Strategies for Reading Permit Documents

Permits are granted by government agencies. Many documents are generated in a permitting process. Permit granting is political – a balance of socio-economic benefits vs. environmental degradation. Granting or renewing a permit requires public involvement, where people can comment on both sides of that balance.

A *permit application* is a document proposing a new project. The proposing company fills out the application. A government agency then decides whether or not to grant the permit, and what restrictions the permit should specify. Most permits eventually expire and must be renewed.

A *release permit* lets a company put a certain amount of pollution into the water, air, or soil in a period of time. This can be called a release, discharge, runoff, or effluent.

A *site permit* allows a company to construct a building and parking lots, checking to see if the company has a plan (both during construction and long-term) for dealing with water, sewage, trash, construction pollution, electricity, traffic, stormwater runoff, etc.

Other permits limit the amount or type of fuel a company can burn, or how much water or power they can use. Special permits are required for companies whose business is storing or treating hazardous waste.

Typical Sections

Select a typical page or two from each section. Section names vary greatly, depending on the type of permit and the granting agency. Focus on the issue you care about most. If you think the company isn't being truthful, use sections that depend on numbers provided by the company. Most permit documents specify exact numbers for each building, tank, boiler, furnace, machine, etc. regulating:

- what it does, and how long and how often it can operate
- what chemicals are used and how, where and how they are stored, and any possible contact with people
- how much fuel, water, or power it can consume
- how much contamination it can release in a period of time
- how often it should be monitored and inspected, and how that information should be kept and reported

Categories of Questions & Observations

On the right are typical categories into which questions and observations can be grouped.

An example is given for each, but you don't need to write the example on the posted paper, just the category.

Definitions & Chemical Properties

> What's "effluent"? What's in it?

Predictions

> How much effluent will the new factory create?

Health Risks

> Is that level of effluent dangerous?

The Study Process

> How did they determine how much effluent there might be?

Action Needed

> Is this acceptable? Can we fight this?

Other Questions or Observations