

The United States Federal Government and Its Uptake of the ISO 14000 Series of Environmental Management Standards

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A commitment to Improving Performance

President George W. Bush and his Administration are working to ensure that the Federal government leads by example, is a good neighbor, and is a good steward of our resources. As America's first MBA president, he recognizes that the government must be well managed and work to provide Americans with results – with improved performance and value. He recently stated, "We will continue to focus on getting results from federal spending. A federal program's measure of success is not its size, but the value it delivers."

President Bush is applying the same kind of focus to the federal government's own management and performance that many in the private sector have long applied. And managing the environmental, health, and safety considerations of the federal government's operations is a critical component of our commitment to improving the federal government's management and stewardship. Ultimately, with effective management systems in place, we will improve our operational efficiencies, reduce costs and risks, improve environmental performance, and improve worker health and safety.

As part of the Bush Administration's efforts to ensure that agencies improve their performance through more effective management, the U.S. federal government is adopting management systems to improve our environmental, health, and safety performance. Because of its size, geographic distribution, range of activities, and resource expenditures, the federal government significantly impacts the local environment, communities, and workers.

The Federal government is applying management system principles because we know they have worked successfully in the private sector around the world. Sound environmental, health, and safety management practices enhance budgetary planning

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and overall performance by integrating these issues into organization management through a formal process of planning, performance measurement, and review. This approach can help federal organizations and facilities identify and reduce risk, achieve compliance with regulation, and achieve environmental performance goals. A well-implemented environmental management system (EMS) supported by other related management tools not only improves regulatory compliance and environmental performance, it increases overall efficiency and accountability, reduces operational costs and potential liability, and enhances employee morale and community relations.

The ISO 14000 series of standards, in particular, provides recognizable, transparent, and flexible models and tools for managing environmental issues. These international standards have been developed by consensus of a world-wide collection of experts, and allows us to operate effectively without having individual government entities create their own protocols and guidelines.

The U.S. government has been an ardent supporter and believer in the international standards process, and specifically, the ISO 14000 family of environmental standards. Since the creation of ISO Technical Committee 207 on Environmental Management, members of the U.S. government have been actively participating in the process, including involvement in the US Technical Advisory Group (USTAG) and as delegates to the international TC meetings. For example, the co-chair of the USTAG for many years was a member of the Environmental Protection Agency, Ms. Mary McKiel.

The U.S. Congress, in 1996, adopted the National Technology Transfer and Advancement Act. This forward-looking legislation requires that where international standards exist, federal agencies must use them instead of creating their own standards or requirements. One example is the use of the quality management system standard (ISO 9000) in federal procurement guidelines. Some agencies require their suppliers to have ISO 9000 systems in place.

Early U.S. Government Experiences with ISO 14001

The first of the ISO 14000 series to be recognized and applied by the federal government has been ISO 14001, Specifications for Environmental Management Systems (EMS). The movement first began as interest by specific agencies and facilities. In 2000, the expectation for EMS implementation in federal agencies was incorporated into presidential Executive Order 13148. The order requires all major federal facilities to develop and implement an EMS by December 2005. Although the order did not specify ISO 14001 (as it is not a worthwhile use of American taxpayer dollars to impose ISO 14001 on all federal facilities), the standard nevertheless was the most readily recognizable model and the order included all of the desired elements outlined in ISO 14001.

To date, nearly 200 federal facilities have EMSs in place – with many more developing agency policies, training, and EMS implementation tools. The Environmental Protection

Agency, Department of Defense, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and others are developing resources that other agencies can use to implement EMSs. Of the nearly 200 federal facilities that already have implemented an EMS, nearly all have been modeled after ISO 14001. Twenty have had their systems third-party certified.

To ensure we meet the executive order timeline and improve management and performance as soon as possible, the Bush Administration is actively promoting and supporting the implementation of EMS. On April 1, 2002, I and White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Mitch Daniels wrote to all agency heads that “[t]he federal government must be a leader in using this tool of effective management” and urged each “to actively participate in your agency’s efforts to make EMS a priority at all levels of your agency.” In 2002, OMB also revised its budget guidance to include provisions for EMS implementation.

With this momentum, many more facilities are underway with EMS implementation, and we anticipate an exponential increase in such systems in the very near future. In addition, just as leading private organizations include health and safety in their EMSs, we are encouraging federal facilities to include these issues in their EMSs to foster integration and reduce synergistic impacts on the environment, workplace, community, and employees.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is actively evaluating the role of an EMS in regulatory policy decisions. These may include permit flexibility or alternate reporting requirements for organizations implementing an EMS. EMS applications, using the ISO 14001 standard, have also been used in other pilot initiatives involving the federal government. For example, several EPA sector-based initiatives encourage enhanced environmental performance use the EMS, and ISO 14001 as the predominant model, as the foundational tool for best management practice efforts. EPA’s National Environmental Performance Track encourages participants to use an EMS to meet certain performance objectives in order to receive alternate regulatory considerations. The National Biosolids Partnership requires participants to use an EMS to help wastewater treatment operations apply best practices to biosolids management.

State and local governments in the U.S. also are very interested in EMS, with many both incorporating support of the use of an EMS by the regulated community, and they themselves implementing an EMS. The EPA has had an ongoing pilot program where, through eight resource centers around the country, they support and assist with the implementation of an EMS in local governments. Such cases include the City of San Diego, California wastewater treatment, the City of Scottsdale, Arizona’s Public Works Department. EPA also has several partnerships with other federal agencies and states or local governments regarding EMS applications.

Use of Other Standards in the ISO 14000 Family

The U.S. federal government is also interested in the other standards in the ISO 14000 series. For example, the life cycle assessment standards can be evaluated for application in government efforts regarding green procurement, green buildings, and enhanced EMS uses. Secondly, the eco-labeling standards can also be useful in supporting and enhancing procurement protocols in the government. The application of these other standards in the series is not as far along as with the EMS standard. However, we expect that as more organizations implement management systems, and become more aware of the international standards process, they will look to the other documents in the series. These other documents all can help enhance various elements of the EMS.

For example, pending guidance regarding environmental communications and reporting can assist with outreach to stakeholders. Guidance documents on Integration of Environmental Aspects into Product Standards can assist organizations with proactive procurement, and in helping communicate with suppliers. Another example is an ISO White Paper on application of the ISO 14001 series of standards for climate change issues. The standards on performance evaluation, auditing, and communications would be very practical tools in establishing greenhouse gas emission reduction protocols and verifying claims of reductions.

The environmental performance evaluation guidance documents will be very helpful in our effort to develop relevant environmental indicators and relevant metrics. Historically, government tends to make most decisions based on measures activities and operational parameters more so than on environmental condition parameters. But that is changing, with more active efforts to collect, analyze, use, and report on environmental condition indicators.

Where do we go from here?

At present, government environmental personnel are already aware of the requirement, but more so the value, of implementation of an EMS. To support and reinforce this effort, it is vital that government management, policy and budget personnel are engaged in the EMS process. Both in concept and practice, the EMS approach meshes well with the Administration's management objectives. It provides the platform for meeting federal stewardship goals as well as the management tools to measure and improve performance against those goals. And, as noted before, the Bush Administration is actively promoting and supporting the implementation of EMS.

The key now is simply getting the government comfortable with revising the way it functions to begin using the standards as tools. The challenge is getting the tools to be used, and sustaining their use. Fortunately, with government, as with the private sector, once an organization follows through with the experience, they believe the tools are useful and they are glad they went ahead with the effort. So a large part of the success of the uptake of international standards is outreach, educations, and sharing of experiences and success stories.

CEQ has expertise on the ISO 14000 series, as well as understanding the international standardization process. CEQ sees the relationship between the purpose of the tools, and the needs and goals of the government in relation to environmental issues. CEQ has the opportunity to bring to light the connections between performance goals and necessary management tools, and illustrate the value of the standards to help meet the goals.

The Office of Management and Budget will also be a key player in the future efforts because the ISO 14000 series is characterized as being a set of management tools to address environmental issues. Hence, OMB has a major role to play, helping agencies integrate sound environmental management with organizational expectations.

We do understand that implementation will take longer in government. But together, all of the levels of government can work together to enhance environmental performance, in part through using the standards. The long-term picture looks promising, and if the current rate of interest and implementation is any indication, the ISO 14000 series of standards will be a big part of the U.S. federal government's future.

For more information about what the U.S. federal government is doing with environmental management systems and the ISO 14000 series, please see www.ofee.gov or www.epa.gov/ems.
