

SMALL BUSINESS ASSISTANCE OFFICE

*ANNUAL REPORT
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Prepared by:

Central Ohio Small Business Assistance Office
1-800-329-7518
(614) 728-8573
fax: (614) 728-8579

Ohio EPA-Central District Office
3232 Alum Creek Drive
Columbus, Ohio 43207-3417

Internet Address:

<http://www.epa.state.oh.us/other/sbao/sbaindex.html>

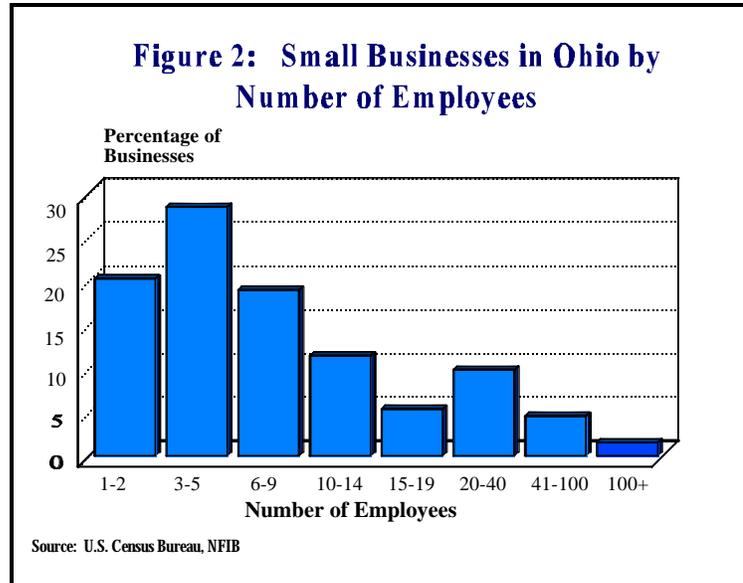
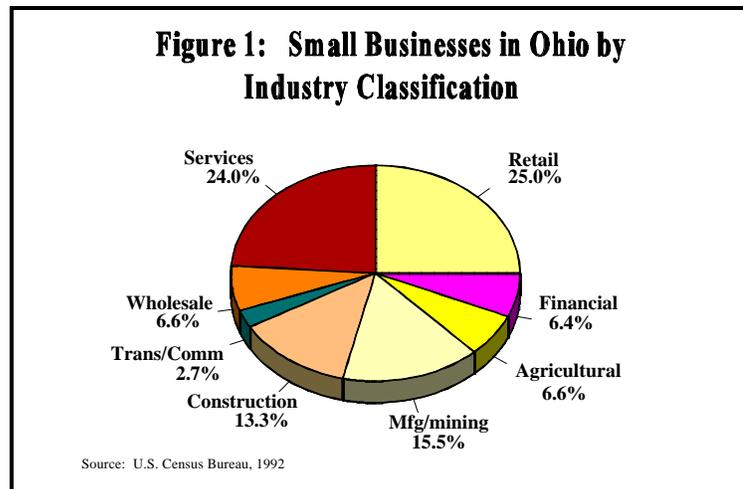
INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the environmental laws have grown in number and complexity and today there are many laws that apply to small businesses such as printers, auto maintenance shops and dry cleaners. At the same time, it is recognized that there are unique demands placed on small business owners. Understanding and keeping up with the changing environmental laws can be difficult, particularly for a small business.

Approximately 97 percent or about 248,000 businesses in Ohio are classified as small businesses. Many of these small businesses are subject to some environmental regulations. A summary of small businesses by industry classification is provided in Figure 1.

Although many small businesses want to comply with the environmental laws, they are often not aware of the rules that apply to them and how to comply. In addition, a typical small business owner cannot afford the services of an environmental consultant. In Ohio, most small businesses have fewer than 20 employees as shown in Figure 2.

To help small businesses understand and comply with the environmental laws, the General Assembly with the support of Governor George Voinovich created a pilot program, to be administered by Ohio EPA.

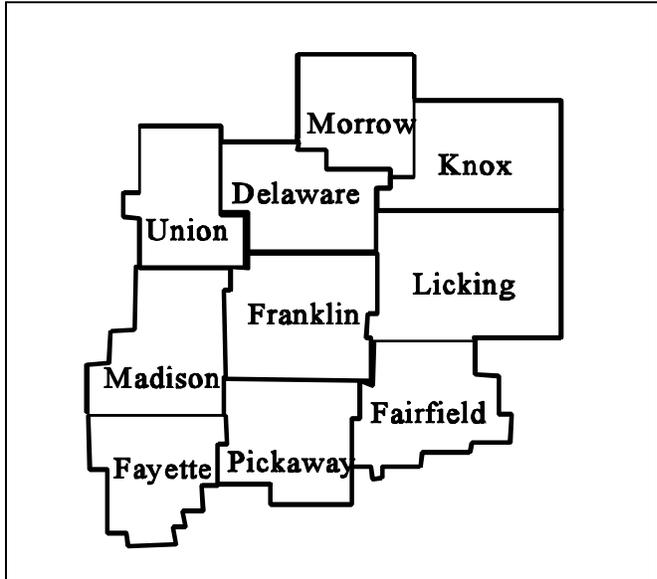


OVERVIEW OF THE SMALL BUSINESS ASSISTANCE OFFICE

In December 1995, Ohio EPA's Small Business Assistance Office (SBAO) began servicing businesses with less than 100 employees in a 10-county Central Ohio area. The office became fully staffed with two technical specialists and administrative support in March 1996. The budget for the two-year pilot project totals \$250,000. The goal of the office is:

"to help small businesses understand and comply with the multimedia, environmental regulations that apply to them."

To meet this goal, the SBAO's major objectives for the first year included:



- Providing telephone and on-site assistance to help small business owners understand the environmental requirements and the measures needed to maintain compliance.
- To conduct seminars and presentations for small businesses to help educate them about environmental compliance.
- To compile and maintain a multimedia (air, waste, water) environmental resource library consisting of easy-to-understand publications for small business owners.
- To maintain an effective marketing campaign to increase awareness of the SBAO's services within the small business community.
- To maintain effective communication about the program with internal agency staff and external stakeholders.

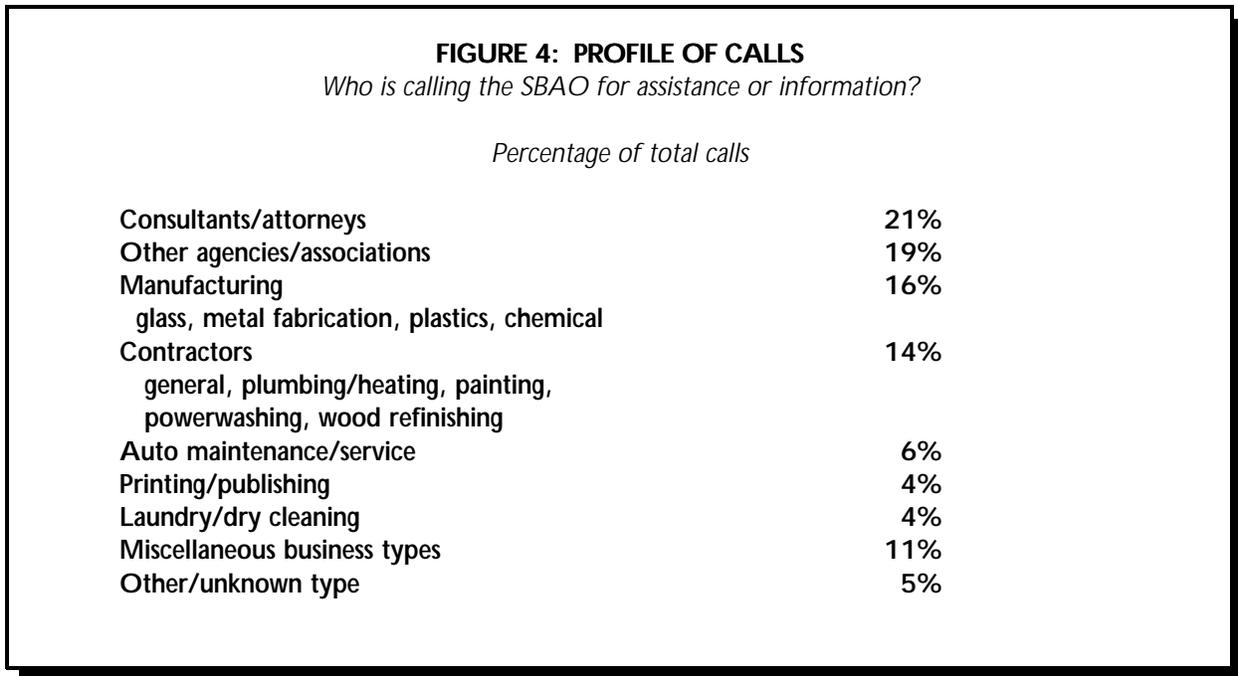
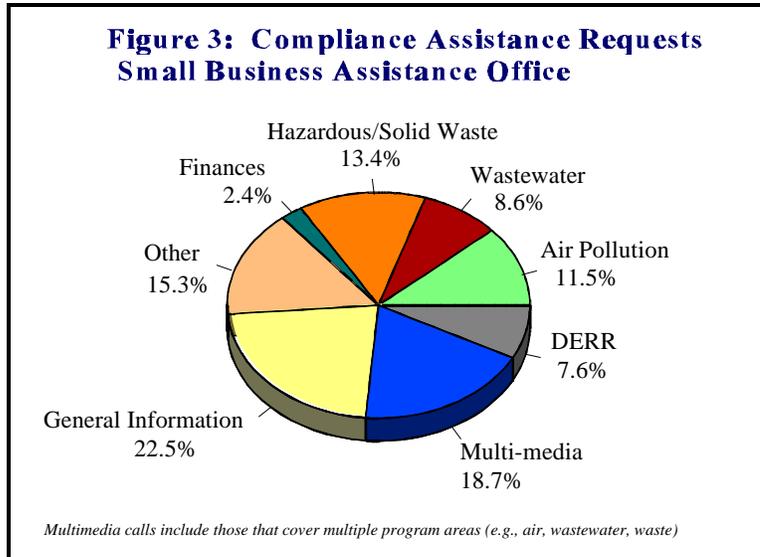
Confidentiality

Recognizing the importance of helping businesses feel comfortable about using the services of the SBAO, written confidentiality procedures for the office were finalized in 1996. The SBAO's internal confidentiality procedures mean that information provided to the office is not turned over to agency inspection or enforcement staff. In a letter of support that accompanies the operating procedures, Ohio EPA Director Donald Schregardus emphasizes that "the success of the program depends on a fundamental element of trust between the agency and the small business community." The confidentiality procedures also support the statutory mandate of the SBAO to "educate and assist businesses with permitting, regulatory and other general environmental issues."

SBAO Hotline

The SBAO's commitment to small business customers includes providing quick access to technical information and timely answers to regulatory questions. The SBAO staffs a toll-free telephone hotline (800-329-7518) with environmental specialists, available to businesses from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. During the first few months of operation, the SBAO received three to five incoming calls per month from small businesses. Once fully staffed in March 1996, a priority of the office was to increase the visibility/awareness of the SBAO within the small business community.

As of December 1996, the SBAO has logged more than 200 total calls and the average number of calls to the office has increased to approximately 25-30 calls per month. Many different types of businesses have called the SBAO for assistance. Some questions are related to a specific program area (e.g., hazardous waste regulations). Others are multimedia compliance requests, from businesses who need to know about compliance in all program areas (air, waste, water). See Figures 3 and 4.



On-Site Environmental Assessments

The SBAO provides confidential, on-site environmental assessments to small businesses. The on-site assessments include a facility walk-through and paperwork review to help business owners determine what regulations apply to them. Additionally, the environmental specialists provide specific recommendations about measures needed to maintain compliance.

The SBAO has completed seven on-site environmental compliance assessments since March 1996. It is anticipated that additional marketing during 1997 will result in an increase in the number of on-site compliance assessments. In talking with those business owners participating in the on-site assessments, they found them to be informative and helpful in developing a better understanding of the regulations.

Workshops

The SBAO conducts presentations for small businesses to assist them in understanding the environmental regulations. The presentations provide business owners with an overview of:

- Offices/divisions of Ohio EPA and key contacts;
- Waste, water and air requirements that a small business may be subject to; and
- Ohio EPA's pollution prevention loan program and compliance assistance programs.

In partnership with the Central Ohio Small Business Development Center, the SBAO conducted five environmental compliance presentations for small businesses during 1996. Additionally, the SBAO sponsored an exhibit booth and distributed environmental compliance information at eight meetings (trade shows, agency meetings and small business seminars) during 1996.

Printed Materials

The SBAO has collected more than 200 technical publications, regulatory guidance documents and fact sheets. These easy-to-understand resources are distributed to small businesses to help them develop a better understanding of the environmental regulations.

The SBAO published its own newsletter, *The Small Business Resource* and distributed the most recent issue to more than 4,000 small business owners in Central Ohio. In each newsletter the SBAO updates small businesses on the development of EPA guidance and rules that may have an impact on their operations. Additionally, the newsletter is used as an educational tool, with each issue covering a topic related to current air, waste and water regulations. The newsletter is also a way of informing small businesses of the valuable technical resources available to them through Ohio EPA and other organizations.

In coordination with the Division of Hazardous Waste Management, the SBAO drafted its first environmental compliance fact sheet, providing small business owners with guidelines in selecting a hazardous waste disposal facility. With this fact sheet, and others anticipated for 1997, the SBAO continues to work towards a goal of promoting "plain language" publications - those easy for small businesses to understand and use.

Web Site

In July 1996, the SBAO posted its web site at www.epa.ohio.gov/other/sbao/sbaindex.html. Through the site, small business owners can find information about the SBAO. Additionally small business owners can obtain environmental guidance documents, technical publications and links to other helpful small business resources through the web site.

As of December 1996 the web site was contacted over 900 times and the office recently received its first compliance assistance requests via web site e-mail links to the SBAO. The SBAO anticipates more web site usage as internet access to small businesses expands.

MARKETING

Increasing awareness of the services available to small businesses and encouraging them to participate in a voluntary compliance program required intensive marketing efforts by the SBAO during 1996. Marketing efforts have included:

- news releases to papers, trade journals and other small business publications;
- radio interviews;
- networking with small business related associations and agencies (exs. NFIB, Chamber of Commerce, Department of Development, trade groups);
- six-month paid advertising in two small business newspapers;
- direct mailing of SBAO program brochure and newsletters; and
- SBAO exhibit booth at eight small business functions (expos, conferences, trade shows).

The SBAO staff completed 42 presentations at various agency and small business association meetings to share information and market the services of the office. Some of these presentations included marketing the program to internal EPA staff as well. These presentations included a general overview of the SBAO services. Because of these marketing efforts, the number of requests for assistance has increased steadily.

The SBAO has collected information on incoming calls to assess the effectiveness of different marketing strategies. A summary of incoming calls and their relationship to different marketing strategies is highlighted in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: SBAO MARKETING AND COMPLIANCE ASSISTANCE REQUESTS

Percentage of Total Calls Received Given Various Marketing Methods

Network contacts	30%
Attendance at trade shows, conferences, meetings	
Referrals from small business associations (NFIB, SBDC, Chamber of Commerce)	
Referrals from trade associations, other agencies	
Internal Ohio EPA referrals	27%
Direct Mail	14%
SBAO newsletters, brochures	
Secretary of State (new businesses) mailing	
New hazardous waste notifier mailings	
Media	20%
Newspapers, trade journals, small business journals	
Radio spots, yellow pages, Internet web site	
Unknown	7%
Other	2%

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

SBAO Advisory Committee

External stakeholder involvement is another key element in ensuring that effective and useful services are provided to our small business community. In 1996, the SBAO created an advisory committee to assist in program planning and evaluation. Since first meeting in June 1996 the committee has assisted the SBAO in establishing contacts with various trade associations. The committee also evaluates the SBAO's marketing techniques and peer reviews the SBAO's guidance documents and newsletters. Advisory committee members provide an important small business perspective to the SBAO in its program planning activities.

Currently, the voluntary committee includes three small business owners, two trade association representatives and Ohio EPA staff. The committee met in June, September, October and December of 1996 and will meet bimonthly in 1997. In 1997 the SBAO is considering expanding the committee to include a few additional small business representatives from other industry sectors.

Other Partnerships

The SBAO's efforts in 1996 included establishing stronger working relationships with other agencies and organizations that communicate with small businesses. Often, small businesses are coming to these other agencies for additional resources (finance, business planning, etc.). By receiving referrals from these agencies, the SBAO has been able to help many new businesses get on the right course for environmental compliance. Working with these associations and strengthening partnerships will be an objective for 1997.

Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, Small Business Development Center
Ohio Chamber of Commerce
Ohio Minority Business Contractors Association
WSOS Community Action Commission
Ohio State University, Small Business Extension Center
Other State Agencies (Dept. of Dev., Public Utilities Comm., State Fire Marshal)

MEASUREMENT AND CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Through its advisory committee, contact with other associations and direct dialogue with small business owners, the SBAO is continuously seeking opinions on its services and the compliance needs of small business. Each small business owner using the services of the SBAO is given a Customer Satisfaction Survey Card that can be returned to the office anonymously. A short survey of all small businesses who have used the SBAO's services during the year resulted in some encouraging feedback as shown below.

**FIGURE 6: SMALL BUSINESSES USING THE SBAO
SURVEY RESULTS**

*Percentage of Survey Respondents**

Finding information provided to them helpful	100%
Receiving information in a timely manner	100%
Finding SBAO staff courteous	100%
Who would call the office again if they had other questions	100%
Would recommend the office to other small businesses	100%

* Survey cards mailed to 69 small businesses, 30 returned. Response rate = 43.4%

FUTURE GOALS

Small business owners have multiple priorities and limited resources to devote to environmental compliance. Throughout the coming year, the SBAO will continue to seek out ways to help small businesses stay aware of and comply with the changing environmental regulations. To this end, major objectives for 1997 include:

- Assisting Ohio EPA divisions in developing more fact sheets and guidance documents that are specifically targeted at small businesses.
- Having a greater role in providing a small business perspective to Ohio EPA on rule/guidance development and program planning issues.
- Increasing accessibility of agency fact sheets and guidance documents to small businesses through direct distribution and establishing an information fax-back service.
- Continuing marketing efforts to increase the number of incoming calls to the SBAO and to increase the number of on-site compliance assistance requests.
- Continued networking with small business associations and other agencies to help identify and respond to compliance needs.

It also is hoped that continued successes demonstrated by the pilot project during 1997 will be the catalyst for expanding the program to ensure that technical resources are available to small businesses statewide.