

SESSION 9D

EVALUATORS' BIAS – ARE FIREWALLS THE ANSWER?

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PANELISTS:

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SESSION SUMMARY:

Bias has been a concern of program evaluators from the start; the credibility both of the evaluation results and of the evaluators themselves are at stake. Evaluation standards and protocols have been developed in an attempt to control for a wide variety of evaluator biases. Despite these efforts, however, bias continues to be a concern. For example, the California PUC has determined that certain types of evaluator conflicts of interest will inevitably bias, or appear to bias, evaluation findings. The result is the evaluation "firewall" in California, which forbids any evaluator from conducting any impact evaluation, if that evaluator is involved with any type of program implementation. Other jurisdictions reject the simple firewall approach, and instead treat bias as an issue to be addressed case-by-case.

Panel members will review the key aspects of the evaluation bias issue and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to addressing bias. In doing this, the following questions will be addressed:

- Real world examples of evaluation bias or conflict-of-interest problems
- What are the American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for addressing bias?
- How does the California PUC firewall address bias? How do other programs, including NYSERDA and the Northwest address evaluation bias?
- Do the needs of stakeholders and uses of evaluation results affect the treatment of bias? E.g., California evaluation results determine utility shareholder earnings and procurement needs; NYSERDA evaluation results inform program implementers and public policymakers.

The panel includes evaluation practitioners, evaluation managers, and users of evaluation results. They will be speaking from direct personal experience, and will also contribute policy insight to the discussion. Audience members will be invited to contribute real world examples and perspectives from other energy efficiency organizations/evaluators.