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WE NEED A U.S. PERMITTING CORPS

And Other Legislative Ideas for Improving the Federal Permitting Workforce

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JUNE 2026

Congress 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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We Need a U.S. Permitting Corps

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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.

Congress must pass legislation and engage in oversight that reimagines 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:*

- **Revising current permitting reform legislative proposals to:**
 - **Create a “U.S. Permitting Corps”** that will bring together interdisciplinary professionals who can be “deployed” with agency teams tasked with implementing reforms and improving efficiency. The Permitting Corps should be drawn from experienced permitting professionals outside government and managed and funded under the auspices of the federal Permitting Council.
 - **Invest in the skills to share and use best-in-class digital tools and permitting data across** agencies to improve project management, streamline processes, and accelerate permitting timelines.
- **Using existing oversight and budget hearings to ensure agencies:**
 - **Are 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.
 - **Are 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 Environmental Impact Statements (EIS), and many scenarios in-between. Today, changing workflows and the proliferation of AI and other technologies (see this [example](#)) are reshaping this job in fundamental ways, i.e., in ways that will automate or augment both routine NEPA document preparation (for instance) 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.

Before those workforce deficits undermine the potential benefits of permitting reform efforts, Congress has opportunities to help bridge talent gaps so that the permitting workforce is ready to take full advantage of both the regulatory flexibilities and permitting-focused technology now available to them.

² See, as a starting place for federal roles like this, [Series 0028](#).



Background (cont'd)

Congress is working on a series of legislative initiatives to improve permitting, including the PERMIT Act, SPEED Act, ePermit Act, and the CERTAIN Act. These legislative initiatives and Administration actions hold promise for accelerating and improving permitting—providing cost savings, moving projects forward faster, and driving better outcomes for all involved in the federal permitting process. However, most of that focus is on deploying new technologies and changing regulatory or program direction and *not* on providing guidance or resources on the talent needed to actually implement these critical improvements.

This presents Congress with an opportunity to improve the speed and quality of permitting using skill sets and technologies available to agencies *today*. Through talent development and the dispersion of technology use cases across agencies, the government can transform both the reputation and experience of permitting for all the actors in the process. The quality of a permit depends on the expertise of the permitting professionals doing the work; and the bottom line for lawmakers and agency leaders alike is that workload and mission demands don't match the talent supply—and that new talent configurations and strategies are needed to execute on permitting priorities.

Recommendations

Fortunately, Congress has 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

We recommend a series of actions by center of government agencies as well as permitting-focused agency teams themselves:



Permitting Workforce Recommendations

LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES	DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS (CON'TD.)
<p>Revisions to Permitting Reform Draft Legislation: Funding, Accountability, and Permitting Talent Expectations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund and set expectations for a “U.S. Permitting Corps” under the auspices of the Permitting Council—revise language to create 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. This staff would be hired from pools of experienced permitting professionals currently with private, non-profit, and academic institutions outside government. The Permitting Corps would provide surge support to close critical workforce gaps as the agencies adapt to new technologies. • Set expectations for 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). • Approve dedicated hiring flexibilities for permitting roles (e.g., dual compensation waivers, direct hire authorities, term appointments, etc.) to return experienced/retired permitting professionals to federal service to accelerate urgent projects and improve permitting workflows. • 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.
<p>Budget and Agency Oversight Hearings and Member/Committee Staff Consultation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for consistent reporting and provide agencies needed oversight and consultation for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Rewarding 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. ➤ Executing 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. ➤ Expanding digital, data, and AI talent within permitting teams to improve speed, rigor, and accuracy of analyses supporting permitting decisions and leveraging specialized federal technical talent programs (Tech Force, Presidential Innovation Fellows (PIFs), or the United States Digital Corps) to deploy technical expertise quickly into high-priority permitting programs.



Permitting Workforce Recommendations

LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS (CON'TD.)

Budget and Agency Oversight Hearings and Member/Committee Staff Consultation

- **Ask for consistent reporting and provide agencies needed oversight and consultation for:**
 - **Facilitating 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.
 - **Scaling 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.
 - **Strengthening project management capacity across the permitting system** by deploying common tools, workflows, and performance dashboards to better manage schedules, costs, handoffs, and accountability.
 - **Capturing and institutionalizing 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.



Conclusion

Whether taken together as complementary pieces of a comprehensive 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.

Legislation that provides better tools and processes won’t deliver better results on its 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 recommendations or this work? Have ideas we missed or see something we got wrong? We want to hear from you.

About this Work



ABOUT FAS

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.



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.