

We Can Process the Data — But We Still Own the Decision

Over the past few years, we have added more technology to our operations than at any other time. Data systems, automated reporting, and now AI tools that can pull together and summarize information almost instantly. What used to take days can now be done in minutes. On paper, it looks like progress. And in many ways, it is.

But sitting in the control room—or reviewing a report before it goes out—something feels different than what you would expect. *We are clearly moving faster, but not necessarily with greater certainty.*

The data systems, reporting tools, and AI summaries do a good job of telling us what is happening. They can pull together operating data, emissions trends, and historical patterns in seconds.

Internal reviews move faster. Data requests can be answered more quickly. What used to take a coordinated effort across teams can now be handled in a much more streamlined way. In many ways, the mechanics of compliance—and the regulatory review process that supports it—have become more efficient.

But the underlying question has not changed: What does the information actually mean?

Is this within the intent of the permit?

Is this how it would be interpreted in a regulatory review?

Is this a one-time condition, or the start of something we need to address?

Those are not questions the system answers.

Those are still decisions businesses have to make.

There is also a subtle shift that comes with all of this.

When data was harder to gather, we spent more time understanding how it was built. We knew where the numbers came from, what assumptions were behind them, and where the gaps might lie. Now, the process is streamlined. Cleaner. Faster. Easier to use. But it also creates distance.

We see the output more than the inputs. We trust the summary more than the process behind it. And that works—right up until it does not. From a regulatory standpoint, that distinction matters. A report can be technically correct and still raise questions.

A trend can look stable and still reflect something that has drifted from original assumptions—changes in production rates, raw materials, or operating schedules that may not immediately stand out in a summary report.

A system can show “within limits” and still leave you wondering how it would hold up under scrutiny. Because at the end of the day, the system is not the one answering those questions. The responsibility still rests with the business.

Technology does not carry responsibility.

- ▶ It can organize information.
- ▶ It can highlight what looks unusual.
- ▶ It can even suggest what might need attention.

But it does not:

- ▶ sign the submittal,
- ▶ respond to the agency, or
- ▶ explain decisions when they are challenged.

That responsibility has not shifted.

If anything, it has become more visible.

So the question is not whether these tools are useful.

They are.

The process has improved. The tools are better. The speed is undeniable. But the outcome still depends on how that information is interpreted—and that has not been automated. We can process the data faster than ever. *But the decision hasn't gotten any easier, and the responsibility still rests with the business. ♦*