

# **CAL/EPA RECOMMENDED GUIDANCE ON INCENTIVES FOR VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE**

**October 2003**

## **Purpose**

This Guidance is designed to enhance the protection of human health and the environment by encouraging regulated entities to prevent or to discover voluntarily, disclose, and correct violations of federal, state and local environmental requirements through the use of routine, systematic application of an environmental compliance auditing program.

## **Definitions**

For purposes of this Guidance, the following definitions apply:

"Environmental Audit" is a systematic, documented, periodic, and objective review by regulated entities of facility operations and practices related to meeting environmental requirements.

"Due Diligence" encompasses the regulated entity's systematic efforts, appropriate to the size and nature of its business, to prevent, detect, disclose, and correct violations through all of the following:

1. Compliance policies, standards, and procedures that identify how employees and agents are to meet the requirements of laws, regulations, permits, and other sources of authority for environmental requirements;
2. Assignment of overall responsibility for overseeing compliance with policies, standards, and procedures, and assignment of specific responsibility for assuring compliance at each facility or operation;
3. Mechanisms for systematically assuring that compliance policies, standards, and procedures are being carried out. These include monitoring and auditing systems reasonably designed to detect and correct violations, periodic evaluation of the overall performance of the compliance management system, and a means for employees or agents to report violations of environmental requirements without fear of retaliation;

4. Efforts to communicate effectively the regulated entity's standards and procedures to all employees and other agents whose duties involve environmental compliance;
5. Appropriate incentives to managers and employees to perform in accordance with the compliance policies, standards, and procedures, including consistent enforcement through appropriate disciplinary mechanisms; and
6. Procedures for the prompt and appropriate disclosure and correction of any violations, and for any necessary modifications to the regulated entity's program to prevent future violations.

"Environmental audit report" means the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations resulting from an environmental audit, but does not include data obtained in, or testimonial evidence concerning, the environmental audit.

"Gravity based penalties" are that portion of a penalty over and above the economic benefit of noncompliance, whether or not they are labeled as such, i.e., the punitive portion of the penalty, rather than that portion representing a defendant's economic gain from non-compliance. (For further discussion of this concept, see "A Framework for Statute-Specific Approaches to Penalty Assessments," #GM-22, 1980, U.S. EPA General Enforcement Policy Compendium. See also the particular penalty statutes and regulations for the individual enforcing agency bringing the action).

"Regulated entity," means any person, facility, or entity, including a federal, state, or municipal agency, regulated under federal, state, or local environmental laws.

### **C. Incentives**

This section identifies the major incentives provided to encourage self-audits, prompt disclosure and correction. These may include significantly reducing or not seeking gravity based civil penalties, declining to refer for criminal prosecution companies that self-report, and refraining from routine requests for audits.

#### **1. Waiving Gravity Based Penalties**

Where the regulated entity establishes that it satisfies all of the conditions of Section D, gravity based penalties for violations of environmental requirements may be waived if allowed by applicable statute. Gravity based penalties (defined in Section B) generally reflect the seriousness of the violator's behavior. It would be appropriate to waive a portion of such penalties for violations discovered through due diligence or environmental audits, recognizing that these voluntary efforts play a critical role in protecting human health and the environment by identifying, correcting, and ultimately preventing violations. The conditions set forth in Section D, which include prompt

disclosure and expeditious correction must be satisfied for any portion of gravity based penalties to be waived.

Any economic benefit obtained as a result of noncompliance should be recovered, even when all other conditions of the Guidance are met. Economic benefit could be waived, however, if the enforcing agency determines that it is insignificant. The recovery of economic benefit is important for two reasons. First, it provides an incentive to comply in a timely manner. Taxpayers expect to pay interest or a penalty fee if their payments are late; the same principle should apply to corporations that have delayed their investment in compliance. Second, it is fair because it protects responsible companies from being undercut by their noncomplying competitors, thereby preserving a level playing field.

## 2. Reduction of Gravity Based Penalties

Gravity based penalties for violations of environmental requirements can be reduced to the extent the regulated entity satisfies the conditions of Section D below. The enforcing agency, may, at its sole discretion, reduce the gravity based penalties further as a credit for investment in Supplemental Environmental Projects (See Cal/EPA guidance on Supplemental Environmental Projects.).

The complete waiver of gravity based civil penalties should be available only to companies that meet the higher standard of reporting as a result of conducting an environmental auditing or systematic compliance management. However, to provide encouragement for the kind of self-policing that benefits the public, gravity based penalties can be significantly reduced for a violation that is voluntarily discovered, promptly disclosed, and expeditiously corrected, even if it was not found through an environmental audit particularly where the company agrees to implement an environmental compliance management procedure. Cal/EPA expects that this will encourage companies to come forward and work with regulatory agencies to resolve environmental problems and begin to develop an effective compliance management program.

## 3. No Criminal Recommendations

The enforcing agency may decline to recommend to a prosecuting authority that criminal charges be brought against a regulated entity where they determine that all of the conditions in Section D are satisfied, so long as the violation does not demonstrate or involve:

- a. A management practice that concealed or condoned environmental violations; or
- b. Knowing or negligent involvement in or deliberate ignorance of the violations by corporate officials or managers.

Whether or not an enforcing agency refers the regulated entity for criminal prosecution under this section, they may reserve the right to recommend prosecution of the criminal acts of individual managers or employees.

This Guidance has important limitations. It will not apply, for example, where corporate officials are consciously and knowingly involved in, or willfully blind to, violations, or conceal or condone noncompliance. Since the regulated entity must satisfy all of the conditions of Section D, violations that caused serious harm or that may pose imminent or substantial endangerment to human health or the environment are not covered by this Guidance.

Nothing in this guidance should be construed to restrict the power of a city attorney, district attorney, county counsel, or the Attorney General to bring any criminal proceeding otherwise authorized by law or to prevent an enforcing agency from cooperating with, or participating in, such a proceeding.

4. No Routine Request for Audits

It is not recommended that an enforcing agency routinely request environmental audit reports to initiate an investigation of the entity. If the enforcing agency has independent reason to believe that a violation has occurred however, it is reasonable to expect that they seek any information relevant to identifying violations or determining liability or extent of harm, including any audits that the facility may have conducted.

**D. Conditions**

This section describes the nine conditions that a regulated entity must meet in order for an enforcing agency not to seek (or to reduce) gravity-based penalties for violations of environmental laws. As explained in the Summary above, regulated entities that meet all nine conditions may avoid gravity-based civil penalties unless otherwise mandated by statute.

1. Systematic Discovery

The violation was discovered through:

- a. an environmental audit; or
- b. an objective, documented, systematic procedure or practice reflecting the regulated entity's due diligence in preventing, detecting, and correcting violations. The regulated entity must provide accurate and complete documentation to the enforcing agency as to how it exercises due diligence to prevent, detect, and correct violations according to the criteria for due diligence outlined in Section B. The enforcing agency may require as a condition of penalty mitigation that

a description of the regulated entity's due diligence efforts be made publicly available.

2. Voluntary Discovery

The violation was identified voluntarily, and not through a legally mandated auditing, monitoring, or sampling requirement prescribed by statute, regulation, permit, variance, judicial or administrative order, or consent agreement.

3. Prompt Disclosure

The regulated entity must have fully disclosed in writing to the appropriate federal, state or local agency, a specific violation promptly after the violation is discovered. Promptly is nominally defined as 21 working days or such shorter period as provided by law.

The 21 day period begins when the regulated entity discovers that a violation has, or may have, occurred. The trigger for discovery is when any officer, director, employee or agent of the facility has an objectively reasonable basis for believing that a violation has, or may have, occurred. Where an entity has some doubt about the existence of a violation, the recommended course is for it to disclose and allow the regulatory authorities to make a definitive determination.

The 21 working day period may not always be appropriate. Many laws and permits require immediate notification. In other instances where circumstances are complex, do not present a serious threat, and take longer to evaluate, disclosures within 21 days may not be practical. The enforcing agency may accept later disclosures as "prompt" where the regulated entity meets its burden of showing that the additional time was needed to determine compliance status and did not expose the public to unreasonable risk. Conversely, if the violation objectively represented an imminent threat to human health or the environment, reporting within 21 working days will not be deemed reasonable. Satisfaction of the prompt disclosure condition is solely within the discretion of the enforcing agency.

This condition recognizes that it is critical for enforcing agencies to receive timely and accurate reports of violations, in order to have clear notice of the violations and the opportunity to respond if necessary. Prompt disclosure is also evidence of a facility's good faith attempt to achieve or return to compliance as soon as possible.

4. Discovery and Disclosure Independent of Government or Third Party Plaintiff

Regulated entities must have taken the initiative to find violations and promptly report them, rather than reacting to knowledge of a pending enforcement action or third party complaint. Thus this condition specifies that the violation has to have been identified and disclosed by the regulated entity prior to:

- a. The commencement of a federal, state, or local agency inspection or investigation, or the issuance by such agency of an information request to the regulated entity or related industries;
- b. Notice or commencement of a citizen suit;
- c. The filing of a complaint by a third party;
- d. The reporting of the violation to a government agency by a "whistle blower" employee, rather than by one authorized to speak on behalf of the regulated entity; or
- e. The imminent discovery of the violation by a regulatory agency.

5. Correction and Remediation

The regulated entity corrected the violations immediately, certified in writing that the violations have been corrected, and took appropriate measures as determined by the appropriate agency to remedy any environmental or human harm resulting from the violation. Where appropriate, the enforcing agency will require that to satisfy conditions 5, 6, and 8, a regulated entity enter into a publicly available written agreement, administrative consent order, variance, or judicial consent decree, particularly where compliance or remedial measures are complex or a lengthy schedule for attaining and maintaining compliance or remediating harm is required.

This Guidance requires the violation to be corrected immediately reflecting the expectation that regulated entities will move quickly to meet their obligations under the law. While it is expected that violations must be corrected immediately, there will be those violations that require longer-term remedies, such as where significant capital expenditures are involved, or where regulatory oversight is required. The regulated entity will be expected to do its utmost to achieve compliance under the law, and the appropriate enforcing agency will retain sole discretion to determine whether the regulated entity timely corrected and remediated the violations.

6. Prevent Recurrences

The regulated entity agrees in writing to take steps to prevent a recurrence of the violation, which may include improvements to its environmental auditing or due diligence efforts.

7. No Repeat Violations

The violation (or similar violation) shall not have occurred at the same facility within the past three years. This three year time period begins to run when the government has given the violator notice of the violation, without regard to when the violation cited in the notice actually occurred. For purposes of this determination, a violation includes:

- a. Any noncompliance with a federal, state, or local environmental law or regulation identified in a conviction, plea agreement, judicial order, final administrative order, consent agreement, variance, or in a notice of violation or inspection report.
- b. Any act or omission for which the regulated entity has previously received penalty mitigation from a federal, state or local agency.

This condition bars repeat or chronic offenders from receiving penalty reduction and benefits both the public and law-abiding entities by ensuring that penalties are not waived for those entities that have previously been notified of violations and have failed to prevent repeat violations. The enforcing agency should consider all the facts and circumstances relating to any prior violation in determining whether it is a repeat violation.

This condition applies if the entity was operating under the same ownership and/or management when both violations occurred. When the facility is part of a multi-facility organization, relief under this guidance is unavailable if the same or a closely related violation occurred as part of a pattern of similar violations at one or more of these facilities within the past five years.

#### 8. Serious Violations Excluded

The violation is not one which (1) resulted in actual harm, or which may present an imminent or substantial endangerment to, human health or the environment, or (2) violates the specific terms of any judicial or administrative order, or consent agreement.

This condition makes clear that violations that result in actual harm or which may present an imminent or substantial endangerment to public health or environment are excluded from consideration under this guidance.

The Guidance also excludes penalty reductions for violating the specific terms of any judgment, order, consent agreement, or plea agreement. Once an order or agreement is in effect, there is little incentive to comply if there are no sanctions for violating its specific requirements. The exclusion in this section also applies to any failure to implement any response, removal, or remedial action covered by a written judgment, order or agreement.

#### 9. Cooperation

The regulated entity timely and fully cooperated as requested by any regulatory agency and provided the agency with the information it needs to determine applicability of this Guidance. Cooperation includes, at a minimum; timely providing all requested documents, and access to employees and the facility; and providing assistance in

investigating the violation, other related compliance problems, and any environmental consequences related to the violations. The regulated entity must not hide, tamper with, or destroy possible evidence following discovery of potential environmental violations.

This section makes clear that recalcitrant violators are excluded from consideration under this guidance. To be considered under the guidance, all entities that have been ordered or requested to come into compliance shall have done so pursuant to any time frame described by the enforcing agency. Entities that are determined to have refused lawful orders shall not benefit from their recalcitrance.

#### **E. Economic Benefit**

The enforcing agency should retain full discretion to recover any economic benefit gained as a result of noncompliance to preserve a "level playing field" in which violators do not gain a competitive advantage over regulated entities that do comply. The enforcing agency may forgive all or any portion of the penalty for violations which meet Conditions 1 through 9 in Section D, and which in its opinion do not merit the full penalty due to the insignificant amount of any economic benefit.

In determining economic benefit, the enforcing agency should also take into consideration any documented expenditures the regulated entity has made to create and implement an environmental audit or due diligence program, which can be significant. Such expenditures may counterbalance the economic benefit of the violations.

#### **F. Applicability**

At the discretion of the enforcing agency, this Guidance may be applied to settlement of claims for administrative or civil penalties for violations under statutes and regulations within the jurisdiction of enforcing agencies.

It is within the discretion of the enforcing agency to determine whether it is appropriate that a regulated entity that has received penalty mitigation for satisfying specific conditions under this Guidance receive additional penalty mitigation for satisfying the same or similar conditions under other policies for the same violation(s).

This Guidance sets forth factors for consideration that will guide the enforcing agencies in the exercise of their enforcement discretion, and is intended as guidance only. It does not create any rights, duties, obligations, or defenses, implied or otherwise, in any third parties. This guidance is not promulgated in regulation or statute and as such is not binding on any Board, Department or local agency.

This Guidance can be used in settlement negotiations for both administrative and civil judicial enforcement actions. It is not intended for use in pleading, at hearing, or at trial. The Guidance may be applied at the enforcing agency's discretion to the settlement of

administrative and judicial enforcement actions instituted prior to, but not yet resolved, as of the effective date of this Guidance.

#### **G. Scope Of Guidance**

Cal/EPA has developed this document as a guide for settlement actions involving a broad range of environmental violations. All enforcing agencies are encouraged to adopt similar policies in order to assure statewide consistency in application.

#### **H. Making Disclosures**

Disclosures should be made to state and local agencies that have jurisdiction over their reported violations, i.e. to the local air district for air violations, to the local CUPA and/or the Department of Toxic Substance Control for hazardous waste violations. A copy may also be sent to Cal/EPA, attention legal unit. Reports to the US EPA should follow the guidelines set forth in their guidance.