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Robert L. Vertrees
South Dakota State University

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• (605) 688-4141

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM NEW FEDERAL PLANNING PROCEDURES

On August 3, President Nixon approved new principles and standards for federal agencies to follow when planning for the use of water and related land resources.

Like their predecessors, the newly-adopted planning procedures will be used by all federal agencies that are involved in regional or river basin planning or in the planning of federal and federally-assisted programs and projects which directly influence the use of water and related land resources. The new principles and standards will not be binding upon state and local units of government. They are, however, intended to be broad and flexible enough to accommodate the goals and objectives of these units and to provide them with a useful guide to resource planning.

The new principles and standards revise former federal procedures along eleven different lines. Each of these lines of revision cannot be dealt with in this newsletter. Yet their general nature can be summarized, and some speculative comments can be offered about what to expect from the new federal planning procedures.

The new principles and standards will require that the beneficial and adverse effects of alternative plans for programs and projects be measured in either monetary or nonmonetary terms. The expected effects from each alternative plan will then be displayed in order to depict their influence upon two basic objectives: (1) the enhancement of national

economic development, and (2) the enhancement of environmental quality. When appropriate, beneficial and adverse effects of separate alternatives will also be displayed in order to show their influence upon the development of particular regions and upon the distribution of income, employment, and other social opportunities among different groups of people.

Each of the two basic objectives listed above is to be given equal consideration through the complete display of beneficial and adverse effects of separate alternatives. The new principles and standards do not, however, prescribe any hard and fast rules about which of these two objectives is to be given top priority when choosing among alternative plans. Nor do the principles and standards specify the priority that should be assigned to effects upon the development of regions or to effects upon the distribution of various measures of social well-being. Rather than specifying such rules, the new procedures set forth detailed and systematic procedures which should allow both public and private parties to participate in the planning process and eventually arrive at final choices among alternative plans.

What, then, are the most significant general outcomes to expect from the recently adopted federal principles and standards? It appears to the author that these outcomes can be summarized as follows.

1. The new procedures will augment

the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The environmental quality objective will call for explicit consideration of the environmental impacts of proposed programs and projects. An improved balance between economic development and environmental quality should be attained and sustained. More persons who have been trained in the natural sciences will be required in the planning and evaluation process in order to study the environmental impacts. Many of these impacts will have to be expressed in non-monetary terms.

2. The new procedures will reflect mounting social and political concerns about which regions and groups gain the benefits and pay the costs of public programs and projects. Similar to environmental impacts, the regional and distributional effects of public endeavors are often difficult to measure in monetary terms. Therefore, economists and other social scientists involved in the evaluation of alternative plans will likely have to become more adept in expressing beneficial and adverse effects in nonmonetary terms.

3. The evaluation of alternative plans in accordance with the new principles and standards will have to be accomplished through a team effort. Persons

trained in the natural, social, and technical fields will have to coordinate their individual contributions to the planning process. Additional training in this process will then likely be necessary for persons whose basic training is in the separate academic fields.

4. In sum, the new procedures will allow an improved system of multi-objective planning to evolve, but they will not specify the priorities to assign to any of the objectives. The new federal procedures encourage a wide range of agencies and interest groups to state their priorities and preferences. Therefore, the new system should provide improved means to arrive at compromise solutions that resolve the often conflicting desires of different parties. As these desires change over time, so will the priorities that are placed upon the objectives of national development, environmental quality, regional development, and social well-being.

These new principles and standards have been published in the "Federal Register," Sept. 10, 1973, Vol. 38, No. 174, Pt. III. Copies may be obtained from the U. S. Water Resources Council, 2120 L Street, N. W., Washington, D. C. 20037.

Robert L. Vertrees - Assistant Professor, Economics

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