

Dr. Richard Beck

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By Michael J. Keegan

Measuring Performance to Inform Management Decisions at Interior

Good government must achieve results. This underscores the critical importance of performance and accountability in government management, which is based on the belief that government should be accountable to its citizens. With the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, the U.S. Congress placed greater emphasis on outcomes and results by directing all federal agencies to engage in strategic planning, setting goals, and measuring performance. Through systematic performance planning, measurement, and reporting, GPRA sought to strengthen federal decision making and accountability. “Its emphasis is not just on having a plan and doing the performance assessment against that plan, but looking at outcomes—outcomes in terms of results,” declares Dr. Richard Beck, director, Office of Planning and Performance Management at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Beck leads an office within the Department of the Interior that provides leadership, guidance, and consulting services to the department and its bureaus on strategic planning, performance management, and organizational effectiveness.

He does this for a department that is the nation’s principal conservation agency, with a direct appropriation budget of around \$16 billion, over 70,000 employees, and responsibility for managing one out of five acres in the United States. “The department,” Beck describes, “is kind of the capstone amongst nine bureaus, ranging from the Fish and Wildlife Service to the National Park Service to the Bureau of Land Management to the Bureau of Reclamation.” Interior’s responsibilities are expanding as the nation looks to its public lands for energy, water, wildlife protection, recreation, and enhanced security.

Such an expansive mission requires a strategic plan that links the department’s mission to each activity and program. According to Beck, Interior’s strategic plan has four main mission areas: resource protection, resource use, recreation, and serving communities. “We start to work through end-outcome goals: What does it mean for resource protection, protecting

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Environmental Satellites Program Manager, NASA
- Director, Office of Earth Science Business Division, NASA
- Director, Resources Management Division, NASA

land, or protecting the wildlife?” says Beck. He continues: “One of the challenges is still to get folks to focus on: What’s the outcome? What’s the result? Trying to define results for a government agency [is] very challenging.” Management excellence is an enabling goal to ensure that “we’re [meeting] our programmatic results—to have effective business processes and practices across the board,” explains Beck. This goal provides the enabling framework for accomplishing Interior’s mission. There’s a focus on the efficient use and careful management of tightening resources. Beck admits that only by effectively measuring results can the department adjust its tactics and strategies to meet its goal of management excellence.

Over the last seven years, the President’s Management Agenda (PMA) has been the strategy for improving management within federal agencies, with its clear focus on performance and results. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) evaluated agencies for improvement in such areas as human capital, financial performance, competitive sourcing (or commercial services management), e-government, performance improvement, and real property. OMB has used an Executive Branch Management Scorecard to monitor agencies’ status and progress on the PMA. “The scorecard,” says Beck, “has really helped [to] crystallize what we’re trying to do. It gives you a road map as far as what you want to achieve—a framework of what you need to improve.”

Along with the scorecard, the department and its bureaus have performed program evaluations to assess performance. The information derived from these evaluations is used in



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planning and performance management activities. OMB’s Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) was developed to assess and improve a program’s impact on outcomes that matter to the public. “What’s been beneficial about PART [was it revealed] that there were some programs that didn’t have performance measures at the program level,” says Beck. “PART identified those programs.” It permits one “to step back from your day-by-day and make sure you have some idea of where you’ve been, how well you’re doing, and where you’re going—PART helped put that in place.” Of the 70 Interior programs that have undergone PART evaluation, only 15 received a “results not demonstrated” rating. The remaining programs have received a rating of some level of effectiveness. “There used to be a much higher percentage when we first started—[we’ve] progressed over these years,” notes Beck.

According to Beck, this focus on performance has led to more accountability and enhanced program outcomes and results. “We have programs that now can track what they are doing and a way to describe it: where they’re going, what they’ve done, what they’re trying to achieve. I think that makes them more accountable.”

Interior has also tried to better link cost with performance. It has implemented activity-based costing in an attempt to track, manage, and link costs to performance. “The extent that we can relate performance and costs, I think [we] become more informative and [we] start to help decision making.” To illustrate, Interior manages the Chickasaw National Park, where it houses endangered species that have specific dietary needs—mice. As a result, the department began raising feeder mice. When the managers received better cost information about spending, the department challenged them to think about their mission: what was their business and how were they spending funds. They realized they were spending too much to raise mice to feed these endangered animals. Feeder mice could be bought cheaper from pet stores. They stopped raising mice, reduced costs, and redirected that savings to improve the quality and quantity of the wilderness trails.

To institutionalize progress around performance management and to foster continued transparency and access to

government information, the Bush administration issued Presidential Executive Order 13450, entitled “Improving Government Program Performance.” “This is codifying the importance of looking at performance, evaluating performance, demonstrating performance, and using it as part of your planning process,” says Beck. The order also creates a point person within agencies responsible for program performance. “You want somebody in the organization to basically spearhead what’s going on across the agency, as large as it is, and make sure efforts are coming together—that’s the performance improvement officer (PIO),” notes Beck. The PIO looks at how planning and performance are being used across a department. Currently, Beck acts as deputy PIO for Interior. The order also formalizes the Performance Improvement Council, which is a government-wide council focusing on performance management within government.

According to Beck, “performance management is very introspective: You can see how well you’re doing and how you are achieving. You can also use it to inform the public and Congress. It’s not so much about targets being met or not met, but understanding why and what to do about it.” It requires being more strategic about the data, how it is constructed and brought to decision makers so it’s useful. He points out that “this is a different way of thinking and looking at performance. We have to help folks understand it’s not necessarily a bad thing if your results aren’t what you want them to be—use that in a constructive way.” ●

To learn more about the Department of the Interior’s Office of Planning and Performance Management, go to www.doi.gov/ppp/.



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