



Young Leaders Program

Environmental Impact Assessments – Czech and American approaches

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Background

My project consisted of a six month internship at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of the United States Federal Government in Washington DC. The main aim of my project was to gain experience in the biggest environmental organization and regulatory body worldwide, to develop a closer partnership between Czech and US environmental bodies, and to learn more about environmental protection in the United States. Overall, I intended to improve my qualifications, knowledge, experiences, and leadership skills.

Before my departure to the United States I worked as a personal assistant to the Minister of the Environment of the Czech Republic. I had experiences with national and European systems of environmental protection. I worked with the top management of the Ministry, among others accompanying the Minister to Parliament. I have background in drafting laws and regulations in the Czech Republic and also in European Union. I wanted to learn more about the American system from the “inside” and in a way to become a part of the Obama Administration for six months.

I worked out the details of my stay in the United States with the Office of International and Tribal Affairs and also directly with Office of Federal Activities, a part of EPA Headquarters in Washington DC. The office helped me with arranging of the visa and other necessary arrangements. I left for Washington DC in September 2010, as planned.

American Partner

My internship partner was the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a leader in the nation's environmental science, research, education and assessment efforts. EPA is also one of the leaders in environmental protection internationally. The mission of EPA is to protect human health and the environment and to safeguard the natural environment – land, air, water – upon which life depends. To accomplish this mission, EPA develops and enforces regulations, gives grants, studies environmental issues, teaches the public about the environment, that protecting the environment is everyone's responsibility. EPA informs the public about activities, works with businesses, non-profit organizations, and state and local governments through dozens of partnerships. EPA employs about 17,000 people across the United States, including its headquarters offices in Washington D.C., 10 regional offices, and more than a dozen labs.

EPA is one of the few agencies with environmental regulatory powers at the federal level. EPA's five major national programs are: Air and Radiation, Water, Solid Waste and Emergency Response, Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances, and Enforcement and Compliance Assurance.

EPA works with state governments to implement federal environmental programs, with officials in state environmental, health and agricultural agencies on strategic planning, priority-setting and measurement of results. EPA has a comprehensive Partnership Programs addressing a wide variety of environmental issues by working with companies, organizations, communities, and individuals which offer participating enterprises a wide variety of valuable services and resources to reduce their overall environmental impact.

Brief Evaluation Statement

I had beautiful time in the United States. I spent six most interesting months of my professional life full of learning, exploring, and improving myself. My project was a great challenge for me. Fortunately, I had strong support by my counterparts and thus had a perfect opportunity to learn how EPA works. My whole stay was also about managing all necessities for me, facing up to unexpected problems, contacting people, arranging my life in a totally different and foreign country without any friends. I wanted to find out for myself how I can act and adapt myself to these new conditions.

My goal was to explore new findings, to learn new working techniques to help me in improving my leadership skills, knowledge, and career potential. I wanted to help foster professional contacts between the Ministry of Environment in the Czech Republic and the EPA.

Detailed Description

My program consisted of two parts – two main areas of interest. My first and the longest part of my stay I spent at EPA's Headquarters in Washington DC, in the Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance, Office of Federal Activities. This is the office which oversees of EPA's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) program. But this was just one small part of my daily work. The Office runs a number of international activities. It supported international exchange programs. I was in a team coordinating visits from all over the world. It was a perfect occasion to meet new colleagues, to share information, to learn a lot not only about the American environmental assessment system but also about Canadian, Australian, Central American, Chinese, and Taiwanese. We held meetings with official international delegations, with other US departments (e.g. Department of Justice, Department of Transportation), with NGOs. I had the possibility to study the EIA system from different points of view. I was especially interested in public participations during EIA public hearing procedures, involvement of different stakeholders in the process, the role of public interest and the role of a state and public authorities in EIA. Last but not least activity was preparing materials, facts, papers for the Energy and Mining Guidelines of CAFTA DR States (cooperation under Dominican-Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreements signed with five Central American States - Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic).

Many conferences, lectures and talks took place right at EPA's Building or opposite in Ronald Reagan Building at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. These events were good sources of knowledge for me. It also helped me with deeper understanding of American positions in issues such as climate changes, role of EU in global environmental negotiations, cooperation between United States and China in environmental field. All these activities helped me to improve my communication skills, to learn alternative methods of working, to obtain new sources of information.

I observed the behavior of the managers to their colleagues. I was a member of their team. I improved my team working skills, professional approach. It was great training in leadership skills for me.

I was interested in the application of the environmental law across the United States so the second part of my stay I spent in one of ten regional EPA's offices. I moved to San Francisco, California, called the greenest state in the United States. I studied concrete EIA cases and I was also interested in the area of air pollution here. I was assigned to the Air Division, Permits Office, and I participated in a project of preparation of modernization and reconstruction in the Four Corners Power Plant, one of the largest coal-fired generating stations in the United States located on Navajo land in Fruitland, New Mexico. It is a huge source of pollution effecting 16 National Parks and Protected Areas. My task was going through the materials, preparing of fact sheets for public hearings, comparisons of this facility with others in a different region. I have experienced presentations and negotiations of numerous proposals by stakeholders and communities.

This region experience was about specific, concrete tasks and examples of what I knew and learnt in general during my previous stay at EPA headquarters. Culmination of my stay in California was a meeting with Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld and my participation at the press conference of EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson in Washington DC.

My whole stay in the United States was not just about learning but also about sharing. During my internship I made presentations and discussed EU and national systems of environmental protection, about the Environmental Impact Assessment procedures in the EU and in the Czech Republic, on air pollution and climate change. I was able to improve my presentation skills, my stay was full of learning and meeting people, building a professional network.

Organization and Time Schedule

My American partner helped me with visa forms. The whole visa procedure took me approximately 2 month. After getting my visa I started to arrange flights, accommodation, insurance and I arrived to Washington DC at the end of August as I planned. I became a part of Obama's administration and started my project at EPA from the beginning of September 2010. At the beginning of January I moved to Region 9 office in San Francisco where I spent the second (shorter) part of my internship.

Program Cost

As I expected, my expenses were higher than the \$ 15,000 grant from AFCSLS. I contributed the difference from my own resources. I compare the initial cost estimate with the actual cost of my program in the following chart:

Item	Cost Estimate in US\$	Actual Cost in US\$
Administrative fees (visa, registration fees, etc.)	200	200
International travel	1,500	1,200
Local transportation	1,000	900
Medical insurance	1,000	800
Monthly maintenance	12,000	13,200
Contingency	2,000	500
Total	17,700	16,800

Program Benefits

My program benefited me greatly in many ways both at a professional and a private level. I have learned a lot about a different point of view of environmental protection outside the European Union. This experience has enhanced my professional knowledge, deepened my understanding of environmental politics, Environmental Impact Assessment or the American position on global health and environmental protection.

I have had the opportunity to experience different cultural and language environment and to test out my reactions, abilities, and skills. I met a lot of new interesting people, professionals, friends who helped me to broaden my way of thinking. I am sure all this will translate into improvements of my management, organizational, social and decision making skills.

I hope I helped with deepening cooperation between the Czech and the American environmental protection agencies. I have gained a broader perspective on problem solving – during my internship I have learnt there are similar problems everywhere – all over the world – but different approaches to their solutions. I will share my experiences with my colleagues in public participation, working with the public, and try to introduce some of these approaches in the Czech Republic. I would like to help shift the approach of the Czech Government closer to the American approach of government as a service: the administration means service and we – officers of the state – are here to serve you, the people.

Risks

The risk of my project I was aware of is resistance to a change of thinking in relation to environmental protection in the Czech Republic and also outdated view of how should the administration work. The main expected risk is official bureaucracy in public service and existing reluctance against working collaboratively with companies, non-profit organizations, communities, and individuals. This is likely to persist for some time but using the phrase by Neil Armstrong: “One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind”, my project in Young Leaders Program I consider to be this one small but very important step.

Thanks

I appreciate very much this opportunity to enhance my education, knowledge, and skills. I would like to thank the American Fund for the Young Leaders Program and for supporting young people. I would like to thank with all my heart to Mrs. and Mr. Herman for their support, love, friendship, my dear colleague Cheryl and her family for their assistance, energy, company, my family who supported me in my plans, and to all my friends who helped me, taught me and made my stay unforgettable.