

The Presidential Statement of Policy

RPA requires that, along with the RPA Assessment and Program, the President transmit to Congress a 'detailed Statement of Policy intended to be used in framing budget requests by that Administration for Forest Service activities' for the 5-year program period. In essence, this was an attempt to gain Administration commitment to the recommended program, a necessary condition of effective strategic planning. The President is to "carry out programs already established by law in accordance with such Statement of Policy or any subsequent amendment or modification thereof approved by the Congress." Either the House or Senate can disapprove of the Statement by resolution and/or revise or modify it if they so choose. The revised or modified Statement of Policy is then to be used in framing future budget requests. Since RPA was enacted, three Presidential Statements of Policy have been transmitted to Congress: the 1975 Statement signed by Gerald Ford (30); the 1980 Statement signed by Jimmy Carter (16); and the 1985 Statement signed by Ronald Reagan (81).

The Act states that the Statement of Policy is to be used in framing budget requests for Forest Service activities. If the budget request does not conform to the Statement, the President "shall specifically set forth the reason or reasons for requesting the Congress to approve the lesser programs or policies presented.'

The Presidential Statement of Policy has been a controversial requirement in the RPA process. This is due, in part, to concerns at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) about the President's need for flexibility in responding to shifting budget needs and priorities (85). OMB did not like the accountability implied by the signing of a Statement of Policy laying out the President's commitment to a 5-year Program, and recommended in 1974 that the legislation be vetoed by then-President Nixon (84, 85). Although President Ford chose to disregard OMB recommendation and sign RPA into law, he noted that:

I would be less than candid if I did not admit that certain provisions of this act disturb me, especially those provisions relating to Presidential discretion in formulating annual budget requests for our national forestry programs (29).

In the 1975 Statement of Policy, President Ford acknowledged problems encountered in preparing the Program, including the lack of adequate and accurate data and the difficulty of determining the relative priority of competing uses. He declared that his policy would be to implement the goals recommended in the 1975 Assessment 'in accord with two basic principles— maximizing the Federal budget's contribution to the Nation's welfare and minimizing Government interference with the normal operation of the market' (30). The recommended 1975 RPA Program goals were to:

1. increase supply of outdoor recreation opportunities;
2. provide a moderate increase in wilderness;
3. provide for species diversity;
4. provide forage without impairing land productivity;
5. increase timber supplies and quality in an environmentally sound manner;
6. meet minimum air and water quality standards; and
7. increase emphasis on involvement in discrete human and community development efforts that complement Forest Service activities.

As stated in the law, the Presidential Statement may be revised or modified by Congress. Among the three statements transmitted to date, only the 1980 Statement by President Carter was rejected by Congress. The objections to this statement centered on: 1) its failure "to send Congress a preferred program of work rather than a range of options" to assist Congress in forming future environmentally and socially sound budgets (64); and 2) the limited budget choices: the high-bound alternative in which the annual rate of program growth had been reduced from 6.7 to 4.9 percent or the low-bound alternative in which the annual growth rate was 3.2 percent (84). Neither of the budget alternatives described the effects of the recommended budgets on the condition of the resources, nor did they assess the long-term impact on goals.

After rejecting the 1980 Statement of Policy, the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Environment, Soil Conservation, and Forestry prepared a "white

paper” to further explain congressional opposition (64). The subcommittee generally accepted the high-bound alternative, with amendments calling for forest productivity to be at 90 percent of the land’s potential by 2030, and for forage-producing rangeland to be at 85 percent of potential by 2000.

Several hearings were held to obtain public comment on the 1979 Assessment, 1980 Program, and 1980 Statement of Policy. At one, Dennis LeMaster, chair of the Department of Forest and Range Management at Washington State University, recommended that, if no accord could be reached between the Congress and the executive branch, the Act be revised to provide for congressional responsibility for the Statement of Policy (9). Other witnesses at the hearings also expressed dissatisfaction with the 1980 Statement of Policy and their agreement with the subcommittee’s white paper. On December 12, 1980, the Appropriations Act for the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies (Public Law 96-514) was signed into law containing a revised Statement of Policy. The revised statement put forth the ideas included in the white paper, stating that Congress generally accepted the high-bound Program, but cautioned that even this budget level might not be sufficient to accomplish the goals of the revised Statement of Policy, particularly in the areas of range and watershed resources, State and private forest cooperation, and timber management.

The 1985 Statement of Policy, signed by President Reagan, was submitted in September 1986, 18 months after the due date designated in RPA. It emphasized: 1) the need for judicious review of our choices and decisions regarding the short- and long-term planning of our renewable resources, and 2) acceptance of the 1985 Recommended RPA Program, because “it identifies a reasonable range of management directions, outputs, costs, and goals for the long-term future” (81). Lyons and Knowles (58) criticized this Statement for not providing specific objectives for Forest Service activities and for not offering guidance for the development of budget requests for the remainder of the Program

period. They further stated that, “In fact, the objective of the low-bound element of the 1985 RPA Program—to defer investments in Forest Service programs in the short run—is essentially similar to the direction provided by the low-bound of the 1980 RPA Program that was rejected by the Congress” (58). Congress did not respond with a revised or modified Statement of Policy within the 90 days specified in section 8(a) of the RPA, and thus the Presidential Statement from Reagan became the guidance to be used by the Forest Service in framing budget requests. Congress might not have responded because the delivery was late in the second session of the 99th Congress, when Congress was rushing toward adjournment, but it may also demonstrate a lack of congressional attention and commitment to the process.

In sum, the Presidential Statement of Policy has failed to provide real guidance for framing budget requests for Forest Service activities. Critics of this provision, including OMB and the President, claim that the Statement of Policy commits the President to a 5-year budget, and restricts needed flexibility. The three Presidential Statements transmitted to date have been general proclamations of anticipated needs without any real commitments to Forest Service direction or sufficient information to guide budget requests for Forest Service programs. To increase the effectiveness of this RPA requirement it may be necessary to further assure OMB and the President that the Statement is not a 5-year budget commitment, but rather will be used to inform and guide the annual budget process only. Deviations from the direction set forth in the Statement are permitted as long as the President publicly explains the changes. Alternatively, the Statement of Policy could be restructured to try to increase the Administration’s commitment to the RPA process. However, if OMB and the President are unwilling to be held accountable in this way, the Statement serves no real purpose and could be eliminated from the RPA requirements.