

Statistics Suffering Under Reagan

"When a vessel is in stormy seas, it is foolhardy to cut corners on radar, navigational equipment, good maps, and ample, well-trained crews." So said University of Chicago dean William Kruskal in a letter to a congressional subcommittee, referring to across-the-board cuts in federal statistics-gathering activities.

Users of federal statistics are alarmed at the low priority the Reagan Administration seems to put on information—both its collection and dissemination. They say that the government is embarking on radical changes in social and economic policies while failing to monitor adequately their effects on the nation.

The most visible recent development was the elimination of the Statistical Policy Branch at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Originally established as the focal point for policy and coordination of statistics programs throughout the government, the functions of the office, which was transferred from the Commerce Department in 1980, will now be disseminated around the OMB. This effectively marks the end of statistical policy as an identifiable function within the government. The action has evoked protests from several congressmen to budget director David Stockman and has added to malaise among those who compile and use federal statistics, for virtually all the 70 or so programs in the government involved in collection and analysis of statistics have suffered from federal budget cuts.

Among areas of direct interest to scientists, information-gathering relating to energy is being hardest hit. The Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration is to be transferred to the Commerce Department and renamed the Bureau of Energy Information. Its budget is scheduled to go down from \$89.8 million in fiscal year 1981 to \$54.5 million in 1983. One of the major programs being cut is the Financial Reporting System which gathers information on the financial structure of energy companies. The OMB says this is no longer necessary since oil prices were decontrolled in 1981. However, critics say policy-makers will lose important information on the effect of the windfall profits tax and various incentives to develop new energy sources, and will find it more difficult to examine the profit and investment patterns of energy companies. Also eliminated will be the National Oil Import Reporting System; long-term forecasts on energy markets and end uses; analysis of the possible impacts of initiating coal-based synthetic fuel programs; and analysis of the costs and benefits of advanced nuclear technology.

According to a Congressional Research Service report produced for the House Committee on Government Operations, steps toward deregulation have been accompanied by reduction of reporting requirements from energy industries—thus neglecting the fact that companies need the government data for their own planning.

Environmental information-gathering and dissemination is also being downgraded. According to an OMB report on federal statistical programs, the main change will be the transfer of responsibility for environmental epidemiology to health agencies. But according to Daniel B. Tunstall of the Conservation Foundation, much environment-related data is not being produced or disseminated. The latest

publication of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), *Environmental Trends*, several years in the making, was finally issued last December but there were not enough copies to supply federal agencies and all went instead to state and local officials. The report was intended to be the first in a series, but no further issues are planned. And CEQ's annual report, already 6 months late, is likely to be a shadow of its former self now that CEQ has been all but abolished. A report regularly prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), *Environmental Outlook*, is unlikely to appear at all this year. *Environmental Profiles*, another EPA report that was ready to go to press last summer, has still not been printed.

In specific program areas budget cuts are resulting in reduction of sample sizes in surveys, decreased periodicity, and loss of geographic detail, as well as failure to get existing information out. These include the stream quality survey, the Mussel Watch program, the National Water Assessment, the air pollutant standards index, an environmental radiation report, and the national pesticides monitoring program.

At recent hearings before the subcommittee on census and population of the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee witnesses indicated that local officials are already having difficulty making program decisions because of delays in getting federal data. Delays in analysis of 1980 census data, for example, are making it difficult to adjust block grants for local health services, according to an official from the American Public Health Association.

There has also been protest from both within and outside the government over the cancellation of a new survey, the Survey on Income and Program Participation (SIPP) which the Census Bureau and the Department of Health and Human Services spent over \$20 million developing. Called by Stephen E. Fienberg of Carnegie-Mellon University "the most heralded new statistical program of the past decade," SIPP was supposed to reveal multiple recipients of various federal aid and service programs with an eye to increasing efficiency and uncovering fraud and abuse. Its elimination is symbolic of the Administration's approach. On the one hand it is doing away with federal regulations and turning over many federal decisions to state and local entities. But on the other, it is reducing the gathering of data that local decision-makers need and which are required to monitor the success or failure of policy changes.

According to Katherine Wallman, head of the newly established Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics, the private sector cannot be expected to fill in the gap. Private enterprises do not have the credibility, the expertise, or the access to sources that the government has, and besides, it will only collect marketable information or information it can use for its own purposes.

Experts, including Nobel prizewinning economist Wassily Leontief, have long been complaining about the uneven quality of federal statistics, the lack of coordination among agencies, and the need for a central focus in the government for statistics policy. Now that the fuss over program cutbacks is giving statistics unprecedented publicity, more attention may be given to these chronic problems.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN