

Name of Method: Expert judgment/opinion

Summary of Method: The application of expert judgment or opinion is probably the most widely used method for assessing the potential impact, and significance of that impact, of a given change on the environment. It essentially relies on the knowledge and experience of the assessor(s) to draw conclusions from the available data. It can be used to identify and assess direct, indirect and cumulative impacts, together with impact interactions. The assessment can be made by an individual or an expert panel, enabling an exchange of information on different aspects of the impact.

Advantages of Method: The method can be widely applied and is relevant to all cause-effect processes. It is a very adaptable method, making use of the information available, ranging from a basic literature search to the results from detailed modelling studies. Once the data on which to make the judgement are available, no specialist software or tools are required. Although the duration of the assessment will depend on variables such as the scale of the change, the sensitivity of the environment and the complexity of the cause-effect pathways, the assessment can generally be made quickly. The financial cost of the method is a reflection of its relative simplicity and speed and, once the data on which to make the assessment has been sourced, is limited to the time taken by the assessor.

Limitations of Method: The main limitations of the method are the knowledge and experience of the assessor and the amount of data available on which the assessment is made. As the method is not always auditable, difficulties can arise such as certainty/confidence in the conclusions, particularly for consultees.

References: European Commission Directorate General – Environment, Nuclear Safety and Civil Protection, 1999. Guidelines for the Assessment of Indirect and Cumulative Impacts as well as Impact Interactions.
South West Ecological Surveys, Levett-Therivel sustainability consultants and Oxford Brookes University, 2004. Strategic Environmental Assessment and Biodiversity: Guidance for Practitioners. Report to CCW, EN, EA and RSPB.