement existing permitting staff tasked with implementing reforms and improving efficiency. The Permitting Corps could be designed and funded under the auspices of the federal Permitting Council.
- **Investing in the skills to share and use of best-in-class digital tools and permitting data** across agencies to improve project management, streamline processes, and accelerate permitting timelines.
- **Engaging in targeted hiring for key permitting roles** in scientific disciplines, project management, and regulatory skill sets to bolster overburdened permitting teams and accelerate progress on federal projects.
- **Rewarding achievements by federal permitting staff and agency leaders** by linking clear, outcomes-based project metrics to improvements in the permitting process.

[1] An analysis of permitting-related occupations across the six key civilian federal permitting agencies (EPA, DOI, DOC, DOE, NRC, and USDA) revealed that, from January 2025 to March 2026, permitting staff saw reductions of 20-30%, depending on the position and agency. Representative roles included Environmental Protection Specialists (Series 0028) and other environmental or scientific positions, as well as grant and contracting roles (e.g., Series 1109, 1102).

Background

Today's changing technology and policy landscapes are colliding with urgent, sprawling national priorities like new energy infrastructure, housing, and climate mitigation. That collision has placed a radically different set of expectations on the federal permitting process to accelerate both the speed and efficiency of projects, while also managing environmental risk. In practice, that means increased pressure on a federal permitting ecosystem that has given little consideration to the scope, composition, or key skill sets needed to implement dramatically improved permitting operations.

Permitting workforce challenges have actually existed for decades: in the form of underinvestment in dedicated permitting staff, poor coordination of permitting decisions within and across agencies, long-standing data, technology, and information gaps, and inconsistent leadership commitments to removing permitting bottlenecks. Take, for example, the federal Environmental Protection Specialist.[2] This role—prominent across the agency teams who administer the complex set of procedures that make up the permitting process—frequently prepares documentation to support permitting decisions. Those decisions range from established or newer Categorical Exclusions (CEs), to the much lengthier and robust process of creating an Environmental Impact Statements (EIS), and many scenarios in-between. Today, changing workflows and the proliferation of AI and other technologies (see one example here) are reshaping this job in fundamental ways—i.e., in ways that will automate or augment both routine NEPA document preparation (for example) as well as highly technical applications of policy or CE determinations.

The work of a modern permitting professional is also inherently cross-functional, sometimes interagency in scope, and needs to respond effectively to evolving permitting regulations. In practice, that means integrating large volumes of information, key data inputs, CE criteria or guidance, and environmental review findings—drawn from numerous subject matter experts and in varying formats—into a coherent evidentiary base for decision-makers. They will need to *simultaneously* track an evolving regulatory landscape composed of new case law, shifting interpretations of implementing regulations, and agency-specific procedural guidance; and they will need to orchestrate that integration in a manner that actually translates emerging changes into operational requirements for other permitting staff, applicants, and agency leaders.

The discrepancy between those needed skill sets and the status quo in permitting capacity illustrates that the government has failed to assess the impacts of who is leaving, who is staying, and whether any federal entity or leader is deliberately shaping what comes next for the workforce charged with making permitting faster and better. Indeed, the 20-30% reduction in roles like this one in 2025/2026 was not a planned approach issuing from new technology capabilities or streamlining regulatory changes—but future permitting workforce decisions need to be.

2 See, as a starting place for federal roles like this, **Series 0028**.

Recommendations

Fortunately, federal leaders have a real opportunity to transform permitting performance through targeted workforce actions. With the right talent embedded in well-designed teams—and sustained support for that talent—federal permitting will move faster and realize better outcomes. Based on confidential interviews conducted with permitting practitioners across agencies in early 2026, they need three skill sets to adapt to regulatory changes, accelerate permitting and maintain quality outcomes consistent with law and national permitting goals.

The recommendations detailed below are informed by these **three overarching skill gaps**:

1. **Digital tools, data, and AI** to integrate new technologies into permitting tasks and workflows
2. **Complex project management skill sets to guide and track** the schedule, cost, and quality of review procedures that make up permitting activities across agencies to improve project management, streamline processes, and accelerate permitting timelines
3. **Targeted, scientific and technical skill sets** in environmental and science disciplines to support consultation, data analysis, and permit decision-making

Permitting Workforce Recommendations

FEDERAL ORGANIZATIONS	DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS
Center of Government Agencies (CEQ, OMB, OPM, Permitting Council)	• **Under the auspices of the Permitting Council, create a "U.S. Permitting Corps"**—a team of innovative, interdisciplinary professionals who can be deployed alongside agency staff to complement existing permitting work, support implementation of permitting reforms, and improve efficiency. • **Design new outcomes-focused reporting mechanisms on closing key permitting talent gaps**—and integrate those metrics with other permitting project reporting (e.g., the FAST-41 Dashboard). • **Leverage dedicated hiring flexibilities (dual compensation waivers, direct hire authorities, term appointments, etc.)** to return experienced/retired permitting professionals to federal service to accelerate urgent projects and improve workflows.

Permitting Workforce Recommendations

FEDERAL ORGANIZATIONS	DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS (CON'TD.)
Center of Government Agencies (CEQ, OMB, OPM, Permitting Council)	• **Provide agencies with clear guidance, sustained budget, clear workforce policies, and dedicated financial and coordination support** to recruit, hire, and deploy talent in the following priority categories noted above—technology, project management, and scientific/technical skill sets.
Key Permitting Agencies (USDA, DOI, DOE, EPA, DOC, NRC, etc.)	• **Reward permitting achievements by agency staff and leaders using clear, outcomes-based metrics**—such as time-saved, quality and efficiency of permitting decisions or workflows, and positive project, community, and/or partner feedback. • **Execute targeted hiring for critical permitting roles in scientific disciplines, project management, and regulatory expertise** to strengthen overburdened teams, rebuild diminished capacity, and accelerate progress on federal projects. *Specifically*: › **Expand digital, data, and AI talent within permitting teams** to improve speed, rigor, and accuracy of analyses supporting permitting decisions. › **Leverage specialized federal technical talent programs**—such as Tech Force, Presidential Innovation Fellows (PIFs), or the United States Digital Corps—to quickly deploy technical expertise into high-priority permitting programs. › **Strengthen project management and coordination capacity** by hiring professionals with expertise in schedule and project management, permitting procedures, and efficient delivery. › **Coordinate with OPM to emphasize permitting roles** in pooled hiring, USAJOBS platforms, targeted recruiting and other initiatives to accelerate talent acquisition across permitting agencies. › **Rebuild critical regulatory, scientific, and technical capacity through strategic workforce planning** efforts aimed at high-demand statutory functions or permitting requirements (e.g., Endangered Species Act Section 7, National Historic Preservation Act Section 106, Tribal consultation, or Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 401), which often drive delays in priority infrastructure projects.

Permitting Workforce Recommendations

FEDERAL ORGANIZATIONS	DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS (CON'TD.)

Interagency Focus

- **Facilitate the sharing and use of best-in-class digital tools and permitting data within and across agencies to streamline** (or redesign) processes based on known gaps and "user" (practitioner) pain-points, structure those efforts as a coherent "orchestration layer" capable of reducing timelines and enhancing efficiency in federal permitting.
- **Scale proven permitting technologies, workflows, and best practices across agencies** by identifying, sharing, and standardizing high-value tools, templates, or AI-enabled use cases (where appropriate) that improve permitting quality, consistency, and efficiency while avoiding fragmented, duplicative experimentation.
- **Strengthen project management capacity across the permitting system** by deploying common tools, workflows, and performance dashboards to better manage schedules, costs, handoffs, and accountability. *Specifically:*
  - **Improve coordination with external stakeholders—including state, local, Tribal, and private-sector partners**—to resolve bottlenecks earlier and reduce delays in permit decision-making.
  - **Promote greater consistency in legal and regulatory interpretation by coordinating with agency Offices of General Counsel** to reduce unnecessary variance in routine permitting decisions and documentation.
- **Capture and institutionalize permitting practitioner knowledge and learnings that can inform and refine best practices**—including permitting workflows, decision logic, and operational, policy, technology, or other "lessons learned" so that critical expertise is retained and replicated across the federal permitting workforce.
  - **Embed that evolving body of knowledge, experience, and technical guidance** into an accessible, shared system that practitioners across agency settings can use/contribute to.

Conclusion

Whether taken together as complementary pieces of a holistic workforce strategy, or a "menu" of options to demonstrate results quickly and scale—all our recommendations share a common goal set: increase the use of modern technology and data practices to streamline permitting workflows, improve the quality, cost, and timelines of permits, and reduce the overall likelihood of litigation and unnecessary delays.

Better tools and processes won't deliver better results on their own, however, and agency leaders and teams must be equipped to source, empower, and retain the talent needed to realize the benefits of those investments.

Get In Touch

Interested in learning more about these recomendations or this work? Have ideas we missed or see something we got wrong? We want to hear from you.

About this Work

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FAS envisions a world where cutting-edge science, technology, ideas and talent are deployed to solve the biggest challenges of our time. We embed science, technology, innovation, and experience into government and public discourse in order to build a healthy, safe, prosperous and equitable society.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY INNOVATION CENTER

ABOUT EPIC

EPIC is a nonpartisan start-up whose mission is to build policies that deliver spectacular improvements in the speed of environmental progress. Across restoration, water, agriculture, and technology programs we build strategies, partnerships, tools, and new ideas leaders can use to drive better outcomes at speed and scale.