



# Audit of the Administration of the Public Inquiries Centre at ECCC

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## Executive summary

The [Policy on Communications and Federal Identity](#) identifies that deputy heads are responsible for enabling communications with the public about policies, programs, services and initiatives by ensuring that their Department responds to information requests or inquiries from the public promptly without undue recourse to the [Access to Information Act](#).

The Public Inquiries Centre acts as a point of entry to the Department for the nearly 8,000 inquiries received each year from the public via various communication channels including email, phone and mail. Accurately responding to these inquiries in a timely manner requires the Public Inquiries Centre to work with a network of subject matter experts across the Department.

## Why it is important

Responding to inquiries received from the public with the right information and in a timely manner is an important element of the Department's communications with Canadians. At Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Public Affairs and Communications Branch, as designated by the Deputy Minister, is responsible for informing the public about policies, programs, services and initiatives. The Public Affairs and Communications Branch is a key enabling partner that provides professional support services across ECCC by offering expertise in Parliamentary and Cabinet Affairs, communications and ministerial services, in addition to public inquiries.

## Objective and scope

The audit objective was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the administration of public inquiries by the Public Inquiries Centre at ECCC. The audit assessed the extent to which ECCC had established processes and practices to ensure that public inquiries are addressed in a complete, accurate and timely manner and that lessons learned from public inquiries inform broader ECCC communication efforts.

## What we found

ECCC has established some processes and practices to support the administration of public inquiries that are received from various entry points into the Department. There are a number of opportunities to improve the administration of public inquiries. These include:

- reviewing and assessing the role of the Public Inquiries Centre in the context of the broader departmental administration of public inquiries
- having stronger controls and processes in place to support a full understanding of the number of inquiries received
- having the processes and tools in place to respond in a complete and accurate manner

Furthermore, there are opportunities to establish and implement standards for expected response times and whether these are being met.

## Recommendation 1

The Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, should undertake an analysis of the current state of how public inquiries are received and responded to within the department.

## Recommendation 2

Based on this analysis, the Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, should develop for the Public Inquiries Centre:

- a service delivery model that supports consistent, complete and timely public inquiries administration
- an approach that includes the use of a common tool for client management and business intelligence purposes

## 1. Background

Responding to inquiries received from the public with the right information and in a timely manner is an important element of the Department's communications with Canadians. The [Policy on Communications and Federal Identity](#) identifies that deputy heads are responsible for enabling communications with the public about policies, programs, services and initiatives by ensuring that their department responds to information requests or inquiries from the public promptly without undue recourse to the [Access to Information Act](#).

At Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Public Affairs and Communications Branch, as designated by the Deputy Minister, is responsible for informing the public about policies, programs, services and initiatives. The Public Affairs and Communications Branch is a key enabling partner that provides professional support services across ECCC by offering expertise in Parliamentary and Cabinet Affairs, communications and ministerial services, in addition to public inquiries.

Within the Public Affairs and Communications Branch, lead responsibility for administering and responding to public inquiries is undertaken by a team within the Public Affairs and Issues Management section of the Communications Directorate. The Public Inquiries Centre works to:

- connect the public with the accurate information as quickly as possible
- contact the appropriate program or Department for specific information related to an inquiry
- cultivate relationships with programs within ECCC and other government departments and agencies to learn to work with them more efficiently
- contribute to, and collaborate with the Communications Branch and the Department on the dissemination of information

The Public Inquiries Centre acts as a point of entry to the Department for the nearly 8,000 inquiries received each year from the public via various communication channels including email, phone, and mail. Accurately responding to these inquiries in a timely manner requires the Public Inquiries Centre to work with a network of subject matter experts across the Department.

It is within this context that the audit was performed.

## 2. Objective, scope, and methodology

### 2.1 Objective and Scope

The audit objective was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the administration of public inquiries by the Public Inquiries Centre at ECCC.

The audit team assessed the extent to which ECCC had established processes and practices to ensure public inquiries are addressed in a complete, accurate and timely manner and that lessons learned from public inquiries inform broader ECCC communication efforts.

The scope of the audit included a review of the governance, risk management and internal control processes in place to support and measure the delivery of public inquiry services.

Specific audit lines of enquiry and criteria are summarized in [Appendix A](#).

### 2.2 Methodology

The audit was conducted and completed using the following methods:

- a review of business processes and other documentation provided by the program
- interviews conducted with management of the Public Inquiries Centre as well as with representatives of other branches across ECCC involved in receiving and responding to inquiries from the public
- an analysis of public inquiries received during fiscal year 2021 to 2022
- completion of a high-level benchmarking analysis of public inquiries functions with 6 other departments and agencies

This audit work was conducted during the period from June 2022 to January 2023.

### 2.3 Statement of Conformance

The audit conforms to the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, as supported by the results of the quality assurance and improvement program.

### 3. Findings, recommendations and management response

Presented in the following sections are key findings resulting from the audit, organized under the following themes:

- Management of the Public Inquiries Centre
- Departmental management of public inquiries
- Integration of the Public Inquiries Centre within ECCC Communications

#### 3.1 Management of the Public Inquiries Centre

**Finding:** The Public Inquiries Centre has established some processes and practices to support the administration of public inquiries. However, the current state of its operations do not adequately enable it to meet the expectations of acting as a Centre of Expertise or as the delegated authority for the broader management of public inquiries within ECCC.

##### What we examined

We expected to find that the Public Inquiries Centre, as the lead function responsible at ECCC for administering public inquiries, is managed in a manner that supports the Department in responding to information requests or inquiries from the public promptly without undue recourse to the [Access to Information Act](#).

##### What we found

The Public Inquiries Centre is an entry point for public inquiries. It assigns inquiries received from the public to subject-matter experts within the Department. These subject-matter experts respond to specific public inquiries because the Public Inquiry Centre employees currently do not directly respond to public inquiries, regardless of the nature of the request. Interviews with the Public Inquiries Centre management confirm that there may be opportunities for Public Inquiries Centre employees to have an expanded role in triaging public inquiry responses, to improve timeliness and consistency of response.

To support their current role, the Public Inquiries Centre has developed and maintains a manual of standard operating procedures to guide staff in managing inquiries. This documentation includes an evergreen directory of subject-matter experts from across the Department who are assigned responsibilities to respond to specific inquiries based on the subject matter.

As a stand-alone unit of 4 experienced full-time equivalents, ECCC has not made effective use of the Public Inquiries Centre as a training ground for communications staff, thereby not leveraging a potential staff development opportunity. Further, given the years of service of the current Public Inquiries Centre staff, there is a recognized succession planning risk that may affect the continuity of operations, should individuals leave the unit.



To address the challenges facing the Public Inquiries Centre, management acknowledged the need to develop a change management strategy, in parallel with other ongoing change management practices at the individual employee level within the Public Inquiries Centre and within the Communications Directorate. However, no strategy has been developed or implemented to date.

Beyond internal change management aspirations, Public Inquiries Centre management is currently evaluating an alternative service delivery model whereby Service Canada may be engaged through a Memorandum of Understanding to support ECCC public inquiry intake and response, thus transforming some Public Inquiries Centre staff responsibilities.

It was noted that this service delivery model assessment is being undertaken in a complex public inquiry landscape within ECCC which includes:

- many other points of intake for public inquiries received across various ECCC program areas outside of the Public Inquiries Centre, the volume of which is unknown
- different processes and tools (for example, inquiry management systems) used by the various program areas to administer inquiries
- opportunities for insights and lessons learned from existing call centre operations within the Department, including the Canadian Centre for Climate Services which operates a call centre to respond to inquiries and the Meteorological Service of Canada which currently has an agreement in place with Service Canada for the intake of public inquiries

Based on these observations, which are further explored in our observations in sections 3.2 and 3.3 of this report, there are opportunities for the Public Inquiries Centre management to assess its current role in the context of the broader departmental administration of public inquiries and the implementation of the alternative service delivery model.

## 3.2 Management of public inquiries

**Finding:** ECCC does not have a full understanding of the number of inquiries received or the processes and tools in place to ensure that all inquiries received are responded to in a complete and accurate manner. There are no formal standards for expected response times. In addition, as a result of the multitude of entry points and the absence of integrated management, there is no understanding of which inquiries have been responded to or the timeliness of those responses.

### What we examined

We expected to find that processes and practices used to support inquiry intake and response are in place and used to support timely, accurate responses. Furthermore, we expected to find that standards for response times for public inquiries received within the Department are established, monitored and reported on.

## What we found

The absence of understanding and controls applied to public inquiries raises the risk of officials providing erroneous advice to the public. This is an area of significant focus in each of the regulatory branches that the audit team interviewed, some of which have implemented additional practices to address this risk. These errors can have a negative impact on the credibility of the Department and lead to non-compliance by regulatees. It can also derail a criminal prosecution and waste the investigative efforts engaged by the Department or lead to civil litigation against the Department and employees if the erroneous advice was given negligently and resulted in damages. It is therefore important that communications with regulated parties be appropriately tracked and that only correct information, provided by the individuals authorized to do so, is given out.

ECCC currently receives public inquiries via many communication channels (for example, phone, e-mail, voicemail, facsimile) and at many points of contact that extend beyond the Public Inquiries Centre. While some inquiries are received by the Public Inquiries Centre and routed to ECCC program areas, most of the inquiries received by program areas or regional offices are received directly from the public, with no involvement by Public Inquiries Centre staff. Table 1 outlines the current environment and includes estimated inquiry volumes, where available. The table was developed based on interviews with Public Inquiries Centre staff and other specific program sector representatives. As a result, it may not present a complete picture of all inquiries received across the Department.

**Table 1: Public inquiry point of entry**

Public inquiry point of entry	Estimated monthly volume of public inquiries received	Estimated percentage of inquiries received via the Public Inquiries Centre
Public Inquiry Centre	500 – 700	100%
Meteorological Service of Canada	500 – 700	15%
Canadian Centre for Climate Services	50 – 70	less than 15%
Canadian Wildlife Service – CITES Permitting Policy and Operations	300 – 400	less than 15%
Canadian Wildlife Service – Wildlife Regulatory (includes regional offices)	30 – 40	more than 70%
Canadian Wildlife Service – Protected Areas (includes regional offices)	about 10	less than 15%

Key observations of the current environment include the possibility that public inquiries received via the Public Inquiries Centre (about 8,000 annually) represent only a partial view of the total number of inquiries received across ECCC. There is significant incidence of program areas (for example, Meteorological Service of Canada) receiving thousands of additional inquiries directly from the public.

Due to the various entry points through which ECCC receives public inquiries, coupled with the lack of integrated management and reporting, there is currently no accurate and consolidated understanding within ECCC of the volume of public inquiries received, the volume of inquiries responded to or the topics of public interest.

Further, there is inconsistency in the processes and tools used to support inquiry intake and response across the various ECCC business lines that currently receive and respond to public inquiries. As a result, the Department lacks the capability to monitor and ensure that inquiries received have been responded to in a complete and accurate manner or to resolve inquiries that may have been responded to incorrectly. The various case management tools used by the Public Inquiries Centre and other departmental areas to support their public inquiry intake and response processes, as summarized in Table 2, illustrate this inconsistency.

**Table 2: Case management tools in use**

Public inquiry point of entry	Estimated monthly volume of public inquiries received	Case management tool used to track inquiries and resolution
Public Inquiry Centre	500 – 700	ECollab
Meteorological Service of Canada	500 – 700	Microsoft CRM Dynamics 365
Canadian Centre for Climate Services	50 – 70	Microsoft CRM Dynamics 365
Canadian Wildlife Service – CITES Permitting Policy and Operations	300 – 400	Excel Spreadsheet
Canadian Wildlife Service – Wildlife Regulatory (includes regional offices)	30 – 40	None
Canadian Wildlife Service – Protected Areas (includes regional offices)	about 10	None

As an extension of this observation, ECCC has not clearly defined expected response times for public inquiries received within the Department and lacks the capability to measure and monitor turnaround time performance for inquiry responses. In response to this risk, several of the sectors involved in the delivery of public inquiries at ECCC are working together to develop a

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution, drawing on their shared experiences with Dynamics 365. The Public Inquiries Centre and the Public Affairs and Communications Branch do not appear to be involved in this project.

Given these limitations, summary inquiry information from the Public Inquiries Centre, which is reported weekly across the Department and to Treasury Board on a periodic basis and is used to populate the external Open Data website, does not present a complete or accurate picture of public inquiries received by the Department.

While these observations highlight various issues requiring management attention, based on a comparative analysis of the practices of other departments, these departments share some of the challenges and issues faced by ECCC. These included the recognized challenge that responding to public inquiries is generally not considered a high-priority communications activity and that there are opportunities to improve monitoring controls to track the completeness and timeliness of responses. [Appendix B](#) provides a summary of these comparative observations.

### 3.3 Integration of the Public Inquiries Centre within ECCC Communications

**Finding:** The Public Inquiries Centre exists in a silo within the Public Affairs and Communications Branch. There are opportunities to better align and integrate public inquiries administration with ECCC's broader communications strategy.

#### What we examined

We expected that ECCC had established processes and practices to ensure that public inquiries inform and are informed by ECCC's broader communications strategy.

#### What we found

Given the various program areas involved in public inquiry intake and response, ECCC generally has an informal and ad-hoc approach towards analyzing inquiry volumes and root causes to determine whether broader communication approaches are required to inform the public on specific topics of interest.

The audit team was provided with some evidence of positive efforts made on the part of various programs or departmental initiatives to forewarn the Public Inquiries Centre of major policy changes or initiatives so they might anticipate a higher volume of questions and direct these to the appropriate program. This also occurs through a weekly communications meeting that includes managers from across the Public Affairs and Communications Branch.

Beyond the application of additional analysis into public inquiry root causes, there is an opportunity to better align the Public Inquiries Centre with other elements of ECCC's communication infrastructure, including the media monitoring unit and ministerial correspondence unit, since there is a natural fit in focus and process among these areas. In

addition, there is an opportunity to leverage the Public Inquiries Centre unit as an entry level training ground for communications staff, to enhance their subject-matter knowledge.

### Recommendation 1

The Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, should undertake an analysis of the current state of how public inquiries are received and responded to within the department.

### Management response

The Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, agrees with the recommendation. During the course of the audit, the Public Inquiries Centre team had begun to take steps to communicate and research how public inquiries through the ECCC Public Inquiries Centre are received by departmental experts once tasked by the team. Roles, responsibilities and service expectations to sector clients are being clarified and service expectations are being communicated to sector clients. Further, the Public Affairs and Communications Branch has collected information and data on how public inquiries are responded to by various teams within ECCC. PACB will complete the review of Public Inquiries Centre received inquiries and fully document the results to determine next steps.

### Recommendation 2

Based on this analysis, the Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, should develop for the Public Inquiries Centre:

- a service delivery model to support consistent, complete and timely public inquiries administration
- an approach that includes the use of a common tool for client management and business intelligence purposes

### Management response

The Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Communications Branch, agrees with the recommendation. A new outside resource will work with the Public Inquiries Centre team to develop and activate a service delivery model that supports consistent, complete and timely public inquiries administration. An operational plan for a 6-month pilot project with Services Canada will be developed to outline the actions to be taken including deliverables and specific deadlines.

The team will also strengthen its approach that includes the use of a common tool for client management and business intelligence purposes. Formal Public Inquiries Centre processes and protocols will also be developed to support Services Canada and Communications directorate collaboration planning over the short, medium and long term. The data and lessons learned during the pilot project with Service Canada will enable the team to establish a more formal

framework and protocol for inquiries as part of the development of the Communications directorate long-term plan beginning in September 2023.

## 4. Conclusion

ECCC has established some processes and practices to support the management of public inquiries that are received from various entry points into the Department. There are a number of opportunities to improve the management of public inquiries. These include reviewing and assessing the role of the Public Inquiries Centre in the broader context of departmental management of public inquiry activities, having stronger controls and processes in place to support a full understanding of the number of inquiries received and having the processes and tools in place to respond in a complete and accurate manner. Furthermore, there are opportunities to establish and implement standards for expected response times and whether these are being met.

## Appendix A: Audit lines of enquiry and criteria

<b>Line of enquiry 1: Management of the Public Inquiries Centre</b>
1.1 The Public Inquiries Centre, as the lead function responsible at ECCC for administering public inquiries, is managed in a manner that supports the Department in responding to information requests or inquiries from the public promptly without undue recourse to the <a href="#">Access to Information Act</a> .
<b>Line of enquiry 2: Management of public inquiries</b>
2.1 Processes and practices used to support inquiry intake and response are in place and used to support timely, accurate responses.
2.2 Standards for response times for public inquiries received within the Department are established, monitored and reported on.
<b>Line of enquiry 3: Integration of the Public Inquiries Centre within ECCC Communications</b>
3.1 ECCC has established processes and practices to ensure that public inquiries inform and are informed by ECCC's broader communications strategy.

## Appendix B: Summary of comparative practices of other departments and agencies

We conducted interviews with 6 other departments and agencies, to perform a comparative analysis of the management of public inquiries. Based on our discussions with officials from these departments and agencies, we observed that they share some of the same challenges and issues as ECCC. Key points of interest observed included:

- Responding to public inquiries was generally not considered a high-priority communications activity.
- Effective controls had not been established to ensure that all inquiries were tracked and responded to in a complete or timely manner. We were also informed that reporting expectations from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat were not clear and that all departments reported the best estimate of the number of inquiries they received annually.
- Insights from public inquiries were generally not used to inform broader communications efforts.
- The majority of departments interviewed made use of a contract with Service Canada to respond to telephone inquiries. Using a Customer Relationship Management solution was recognized as a best practice to enable recording, tracking, monitoring and follow-up on inquiries received, as well to facilitate management reporting.