

CONVENTION FOR ASSIGNING SIGNIFICANCE RATINGS TO IMPACTS

Specialists will consider ten rating scales when assessing potential impacts. These include:

- Extent of impact;
- Duration of impact;
- Intensity of impact;
- Significance of impact;
- Status of impact;
- Probability of impact occurring;
- Degree to which impact can be mitigated;
- Degree to which a resource is lost;
- Reversibility of impact; and
- Degree of confidence of assessment.

In assigning significance ratings to potential impacts before and after mitigation specialists are instructed to follow the approach presented below:

1. The core criteria for determining significance ratings are “extent” (Section 1.1), “duration” (Section 1.2) and “intensity” (Section 1.3). The preliminary significance ratings for combinations of these three criteria are given in Section 1.4.
2. Additional criteria to be considered, which could “increase” the significance rating if deemed justified by the specialist, with motivation, are the following:
 - Permanent / irreversible impacts (as distinct from long-term, reversible impacts);
 - Potentially substantial cumulative effects (see Item 9 below); and
 - High level of risk or uncertainty, with potentially substantial negative consequences.
3. Additional criteria to be considered, which could “decrease” the significance rating if deemed justified by the specialist, with motivation, is the following:
 - Improbable impact, where confidence level in prediction is high.
4. The status of an impact is used to describe whether the impact will have a negative, positive or neutral effect on the surrounding environment. An impact may therefore be negative, positive (or referred to as a benefit) or neutral (Section 1.5).
5. Describe the impact in terms of the probability of the impact occurring (Section 1.6) and the degree of confidence in the impact predictions, based on the availability of information and specialist knowledge (Section 1.7).
6. Describe the degree to which a resource is impacted (Section 1.8).
7. When assigning significance ratings to impacts *after mitigation*, the specialist needs to:
 - First, consider probable changes in intensity, extent and duration of the impact after mitigation, assuming effective implementation of mitigation measures, leading to a revised significance rating; and
 - Then moderate the significance rating after taking into account the likelihood of proposed mitigation measures being effectively implemented. Consider:
 - Any potentially significant risks or uncertainties associated with the effectiveness of mitigation measures;
 - The technical and financial ability of the proponent to implement the measure; and
 - The commitment of the proponent to implementing the measure, or guarantee over time that the measures would be implemented.
8. Describe the degree to which an impact can be mitigated or enhanced (Section 1.9) and reversed (Section 1.10).

9. The cumulative impacts of a project should also be considered. "Cumulative impacts" refer to the impact of an activity that may become significant when added to the existing activities currently taking place within the surrounding environment.
10. Where applicable, assess the degree to which an impact may cause irreplaceable loss of a resource. A resource assists in the functioning of human or natural systems, i.e. specific vegetation, minerals, water, agricultural land, etc.

The significance ratings are based on largely objective criteria and inform decision-making at a project level as opposed to a local community level. In some instances, therefore, whilst the significance rating of potential impacts might be "low" or "very low", the importance of these impacts to local communities or individuals might be extremely high. The importance which I&APs attach to impacts must be taken into consideration, and recommendations should be made as to ways of avoiding or minimising these negative impacts through project design, selection of appropriate alternatives and / or management.

The relationship between the significance ratings and decision-making can be broadly defined as follows:

Significance rating	Effect on decision-making
INSIGNIFICANT; VERY LOW; LOW	Will not have an influence on the decision to proceed with the proposed project, provided that recommended measures to mitigate negative impacts are implemented.
MEDIUM	Should influence the decision to proceed with the proposed project, provided that recommended measures to mitigate negative impacts are implemented.
HIGH; VERY HIGH	Would strongly influence the decision to proceed with the proposed project.

1.1 EXTENT

"Extent" defines the physical extent or spatial scale of the impact.

Rating	Description
LOCAL	Extending only as far as the activity, limited to the site and its immediate surroundings. Specialist studies to specify extent.
REGIONAL	South-West Coast. Specialist studies to specify extent.
NATIONAL	South Africa
INTERNATIONAL	

1.2 DURATION

"Duration" gives an indication of how long the impact would occur.

Rating	Description
SHORT TERM	0 - 5 years
MEDIUM TERM	6 - 15 years
LONG TERM	Where the impact will cease after the operational life of the activity, either because of natural processes or by human intervention.
PERMANENT	Where mitigation either by natural processes or by human intervention will not occur in such a way or in such time span that the impact can be considered transient.

1.3 INTENSITY

“Intensity” establishes whether the impact would be destructive or benign.

Rating	Description
ZERO TO VERY LOW	Where the impact affects the environment in such a way that natural, cultural and social functions and processes are not affected.
LOW	Where the impact affects the environment in such a way that natural, cultural and social functions and processes continue, albeit in a slightly modified way.
MEDIUM	Where the affected environment is altered, but natural, cultural and social functions and processes continue, albeit in a modified way.
HIGH	Where natural, cultural and social functions or processes are altered to the extent that it will temporarily or permanently cease.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE

“Significance” attempts to evaluate the importance of a particular impact, and in doing so incorporates the above three scales (i.e. extent, duration and intensity).

Rating	Description
VERY HIGH	Impacts could be EITHER: of high intensity at a regional level and endure in the long term ; OR of high intensity at a national level in the medium term ; OR of medium intensity at a national level in the long term .
HIGH	Impacts could be EITHER: of high intensity at a regional level and endure in the medium term ; OR of high intensity at a national level in the short term ; OR of medium intensity at a national level in the medium term ; OR of low intensity at a national level in the long term ; OR of high intensity at a local level in the long term ; OR of medium intensity at a regional level in the long term .
MEDIUM	Impacts could be EITHER: of high intensity at a local level and endure in the medium term ; OR of medium intensity at a regional level in the medium term ; OR of high intensity at a regional level in the short term ; OR of medium intensity at a national level in the short term ; OR of medium intensity at a local level in the long term ; OR of low intensity at a national level in the medium term ; OR of low intensity at a regional level in the long term .
LOW	Impacts could be EITHER of low intensity at a regional level and endure in the medium term ; OR of low intensity at a national level in the short term ; OR of high intensity at a local level and endure in the short term ; OR of medium intensity at a regional level in the short term ; OR of low intensity at a local level in the long term ; OR of medium intensity at a local level and endure in the medium term .
VERY LOW	Impacts could be EITHER of low intensity at a local level and endure in the medium term ; OR of low intensity at a regional level and endure in the short term ; OR of low to medium intensity at a local level and endure in the short term .
INSIGNIFICANT	Impacts with: Zero to very low intensity with any combination of extent and duration.
UNKNOWN	In certain cases it may not be possible to determine the significance of an impact.

Note: For any impact that is considered to be “Permanent” apply the “Long-Term” rating.

1.5 STATUS OF IMPACT

The status of an impact is used to describe whether the impact would have a negative, positive or zero effect on the affected environment. An impact may therefore be negative, positive (or referred to as a benefit) or neutral.

1.6 PROBABILITY

“Probability” describes the likelihood of the impact occurring.

Rating	Description
IMPROBABLE	Where the possibility of the impact to materialise is very low either because of design or historic experience.
PROBABLE	Where there is a distinct possibility that the impact will occur.
HIGHLY PROBABLE	Where it is most likely that the impact will occur.
DEFINITE	Where the impact will occur regardless of any prevention measures.

1.7 DEGREE OF CONFIDENCE

This indicates the degree of confidence in the impact predictions, based on the availability of information and specialist knowledge.

Rating	Description
HIGH	Greater than 70% sure of impact prediction.
MEDIUM	Between 35% and 70% sure of impact prediction.
LOW	Less than 35% sure of impact prediction.

1.8 LOSS OF RESOURCES

“Loss of resource” refers to the degree to which a resource is permanently affected by the activity, i.e. the degree to which a resource is irreplaceable.

Rating	Description
LOW	Where the activity results in a loss of a particular resource but where the natural, cultural and social functions and processes are not affected.
MEDIUM	Where the loss of a resource occurs, but natural, cultural and social functions and processes continue, albeit in a modified way.
HIGH	Where the activity results in an irreplaceable loss of a resource.

1.9 DEGREE TO WHICH IMPACT CAN BE MITIGATED

This indicates the degree to which an impact can be reduced / enhanced.

Rating	Description
NONE	No change in impact after mitigation.
VERY LOW	Where the significance rating stays the same, but where mitigation will reduce the intensity of the impact.
LOW	Where the significance rating drops by one level, after mitigation.
MEDIUM	Where the significance rating drops by two to three levels, after mitigation.
HIGH	Where the significance rating drops by more than three levels, after mitigation.

1.10 REVERSIBILITY OF AN IMPACT

This refers to the degree to which an impact can be reversed.

Rating	Description
IRREVERSIBLE	Where the impact is permanent.
PARTIALLY REVERSIBLE	Where the impact can be partially reversed.
FULLY REVERSIBLE	Where the impact can be completely reversed.