

Policy Options: CPR for the RPA

RPA established a long-term planning process for the Forest Service to help direct the course of forest and rangeland management in the United States. Congress intended the process to include public participation in setting strategic direction for Forest Service activities. The Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to prepare: 1) an Assessment of forest and rangeland conditions, of renewable resource supply and demand, and of the opportunities to achieve desired future conditions, every 10 years; 2) a Program, which examines resource needs and opportunities and sets the direction for Forest Service activities, every 5 years; and 3) an Annual Report, which evaluates agency activities and implementation of the RPA Program. By regulation, the Secretary has directed the Forest Service to prepare these documents, but they remain the Secretary's responsibility. The Assessment and Program are transmitted to Congress, together with a Presidential Statement of Policy for use in framing Forest Service budget requests. The Annual Report is submitted to Congress with the annual budget request.

Past Assessments and Programs have not been well received by Congress. Congress has praised the Assessments for presenting substantial information, but has criticized them for lacking essential data and analyses. Congress has broadly condemned the Programs for not providing real direction for the Forest Service nor assisting Congress and the public in making policy and budget decisions. The Statements of Policy have been so brief and general as to be useless. And, the Annual Report has been described as the weakest link in the RPA process, because it has been unrelated to the data and analyses in the Assessment and Program.

Several congressional committees have held hearings on the 1975, 1980, and 1985 RPA Programs, and interested individuals and groups have similarly reviewed the RPA documents. In 1980, Congress revised the Statement of Policy, as allowed under RPA, to specify the direction for Forest Service activities, although Congress did not follow through in subsequent appropriations. In 1986, because of the 18-month delay in releasing the 1985 Program and the general uselessness of the Program for budget decisions, Congress restricted the appro-

priations available for preparing the RPA documents. Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that the process is such a waste of time and money that it ought to be repealed, although others have argued that the process has merit even though the documents have been inadequate.

MAJOR FINDING

In enacting RPA, Congress intended a *strategic planning* process to assure protection and sustainable use of the renewable resources on all forests and rangelands. Strategic planning establishes a long-term framework for management and decisionmaking. It begins with an evaluation of the current conditions, and then defines the desired direction. Strategic planning requires commitment from top management, and relies on frequent feedback to determine if the desired direction is being followed. With the Assessment for analysis of current conditions, the Program for direction, the Statement of Policy for commitment, and the Annual Report for feedback, Congress clearly intended a process that parallels strategic planning.

To date, the RPA process has not met this intent. Even in the private sector, strategic planning is sometimes not successful, and government agencies have additional, inherent difficulties: they cannot redefine their mission; they cannot easily limit the issues that must be addressed; they cannot control all relevant inputs, especially budgets. RPA planning has been subject to all these difficulties, and thus has been under scrutiny for its failure as a strategic planning process. In particular, the Program and Statement of Policy have provided little guidance for policy and program decisions or for budget formulation, and the Annual Report has supplied poor evaluation of agency performance and RPA Program implementation.

If Congress concludes that Forest Service strategic planning under RPA is inappropriate or impossible, the requirement for the RPA Program could be modified to provide other useful information. For example, the RPA Program could be required to aggregate the land and resource management plans for each national forest, that have been prepared with enormous investments of time and money to balance

resource capabilities and local concerns. The Program could then analyze the direction in which these plans are leading the national forests and evaluate the implications of such direction. Alternatively, Congress could direct the Forest Service to continue its present course of developing initiatives, such as the National Recreation Strategy, which address specific issues or opportunities. This approach would need flexibility in implementation, so a Program at 5-year intervals would probably be inappropriate. Congress could restructure RPA to provide for special initiatives as an additional chapter in the Annual Report or as periodic reports to Congress.

Despite the difficulties inherent in strategic planning, OTA finds that retaining the strategic nature of the RPA Program is both desirable and feasible.

RPA was enacted in 1974 because of concerns about growing work backlogs and fears of budget-driven shortsightedness. The limited available evidence suggests that the backlogs remain, while budget deficits have led to continual efforts to reduce Federal spending. Thus, the reasons for enacting RPA remain valid. Strategic planning is undertaken for many reasons—to set organizational direction, to identify and understand changing demands, to analyze opportunities, to provide a foundation for program and budget decisions. Decisionmakers in the Administration and Congress need information on opportunities and issues, on direction and priorities; therefore, a strategic RPA planning process is still *desirable*.

A strategic planning process is also *feasible*. A comprehensive picture of resource conditions establishes a common base for discussing the desired future, and an analysis of opportunities provides a comparison of possibilities. With input from the Administration, Congress, and the public on important issues and desired direction, the Forest Service could develop an acceptable strategic plan to set general direction and to assist those who must decide on budget and program priorities. Having an acceptable strategic plan will not solve all dilemmas, because the Forest Service cannot control all the relevant issues and inputs. Implementation requires commitment from all key decisionmakers (i.e., the

Administration and Congress). Nonetheless, an acceptable strategic plan can help decisionmakers make choices that provide for people's needs while protecting the resources.

The Draft 1990 RPA Program takes several steps in this direction, and is undoubtedly the best effort under RPA so far to provide strategic planning, but it still has a number of shortcomings as a strategic plan.¹ The examination of Forest Service roles is an admirable attempt to define the agency's goals and objectives, although the discussion of future roles is generally limited to doing more of what is already being done. Identifying resource issues also contributes to the strategic nature of the 1990 Draft, but the agency responses summarize past and current choices, rather than exploring new ways to address the issues. The initiatives described in the Draft Program provide clear direction for agency action in certain key areas, but are separate from alternative strategies, rather than a part of the strategic plan.

By addressing several specific problems, Congress could improve the strategic nature of the RPA process. With some modifications, RPA planning could set direction for Forest Service programs, policies, and budgets, leading to better forest and rangeland management and to stronger support from the Forest Service, the Administration, Congress, and the public.

PROBLEMS IN STRATEGIC RPA PLANNING

Three areas stand out where strategic RPA planning could be improved by modifying the process: *data, analysis, and direction*. Some of the problems result from inadequate efforts by the Forest Service, others from insufficient attention within the Administration, and still others from the lack of congressional response or follow-through. It is not the purpose of this report to point fingers at the cause of problems, but to identify options for making the process work more effectively.

Data Problems

The RPA documents contain a wealth of data and analysis, especially on timber resources, that have contributed to public debates about the future of the Nation's renewable forest and rangeland resources.

¹The Final 1990 RPA Program was not available for the preparation of this report. While the Final is likely to vary substantially from the Draft, this analysis examines the RPA process as strategic planning, and should prove useful for evaluating the Final 1990 RPA Program.

However, many gaps still exist. Some relevant data on resource quantity, quality, and outputs are missing, and some are of poor quality. In addition, data used in the RPA documents are poorly linked. Resource information describing the current situation and assessing opportunities (in the Assessment) often differs from that used to set strategic direction (in the Program), and both may differ from that used to evaluate agency performance and RPA implementation (in the Annual Report).

Having better data will not “fix” RPA planning. Strategic planning, particularly by a government agency, is an inherently political process, because the choices are about future directions, and better data will not tell us what should be. However, better data can tell us what is, reducing the debate about current conditions. For example, many groups oppose timber sales because of potential damage to watersheds, although foresters point to evidence that timber can be cut without such damage. If watershed condition data were sufficient to track changing conditions, the impact of harvesting timber could be shown. If no damage was occurring, the debate would be quieted, but if damage was shown, then cutting would probably be reduced or modified. Thus, having accurate data on renewable resource conditions and outputs can reduce debates about what is, and can refocus them on what the future should be.

Incomplete and Weak Data

Congress enacted RPA in part because of concerns that resource needs and opportunities were being short-changed by annual budget decisions, and that backlogs of needed treatments were growing. To address these concerns, RPA requires an inventory of resources and an evaluation of opportunities. A resource inventory is most useful if it provides sufficient data on the quantity, quality, and outputs of each resource to analyze opportunities for increasing quantity, improving quality, or expanding outputs. However, data for many resources are incomplete, with information on resource quality frequently lacking. In addition, many measures of resource conditions rely on surrogates or professional judgments which are questionable for estimating quantity or quality. The incomplete and weak data on renewable resources limit the evaluation of resource needs and opportunities and the ability to identify responses.

While the Forest Service may be partly to blame for the data problems, it is not solely a Forest Service failure. The Forest Service has limited authority and responsibility for some resources, such as water and wildlife, and is not the principal Federal agency for managing others, such as range forage, although the Forest Service could help to coordinate data collection on renewable resources. In addition, insufficient research and inventory funding have hampered the agency's ability to develop adequate databases for all renewable resources.

Option: Direct a study to identify renewable resource data needs.

Congress could direct the National Academy of Sciences to undertake a study of the resource quantity and quality data needed for strategic planning, and the cost to obtain and maintain the appropriate data. **Congress could then appropriate sufficient funds to complete the inventories and maintain the databases, and could assure the databases are maintained through periodic oversight hearings and/or reviews by the General Accounting Office.**

An independent study could identify the appropriate renewable resource data for guiding Forest Service strategic planning. Such a study would need to assess: 1) data required for evaluating resource quantity, and quality, including trends; 2) inventory methods, frequency, and intensity; and 3) implementation costs. If the Forest Service is to meet its charge for periodically assessing renewable resources, Congress must follow through with the funding to develop and maintain the appropriate resource inventories.

The primary advantage of such a study is having an independent view of resource data needs. The Forest Service conducts periodic forest inventories, but focuses on timber quantity and quality. The agency's limited responsibility for some resources further narrows their view, although the 1989 Water Assessment displays reasonable effective use of secondary data. In addition, inventories would compete for funding against activities that the agency may see as having greater needs. Finally, the agency's professionalism and traditional focus on outputs might prevent the Forest Service from recognizing the limitations of professional judgments and resource outputs as measures for assessing resource conditions. Thus, an independent re-

view by an outside entity, such as the National Academy of Sciences or perhaps the Council on Environmental Quality, would be appropriate.

One disadvantage of an independent study is that it may duplicate other efforts. The Forest Service is working to improve the Assessment, and has been successful in some areas, most notably in the 1989 analysis of water resources. The Forest Service has been researching inventory methods, and the traditional forest survey has been expanded to include additional information for some States. Thus, the Assessments will probably continue to improve over time. Furthermore, a separate study would have costs of its own.

Another aspect of congressional direction for an independent study is the implicit commitment to act on the findings. To require and fund such a study and then not respond to its recommendations would indicate a lack of congressional commitment to making the RPA process work. It would also highlight Congress' lack of interest in the quality of the Assessment. Despite numerous congressional hearings and GAO studies on the RPA process, none have focused on the quality and the limitations of the Assessments.

Poor Data Linkage Among RPA Documents

The resource data in the Assessment, Program, and Annual Report often differ. For example, the 1989 RPA Assessment includes data on ecological status of rangeland, and on timber growth and mortality, but such information is lacking in the Program and the Annual Report. The Draft 1990 RPA Program is replete with data not included in the Assessment or in the Annual Report, such as substandard recreation use, the backlog of facility and trail maintenance, noxious weed infestations on rangelands, acres clearcut, acres of old-growth forests, commercial salmon and steelhead harvests, and acres of big game winter range. Finally, the Annual Report contains substantial data that are not included in the Program or the Assessment: the number of grazing allotments, the number of allotments under improved management, and the acres suitable for grazing; structural and nonstructural range improvements; timber stand improvement needs; acres of watershed improvements; number and acres of wildlife and fish habitat improvements; and the total road mileage and the mileage maintained for various levels of use. A further difference among the documents is that the Program and

Annual Report only provide information on National Forest System lands, whereas the Assessment reports on all forests and rangelands, and only occasionally distinguishes resources on National Forest System lands.

Option: Require data linkage among RPA documents.

Congress could require the Forest Service to use the same resource output and condition measures in all RPA documents: the Assessment would contain the databases for evaluating Program alternatives, and the Annual Report would evaluate the outputs and changes in resource condition for the measures used in the Assessment and Program.

Congress could require the use of consistent measures of resource quantity, quality, and outputs for the various RPA documents. The Assessment would need to contain only those data essential for decisionmaking (including decisions about cooperative assistance), except perhaps to set the context for decisions. For example, if acres of old-growth forests and backlog of trail maintenance are important measures for comparing Program strategies, the current status and trends in such resources and activities for all lands and for National Forest System lands would be contained in the Assessment. The Annual Report could then evaluate the resource outputs and changes in resource quantity and quality with the measures used in the Assessment and Program. This would not mean an annual update of the Assessment, but rather reporting on activities to improve the quality or increase the quantity of a resource, such as the number of watersheds (or acres if that is the appropriate measure) which changed condition class or the reduction in trail maintenance backlog.

Data linkage would enhance the strategic nature of the RPA process. The Assessment would assure that analysts within and outside the Forest Service would have the databases to evaluate and compare proposed strategies for Forest Service activities. Furthermore, if the Assessment contained all important measures for Program strategies, it would likely contain the data for addressing current issues. Finally, the Annual Report would identify where and how the Program is not being fully implemented, and could then explore the reasons—the Program was not feasible, the funding was inadequate or

unbalanced, a hurricane devastated the resource base in one region, etc. The Annual Report could also address resource issues more directly, and thus help in surfacing issues for the next Program.

Data linkage would require better coordination in preparing the various RPA documents, and might require a realignment of internal responsibilities, since the documents are currently prepared by separate units (the Assessment by the Research branch, the Program by the RPA staff, and the Annual Report by the Budget staff). In addition, linking the Assessment, Program, and Annual Report could reduce the Forest Service's discretion in preparing the documents. If, for example, concern over a resource condition (e.g., the acres of old-growth forests) arose during the development of the Program, additional inventory would be required. Thus, Assessment supplements might be necessary to assure that the relevant data are collected on issues identified after the Assessment is completed.

Analysis Problems

RPA placed enormous analytical requirements on the Forest Service. In some areas, the Forest Service has responded admirably. For example, the required supply and demand analyses have improved significantly for all resources, and now fulfill this requirement reasonably well, although further improvements are still possible. However, in other areas, the Forest Service has not met its responsibilities. In particular, the RPA documents have not effectively identified impending threats for forest and rangeland resources, have not evaluated opportunities, and have poorly displayed the benefits and costs of Program activities.

Poor Foresight on Threats

Concerns about the long-run condition of our renewable resources were one impetus for enacting RPA. The analysis of trends in the Assessment and the long time-horizon specified for the program clearly indicate that the RPA process was intended to provide foresight on impending and potential problems for resource management. To date, the RPA Programs have been only partly successful in the early identification of such important issues. For example, the 1980 RPA program included wood for energy (responding to the energy crisis) as an issue, but missed the concerns about herbicide use (despite reporting on such use). The 1985 RPA Program did

not include a discussion of issues, and therefore missed current issues, such as below-cost timber sales and grazing fees, and rising public concerns, such as global climate change and loss of biological diversity. The Draft 1990 RPA Program includes a much more thorough list of issues, but still misses important matters, such as grazing fees, log exports, timber taxation, wilderness management, local regulation of forest practices, and the nature of and changes in resource-dependent communities.

Option: Improve scoping of resource issues.

Congress could require the Forest Service to use public participation in identifying potentially important issues and concerns for future renewable resource management on Federal and non-Federal lands.

RPA implicitly directs scoping of issues by requiring the agency to develop the Program in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The RPA staff held numerous meetings during the development of the Draft 1990 RPA Program and was thus reasonably well-informed about important issues, a condition reflected in the 1990 Draft. Nonetheless, several issues and potential problems that could affect renewable resource management in the future were not identified in the Draft Program. Congress could assure that the Forest Service identifies and addresses such potential problems by explicitly requiring public participation early in the RPA process.

One advantage of early public participation is assuring that relevant data and analyses are included in the Assessment and then addressed in the Program. Because of the diversity of interests, the public is likely to be an effective source for identifying potential issues and problems. In addition, early participation can help build public support for the findings and responses. Thus, interacting with the public throughout the RPA process could increase the agency's responsiveness to the public and the public's support for the Program.

There are two disadvantages of required early public participation in the RPA process. First, public participation is expensive and time-consuming. More importantly, addressing potential difficulties can result in premature actions to thwart "problems" that might not occur. The Sagebrush Rebellion, for example, seemed to be a major issue in

1980, but faded away before the 1985 RPA Program was developed. Thus, addressing all possible problems could lead to wasted time and energy.

Lack of Opportunity Evaluation

RPA specifically requires the Assessment to include an evaluation of the opportunities for improving renewable resource yields, with estimates of the necessary investment costs and the direct and indirect returns to the government. Although each of the resource reports supporting the 1989 RPA Assessment contains a chapter describing opportunities, only the Timber Assessment evaluates them. The Wildlife Assessment provides a description of which investments should be made first—not estimates of returns, but at least information for determining investment priorities. Even for timber, the evaluation is incomplete, because: 1) public, industry, and some nonindustry timberlands were excluded from the analysis; and 2) returns to the government were not estimated. In addition, RPA implicitly directs an evaluation of research opportunities, since research is one means of improving yields, but as with direct investments, research needs are described without costs, returns, or priorities.

Option: Enforce evaluation of needs and opportunities.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to meet this RPA requirement by examining resource investment priorities and evaluating research needs, with estimated costs and direct and indirect returns.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to explain why the requirement to evaluate investment opportunities has not been met, and to amend the 1989 RPA Assessment to include such an evaluation. Because of the difficulty in estimating returns to the government, identifying investment priorities could be specified as an acceptable substitute, but priorities among the resources as well as for each resource should be discussed. Furthermore, evaluating the opportunities for enhancing resources through research could be explicitly added to the evaluation requirement.

The primary benefit of evaluating research and investment needs and opportunities, with costs and benefits, is that the information could assist decisionmakers in making informed choices. The Forest Service does not determine the research and invest-

ment options. Rather, the Administration and Congress determine the mix and the level of renewable resource research and investment, and require information that describes opportunities, estimates fiscal requirements, and assesses the quantitative and qualitative benefits. The Forest Service has failed in its responsibility to provide this required information, and Congress has been negligent in overseeing this aspect of the RPA process.

Providing benefit and cost information on investment and research opportunities also has its drawbacks. It is difficult to estimate returns from research and from investments in nonpriced and subsidized resources, and some benefits are difficult to quantify. Such information also leads to priorities, and could politicize the RPA Assessment. Individuals and groups interested in one or a few resources are likely to be less supportive of the RPA process if identified priorities differ from their preferences. Thus, information on priorities could further polarize interest groups, rather than build consensus toward an acceptable direction for Forest Service activities.

Poor Display of Benefits and Costs

RPA requires that the Program identify outputs and results, so that the costs can be compared to the benefits and to the direct and indirect returns to the Federal Government. The Draft 1990 RPA Program is the best effort to date, reporting Federal revenues as well as two measures of social benefits. However, future returns from range forage and from timber seem to be overstated, while the current costs and probably future, costs are underestimated. The 1990 Draft also makes a weak attempt to evaluate the economic and social impacts of Program strategies by only identifying total jobs and county payments under each strategy.

Option: Require full reporting of economic information.

Congress could require cost and revenue data to be consistent with appropriations data, and could expand the reporting requirement to include economic and social consequences of decisions as well as benefits, returns, and costs.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to use the appropriations data and categories in the RPA planning process. If these data and categories are deemed inappropriate, Congress could request GAO

to examine Forest Service cost and revenue accounts used in the RPA Program, and recommend ways to assure that relevant fiscal data are used in the RPA process as well as in Forest Service appropriations. Congress could also direct the Forest Service to identify the likely economic and social consequences of its proposals. Congress has shown concern about communities and about employment. The Forest Service could be directed to develop appropriate measures of community impacts, with details to distinguish among resource programs, and then to report on the community impacts with sufficient information to understand fully the consequences of its actions.

Having accurate and consistent cost and revenue data is one advantage of this option. Such accuracy is necessary to assure that decisions are built on a firm and consistent base of fiscal information. A second advantage is that information on community impacts can help build community support for Forest Service programs by showing their implications. If the Forest Service identifies likely impacts, it can better predict when actions will be opposed, and by whom, and can modify the actions appropriately to broaden support.

One disadvantage of reporting fiscal information in the RPA process is that fiscal measures can lead to a short-term focus. The impact on renewable resources of shortsighted budget decisions was one of the concerns that led Congress to enact RPA. Reporting fiscal information in an appropriations format could increase the short-term, budget focus of the RPA process, short-changing the long-term needs of the renewable resources. A second disadvantage is that more information on community impacts could heighten conflicts among interests, if alternatives are shown to benefit certain segments of a community at the expense of other segments.

Direction Problems

The RPA process was clearly intended to be strategic planning, but has not functioned effectively in this capacity. It has had little influence on the on-the-ground actions of Forest Service managers, has provided little guidance for budget decisions, and has had poor commitment and follow-through from the Administration and Congress. In addition, the evaluation and feedback have not been adequate to determine if the Program is being followed.

Weak Guidance for Action

The RPA Programs have generally identified agency management direction by describing future output levels for the various resources. This has led to a timber focus, because decisionmakers have more direct control over annual timber outputs than over other annual resource outputs. While many are interested in future outputs, others are interested in the future conditions of the resources, especially in assuring the sustainability of the various forest and rangeland resources. In addition, describing future output levels provides little direction for research, for cooperative assistance, and for addressing problems and issues.

Option: Require the RPA Program to establish direction.

Congress could require the RPA Program to identify guiding principles for addressing issues, and to define goals in terms of resource conditions as well as by resource output levels.

Congress could specify that the RPA Program identify a set of principles for guiding Forest Service actions and for addressing issues and problems. For example, below-cost timber sales is an issue identified in the Draft 1990 RPA Program, but the agency response was to describe the new timber accounting system. Meanwhile, the 1991 budget request proposes a test of eliminating below-cost sales on several national forests. If principles were defined to include reducing subsidies and maintaining local employment, alternative approaches could be identified—e.g., modifying sale practices to reduce Forest Service costs; altering sale design to increase timber value or reduce purchaser costs; researching harvesting, transportation, and processing efficiency; subsidizing private timberland production and/or mill alterations; etc. The Forest Service could also be directed to explain how its guiding principles could be used to address the issues raised in the RPA process. In addition, Congress could direct that the RPA Program establish goals defining the desired quantity and quality of renewable resources, as well as resource outputs.

This approach would turn the RPA process into strategic planning, as intended in the Act. It would establish a coherent direction for agency actions—for managing the national forests, for assisting State and private landowners, for research on renewable resources. It would also explain how the Forest

Service could and would respond to current issues and problems. Such coherent direction could also help the agency address new problems as they arise. Finally, by establishing quantity and quality goals as well as output goals, the various interests would better understand how the forest and rangeland resources are being sustained and protected over the long-term, and consequently would probably conflict less with one another.

The greatest limitation of this approach is the difficulty in defining principles that are: 1) general enough to apply to all agency activities and 2) specific enough to provide direction, while 3) being generally acceptable to the agency, the Administration, Congress, and the public. Guiding principles that are too general would provide insufficient direction for making decisions about policies and programs, but principles that are too specific might reduce local flexibility to deal with local conditions. Defining acceptable principles would undoubtedly be costly and time-consuming with no guarantee of success. Finally, identifying principles and establishing resource condition goals could result in a loss of detail in the Program, especially regional information. Establishing guiding principles that meet the three conditions—generality, specificity, and acceptability—is an inherent difficulty in strategic planning, for the private sector as well as for the government.

Poor Support for Budget Decisions

The IWA Programs have been generally inadequate for framing and evaluating Forest Service budgets. Every recommended Program has included a range of budget levels. In 1975, the range was relatively narrow, increasing from 75 to 90 percent over 5 years. In 1980, the proposed budget increases ranged from 9 to 43 percent over 5 years, reflecting the differing views of the Office of Management and Budget (the low-bound Program) and the Forest Service (the high-bound Program). This difference of opinion was again reflected in the 1985 RPA Program, with OMB's low-bound reducing the budget by 3 percent over 5 years, but the Forest Service's high-bound increasing it by 35 percent. The Draft 1990 RPA Program presents similar information, with one strategy simply extending current budget levels and the other strategies calling for 25 to 40 percent increases by 1995.

In enacting RPA, Members of Congress said they wanted the agency's best professional estimate of the money needed to do the "right" job in terms of protecting and managing the Nation's renewable resources. Others have noted that the Administration, Congress, and the public need information to help in selecting the funding level and mix that best meets the resource needs in the context of overall Federal budget limitations. This concept was included in RPA by requiring the Forest Service to include a discussion of priorities for accomplishing the opportunities identified in the Program. To date, the Forest Service has not fulfilled this requirement.

Option: Improve budget information in the RPA Program.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to include the required discussion of priorities, or to provide an analysis of Program outputs and resource conditions under a range of budget levels.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to explain why the required discussion of priorities has not been included in the RPA Programs, and could direct the agency to provide such information if the required discussion is not included in the recommended 1990 RPA Program. Congress could also clarify the priorities requirement by directing that each alternative, or at least the recommended Program, include a display of costs and of quantity, quality, and output data *by resource* for budget levels ranging from the current budget to the agency's professional estimate of the optimum funding level.

This approach would help the Administration (including the Secretary of Agriculture and OMB) and Congress make informed decisions about the Forest Service budget. The Forest Service's professional opinion about the optimum budget level and mix would be displayed, along with the expected trade-offs in resource quality and decreases in quantity and output that would result from lower appropriations.

The primary disadvantage of this approach is that the additional budget details would complicate a document that is already long and cumbersome, and would perhaps distract from the guiding principles for the agency. This problem might be relieved by presenting two separate documents, one with guiding principles and issue responses and the second

with budget details. However, this approach would add to RPA's substantial analytical requirements, and thus increase the cost to prepare the documents.

Poor Commitment From Decisionmakers

Decisionmakers within the Administration have not seemed to be committed to the RPA process. In particular, the Presidential Statement of Policy was intended to gain the Administration's support for the recommended Program, but to date the Statements have contained virtually no information useful for framing budget requests or for directing Forest Service activities. One particular problem has been the mismatch of the RPA cycles with the timing of elections: the first Program and Statement of Policy were prepared under President Ford for implementation under President Carter, while the second set was prepared under Carter for implementation under President Reagan. However, even with the documents prepared under Reagan for implementation during his second term, the Statement of Policy was so general as to provide virtually no direction.

One possible means to strengthen the Administration's commitment to the Program is to have it developed by a special, perhaps temporary, staff in the Secretary's office or by the staff of the Council on Environmental Quality, rather than by the Forest Service. Forest Service personnel could be allowed to participate in, but not to dominate, the process. This approach would involve Administration decisionmakers more in the planning process, and the Program would not be as constrained by the agency's internal structure and politics. It would, however, remove the Forest Service from the role of decisionmaker, and the agency might have less incentive to implement the Program. Also, even this alternative may be insufficient to obtain real Administration commitment to the RPA process.

Congress also seems to lack commitment to the RPA process; congressional feedback (oversight hearings, Statement of Policy revision) has shown little focus and has declined since the early RPA efforts. The 1980 Statement of Policy was revised, as provided for in RPA, but the subsequent appropriations followed OMB's low-bound which was rejected in the revised Statement of Policy. The 1985 RPA Program, which many felt was no improvement over the 1980 effort, received much less congressional review, and the Statement of Policy was left intact, although this could have been due to the late delivery-near the end of the second

session of the 99th Congress. Nonetheless, congressional attention and use of the RPA process seem to have dwindled.

Option: Modify the Statement of Policy.

Congress could modify the RPA cycle to match the political cycles, could eliminate the requirement for a Presidential Statement of Policy, or amend RPA to make the Statement set forth the Forest Service's strategic direction.

Congress could modify the RPA schedule, to acknowledge the inherently political nature of strategic planning by a government agency. The Assessment (or Assessment update) and draft Program could be released for public review shortly following a Presidential election, and the final Program and Statement of Policy could be delivered to Congress together with the first budget of the newly elected President. This sequence would allow anew Administration to influence the recommended Program, such that it could be committed to implementing the Program. However, it could decrease some of the intended (but unrealistic) Forest Service control over the Program.

Since some believe that it is impossible to extract a real commitment from an Administration to implement the recommended RPA Program, perhaps eliminating the *Presidential Statement of Policy* is the only real alternative. Congress could direct that budgets be framed from the recommended Program, rather than from the Statement of Policy as the Act currently requires. Instead of trying to garner complete Administration commitment, Congress could modify the Statement of Policy to be more useful to the agency, the Administration, Congress, and the public. The Statement of Policy could become the Secretary's strategic plan, similar to the recommended Program but stripped of analysis, perhaps defining guiding principles for the agency. Analytical support for this redirected Statement could then be contained in the RPA Program. The principal advantages of this approach would be: 1) to eliminate the waste of time and false sense of commitment with the current approach, and 2) to separate the strategic direction from the detailed analytical support. However, this would also eliminate the technical requirement for commitment from the President.

Congress also needs to **increase its commitment to the RPA process**. This may be a chicken-and-egg problem: the RPA documents have not met Congress' expectations, so Congress has not used them. Consequently, there has been little congressional feedback to the agency on how to make the process and the documents more useful. Improvements in the documents might improve this aspect of the feedback loop, and **increase congressional commitment to the RPA process**. However, the authorizing and appropriating **committees** need to follow through with oversight hearings on the documents, comments on draft documents, efforts to compare budget and policy proposals to the recommended Program, and reaction to the Annual Report.

Limited Feedback

The Annual Report has been used poorly to evaluate the implementation of the RPA Program. RP specifically required the Annual Report to "set forth progress in implementing the Program," but Program implementation was not evaluated until the 1988 Report. Even this evaluation was spotty: important output measures were not examined, implementation successes and failures were not discussed, and significant assumptions and conditions were not reviewed to determine if the Program still could be implemented.

Option: Require complete evaluation of Program implementation.

Congress could direct the Forest Service to include a complete evaluation of Program

implementation in the Annual Report, including an analysis of causes which have limited its implementation and determination of whether the Program is still adequate.

Congress could **direct the Forest Service to include a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the RPA Program in the Annual Report**, and could expand on the RPA requirement to specify that the Annual Report: 1) display performance for all output targets in the **RPA Program**; 2) describe progress in achieving the quantity and quality goals established in the Program; 3) identify where progress is slower than anticipated, and the causes and implications of the delays; and 4) discuss whether changes in assumed trends and conditions might require the recommended Program to be modified. In addition, Congress could direct the Forest Service to expand the distribution of the Annual Report, to assure that all individuals and groups expressing interest in the Program also received the reports on its implementation. A thorough evaluation of the implementation of the recommended RPA Program is the necessary final step to complete the strategic process envisioned in RPA.