

Theme-Based Portal Concept

The Monitoring Council described a concept of theme-based portals that would provide ready access to a variety of assessment information.

These themes, though not yet explicitly defined, fall into two categories. One category would address core assessment questions or concerns, such as: Is seafood safe to eat? Is it safe to swim at the beach? What is the condition of streams? A second category would include certain kinds of foundational data (e.g., flow, landscape maps) that are needed for the assessment of questions about condition, status, or trends. Most of the case studies fall into the first category, with the remainder falling into the second.

The term portal refers to a web-based access point that would enable users to access data and assessment results from the perspective of a broadly meaningful question, and download data as needed. An effective portal would enable users to view issues, assessment results, and data from a variety of different views. Such views might include different spatial scales (national, statewide, regional, county, watershed, and local or site-specific). Perspectives could also include different assessment thresholds, supported by pre-programmed tools that would view the data through different screens. For example, EPA assesses seafood tissue levels at the 10^{-6} risk level, while OEHHA uses a 10^{-4} risk level to account for the health benefits of consuming fish. Beach bacteria data provide another example, where users might want to screen the data in terms of comparison to compliance standards, the number and location of advisories, or the report card scores (i.e., A, B, C, D).

Portals should enable users to readily move between larger and smaller spatial scales as desired, and to access relevant data at each scale. For example, a discharger in the San Gabriel River might want to compare their bioassessment data to assessment results from the regional and then the statewide scales. This discharger should be able to obtain the assessment results at those different levels, and then be able to access reports, data, and assessment tools as needed.

A useful template for what a portal should look like is provided by the State of the USA website, www.stateoftheusa.org, which has the National Academies as a strategic partner and is funded by major foundations. This project aims to provide theme-based, question-driven access to reliable data and information on a range of environmental, economic, and social issues.