

48 District Web Sites examined January 26, 2005

Summary

The Good: All the sites clearly belonged to USGS and served basically the same purpose for their respective State or States. It still would be fair to say that USGS has a water page for each State. At the same time, each site tailored its focus towards data or projects to meet local interest.

The Bad: Many sites did not seem to know how to tie into national programs and activities. Water use and the annual data report were reported inconsistently or not at all. Only 28 sites explicitly referred to the brand, “NWISWeb,” though all had water data. Only 4 sites used the preferred “Contact USGS” system for feedback.

The Ugly: Although most pages showed good to moderate technical and design skills, a few were unworthy of a modern professional organization and showed a lack of understanding of web design principles. Broken links or links to obsolete functions on others indicated a lack of maintenance.

Home Page Identification

The evolution of district offices into science centers is beginning to erode our former identification of the district home pages as “Water Resources of ...” Here’s how the districts or science centers identify their main water pages:

- 8 were presented as part of a Science Center.
- 39 used the title, “Water Resources of ...”
- 1 still called itself a District.

Common Elements

Services and links commonly offered on the sites included the following:

- Although all sites offered water data, only 28 explicitly used the term, “NWISWeb”.
- 26 used the term, “Flood/Drought/Water Watch”. This may vary seasonally.
- 45 had descriptions of projects or programs.
- 46 had list of publications for their state(s).
- 38 offered the Annual Data Report although nomenclature was inconsistent
- 10 had Frequently Asked Questions
- 15 had links to Water Use for their State(s).
- 18 linked to Water Science for Schools

Surprisingly, 2 sites had no link to their publications and 3 had no link to descriptions of their projects or programs. It is obvious that there is no “checklist” of elements to be included on a district web site, nor any guidance about how elements should be presented.

Visual Identity

All web sites used the Visual Identity and followed the VisID rules ... more-or-less. I would consider 14 home pages to contain technical violations of the VisID guidelines. A

few had created their own, slightly non-standard, version of the USGS identifier, or included text within the banner. Depending upon the vigilance of the VisID Police, they may be called up to fix these problems.

Feedback

How to contact the District for information may be the most nonstandard part of the water websites. (NWISWeb is a separate issue, and is much more standard.) Most have a contact link at the bottom of the home page, but others have a separate feedback form, or both. I looked at how a user would contact someone responsible for the home page.

- 27 used *mailto* with a group as the target.
- 11 used their own *cgi* script or the old *comment_h2o* script.
- 4 used *mailto* to an individual.
- 4 used the Contact USGS service.
- 1 had no email contact information!
- 1 directed queries to an obsolete address for Ask USGS.

Only 4 sites used the preferred method of handling feedback with the Contact USGS form. (See <http://answers.usgs.gov/usgs/responding.htm> and http://answers.usgs.gov/usgs/manual_gsanswers.htm for more info on Contact USGS.) Sending feedback directly to an individual is a particularly bad practice, since individuals are not always available to attend to messages.

NatWeb

- 34 sites are running as NatWeb virtual hosts.
- 11 are running as NatWeb reverse proxys. Typically one would do this if running applications such as Internet Map Server not yet supported by NatWeb virtual hosting.
- 3 are running with out any use of NatWeb.

Some districts have multiple servers to support different applications. Only home pages are counted here.

Issues for Discussion

- Should we providing a “water template” for web pages, or should we leave this to Enterprise Web? Or, is the present situation good enough?
- How are websites funded in Districts?
- What are the likely causes of poor website design? How do we upgrade those water websites that seem to be lagging in skill level?
- Should we develop a checklist of common applications that should be on all district water websites?
- What additional training/information is needed to help Districts comply with the Visual Identify guidelines?
- Are Districts aware of the URL with instructions for setting up Contact USGS? How do we get the district websites to convert their feedback to Contact USGS?
- What are the conditions under which a site can be excused from using NatWeb?