Communicating with Policymakers: Engaging with Federal Agencies

When Congress passes new laws, it is often up to federal agencies to implement and enforce them. This can happen through grants and other funding opportunities, new programs, and other agency regulations, and oftentimes agencies will seek input from the public to help them shape these new policies.

There are several ways to find these opportunities, as outlined in our "Engaging with Federal Agencies" blog post, but most ultimately link back to regulations.gov for comment submission. This government website was launched in 2003 with the purpose of making public commenting on federal rules and regulations more accessible, and now has over 220 participating agencies that post there. A related platform is the Federal Register, the official "newspaper" of the federal government that publishes notices of proposed or finalized rules and regulations. The two are directly integrated: you can submit comments directly on a Federal Register posting that is powered by and channeled through regulations.gov.

While searching on both regulations.gov and the Federal Register will show you all current feedback opportunities in one place, making them great starting points if you're not seeking a specific opportunity but want to explore what's out there, they can leave a lot to dig through. Here, we'll provide guidance on how to make the most of your search in both places.
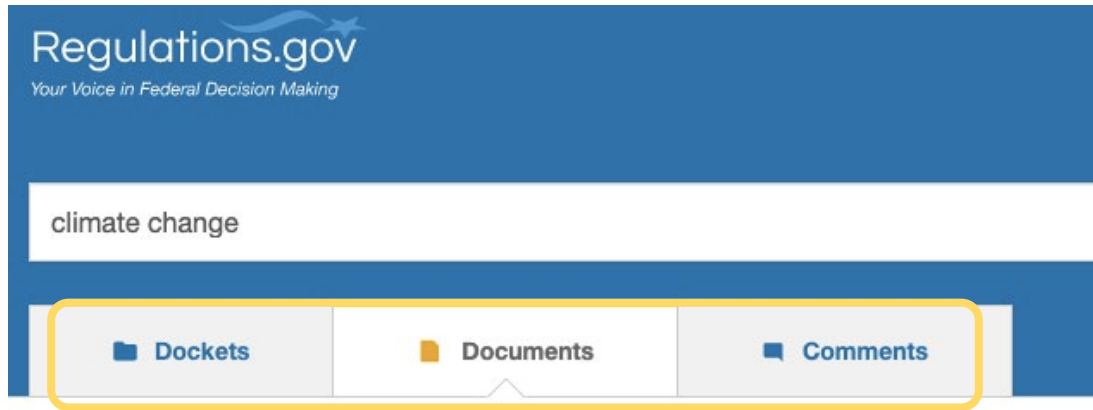
Regulations.gov

When starting out on regulations.gov, it's a good idea to browse some of their "About" pages. You can learn more about rulemaking—the formal process by which federal agencies create new regulations—to see exactly how your comments will be used as they develop new policy, or get help with site navigation, terminology, and commenting on their FAQ section.

When you're ready to dive in, you can start a search either for individual documents (typically notices published to the Federal Register that contain information about proposed rules), or for dockets, which are folders of documents that all relate to the same proposed rule. In either case, there are filters you can apply to your search results to make finding things easier - but there are more filter options for document searches than for dockets. This generally makes it easier to find relevant opportunities by searching through documents, then access the containing docket for more instructions and information. Below are some example searches that will help you get a better sense of what types of documents are posted on reguations.gov, and how to find opportunities of interest.

Searching by Topic

If you're not already aware of a specific comment opportunity, but you have a particular area of expertise or interest that you want to put to policy-making use, searching regulations.gov by keyword is a good place to start.
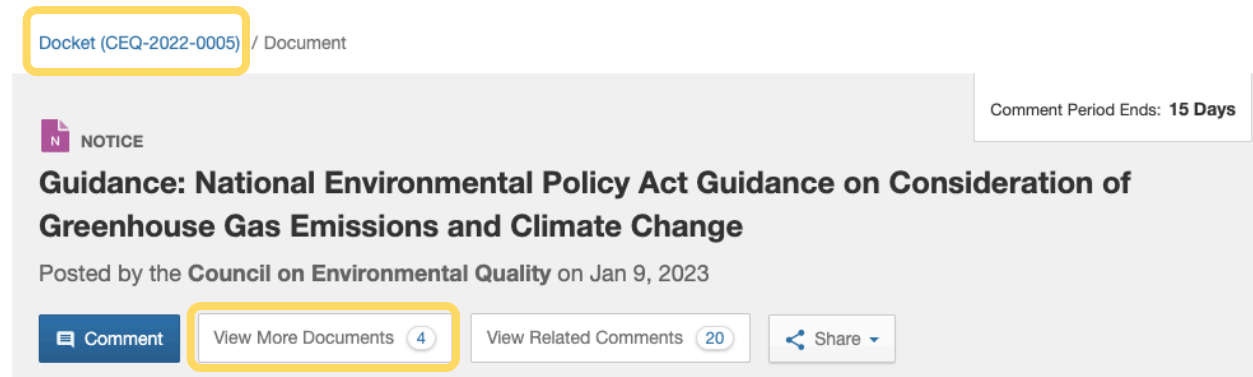

Let's say you're interested in public comment opportunities related to climate change – you'll start by typing "climate change" into the search bar. By default, you'll be directed to the "Documents" tab, which will yield thousands of results. To narrow things down from there, you can start applying some filters on the left side of the results page:

1. **Document Type:** the vast majority of documents that will appear in your search results come from the Federal Register. These includes "Notices", which are general announcements of things like agency decisions or guidance, "Proposed Rules" which are announcements of proposed agency rules, "Rules" which are announcements of finalized rules, and "Supporting & Related Materials" which typically provide additional information about notices/rules in the same docket.
2. **Posted and Comments Due:** these two categories allow you to filter for more recent results, i.e. documents posted recently, or documents with comments due soon, respectively. Since regulations.gov search results will show you everything since the website was launched, even if the comment period has long-since expired, these are particularly useful.
3. **Agency:** allows you to filter your results by the federal agency that has posted that document.

For our purposes, we're only interested in looking for opportunities that still have an open comment period, so we'll apply the "Next 30 Days" filter under "Comments Due". This reduces the search results from over 50,000 to just 37, many of which could be of interest to a geoscientist. This notice from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), for instance, which was posted on January 9th 2023, provides guidance to federal agencies on analyzing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change effects when evaluating major actions.

Clicking on that notice in your results page will take you to the "Document Details" page, where the full description of the guidance is shown along with instructions on where to submit comments. From there, you can look at what comments have already been posted under the "Browse Posted Comments" tab, or visit the containing Docket by clicking either "View More Documents", or the Docket ID number in the top left.

Docket (CEQ-2022-0005) / Document

Comment Period Ends: **15 Days**

N NOTICE

Guidance: National Environmental Policy Act Guidance on Consideration of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Climate Change

Posted by the **Council on Environmental Quality** on Jan 9, 2023

💬 Comment | View More Documents 4 | View Related Comments 20 | < Share ▾

Once on the containing docket's page, you'll find an updated notice posted on February 16th that extends the comment period until mid-April, along with some older related notices.
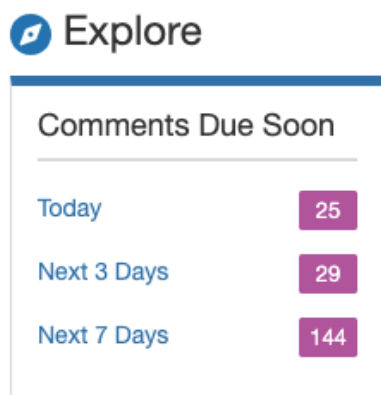
Going back to our search results page, we can apply even more filters to see what other types of public comment opportunities related to climate change are available. Let's say, for example, that you're especially interested in informing proposed rules, rather than issued guidance. We can apply the "Proposed Rule" filter under "Document Type", which leaves us with just 12 results. Several of these proposed rules are related to wildlife and conservation, like this one from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) that proposes a new National Marine Sanctuary in Eastern Lake Ontario, with comments due on March 20th, or this one from the Fish and Wildlife Service that proposes a new critical habitat designation for the `i`iwi bird in Hawaii, with comments due on February 27th.

Some other geoscience-relevant proposed rules in our search results were posted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This proposal would change the way that the EPA reviews water quality standards for aquatic resources reserved to tribes, as directed by the Federal Clean Water Act. Another EPA proposal would amend the processes and timelines for states and federal agencies to submit and implement emissions plans required under the Clean Air Act. Of particular interest is a new requirement for state plan developers to better engage with stakeholders in their community, especially those in underserved communities most vulnerable to emissions.

Searching by Agency

Hopefully, the previous examples gave you a better idea of the kinds of rules and guidelines that agencies seek feedback on via regulations.gov. If you find that you enjoy participating in these comment opportunities and want to check out what's posted more regularly, another strategy is to search by the posting agency, rather than by topic, on a regular basis. As an

example, let's suppose that you, a geoscientist, want to stay up to date on public comment opportunities coming from the U.S. Geological Survey, or USGS. There are two ways to do this:

1) **Use the "Explore" bar**, found on the right side of the regulations.gov homepage. Clicking any of the "Comments Due Soon" or "Posted Recently" options will take you to a search results page that, unlike in the examples above, is not filtered by any keywords. Although the Explore section only gives you up to 7 days – potentially too short a timeframe if you want to give yourself ample time to respond – once you're on the results list you can apply the same filters you did earlier, including changing "comments due" to 15, 30 or 90 days, or even to a custom date range. Then, under the Agency tab, select "Department of the Interior" (DOI, the Agency that houses the USGS), which will show you everything posted by that agency in your selected timeframe.
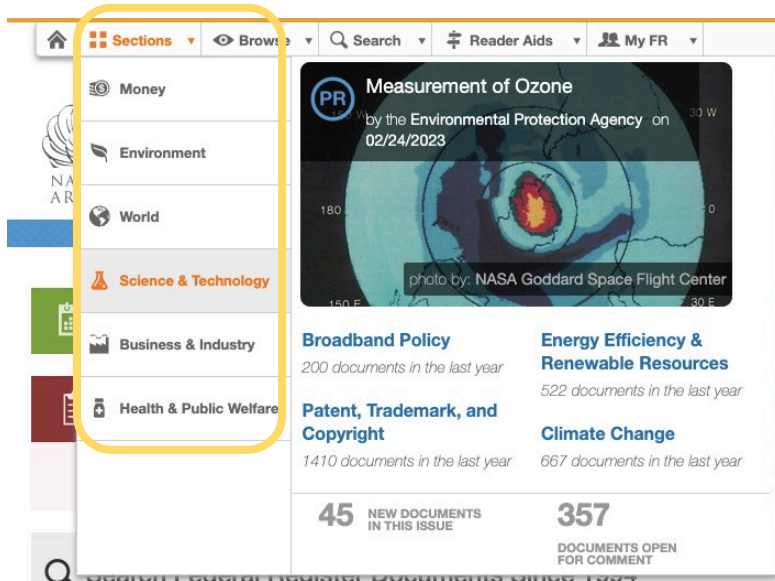
2) **Use the search bar**, but instead of typing in a topic key word as you did with previous examples, type in your agency. Unlike option 1, this will search through document text for mention of that agency, rather than filter by the posting agency. Depending on what you're after, this could be advantageous as it will show you all opportunities of relevance to your agency (in this case, the USGS), regardless of whether it was actually posted by the DOI – although those are usually still at the top of the results page. Note that often documents will use abbreviated agency names, so it is easier and more effective to search for that acronym (e.g. 'usgs') rather than typing out the full agency name.

Using either technique, and making sure you're only showing documents with open comment periods, will whittle down your results substantially, leaving only the opportunities relevant to your agency. In our USGS example, when filtering by comments due within 30 days with both search techniques, this notice with a request for comments on the risk of disruption to the nation's helium supply solicited by the USGS, appears at the top of the results list. Performing a similar search on a regular basis will ensure that you can continue to monitor the USGS's new listings.

The Federal Register

As you've already seen, the notices, rules, and proposed rules that are posted on regulations.gov all come from the Federal Register. While this publication contains presidential documents along with agency notices, its interface is generally friendlier than regulations.gov and it's a little more straightforward to search through.

The online version of the Register operates much like any other online newspaper. It's divided into six sections: Money, Environment, World, Science & Technology, Business & Industry, and Health & Public Welfare. As a geoscientist, browsing either "Environment" or "Science & Technology" from the "Sections" tab at the top of the page is a good place to begin, and you'll find that each section suggests several more specific search topics that have received a lot of recent submissions.

Another option is to visit the "Browse" tab, which allows you to perform an even narrower search. The agency page contains a complete list of the 434 agencies with documents on the Register, allowing you to not only search by larger departments like the DOI, but also the bureaus they contain, like the USGS. Their topics page provides a list of the 874 different indexing terms they use as document keywords – areas of interest that are far more specific than their six overarching sections.

Clicking on any of the topics or agencies on these pages will take you to a list of results that are automatically sorted by the date in which they were posted – a great way to view what's new with a specific topic or agency if you plan to browse regularly. But as this still typically leaves you with a lot to sift through if you're a more infrequent browser, then you might benefit from a more customized search. This can be accomplished either by clicking "View ____ more results" at the top of your initial results list, or by entering a search term directly in the search bar at the top right of the Register.

By either of these routes, you'll be taken to a complete results list reminiscent of regulations.gov, where you can similarly filter by publication date, document type, and posting agency, along with some new options like "Topic" and "Section".

Similar to our regulations.gov example, searching for "climate change" , then filtering for documents posted in the "Environment" section yields the Federal Register's version of the same NEPA guidance document we found earlier. Expanding this result and clicking the green "Submit a Formal Comment" button will reveal a comment box and the option to upload a file, which automatically get submitted to regulations.gov.

The Federal Register will sometimes also post public comment requests that are not channeled to regulations.gov, such as this opportunity to help frame the National Nature Assessment, which directs you to the U.S. Global Change Research Program's Public Contribution Site. This can be found by looking at all of the listings under the Science and Technology Policy Office, the main science advisory department to the president, which is another great agency to keep an eye on as a geoscientist.